

Suzanne Woods Fisher

The
KEEPER

STONEY RIDGE SEASONS

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A Novel

Suzanne Woods Fisher



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fisher, Suzanne Woods.

The keeper : a novel / Suzanne Woods Fisher.

p. cm. — (Stoney Ridge seasons ; 1)

ISBN 978-0-8007-1987-6 (pbk.)

1. Amish—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3606.I78K44 2012

813'.6—dc23

2011032011

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Quote on page 163 is taken from John Vivian, *Keeping Bees* (Charlotte, VT: Williamson Publishers, 1986), 82.

Represented by Joyce Hart of The Hartline Literary Agency

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

Spring came in a hurry. The wind had softened, bare branches were budding, and soon there would be the heavy green shade of the trees. Julia Lapp had already picked peas and spinach out of her garden, and set them, along with baskets of carrots and bunches of asparagus, on the produce table in front of the roadside stand.

When school let out for the year, Julia would get her youngest sister to watch over Windmill Farm's stand, but it wasn't necessary in late April. There weren't too many customers around, not the way it would be later in summer, once the corn started to sweeten up and the tomatoes ripened.

The day was overcast, but gardening was hot work and Julia had been up since five. She glanced in the mirror that she kept hidden against the back wall of the stand. It was a bad, vain habit, catching glances of herself in mirrors and windows, but she couldn't keep from looking. What did she see? A twenty-one-year-old face, with shiny mahogany hair and hazel eyes rimmed with black lashes, and nearly flawless white skin. She pulled herself away from the mirror, silently scolding herself for her vanity. But pleased, all the same.

She should get back to her chores before dinnertime. She placed the honor jar, along with the small chalkboard listing the prices, in the middle of the produce, then hesitated. A few minutes of rest wouldn't hurt.

Julia collapsed into a chair under the shade of an apple tree and sighed in appreciation as a light breeze swirled around her, lifting the strings of her prayer cap. She looked down at her hands and frowned at the dirt under her nails. She and her siblings had been trying to fill in for her father since his heart trouble had started, and she was already weary of plowing, dirt and dust, and the tangy smell of manure that she couldn't get out of her hair despite daily shampooings.

She glanced at the farmhouse and felt a wave of weariness. She hadn't even realized how rundown it was looking, not until Paul's mother pointed it out last month when it was the Lapps' turn to host church. How had it escaped her notice? An upstairs window was broken—a recent victim of her brother's poor aim with a softball. Black buggies awaiting repair littered the driveway in front of her uncle's buggy shop. The entire house was overdue for a fresh coat of paint. Edith Fisher was right—the house was in terrible shape. The whole farm was in terrible shape. There was so much to do before her wedding to Paul in November.

Her thoughts drifted to Paul. Soon, she would be known as Paul's Julia. She said it out loud, savoring each word and its delicious associations—wife-to-be of Paul Fisher. The words were ripe with a sense of promise.

The sound of a horse's footsteps made her look up. It was Paul's sorrel mare. She didn't expect to see Paul today! Her hand flew to her cap. Was it straight? She brushed the back of her hand across her forehead. Was she perspiring?

She needed a shower. Did she stink from the day's work? She hoped not.

Paul climbed down from the buggy, tied the horse's reins to a fence post, then approached the roadside stand. He stood, hands clasped behind his back, examining the produce.

"Paul, what a nice surprise!" Julia said, moving to the produce table.

"I was on my way home from work," he said.

She was beaming at him, positively beaming—she couldn't help it! She still pinched herself every morning when she first woke up and counted the days until their wedding on the first of November. Tall, slender, and elegant, Paul had honey-brown hair, shining azure eyes, milk-white teeth.

Today, his blue shirt matched his eyes. He was staggeringly handsome, Julia thought, but it was his smile that she loved best of all. It had a touch of sweet whimsicality about it that made her feel warm inside, as though they shared something private and precious.

Paul took off his hat and picked up a bundle of asparagus. "Most everyone else in April is still weeks from getting much of anything out of their garden. But yours is already producing."

"Helps to get a few things started in the greenhouse." But Paul knew that.

He sniffed a sprig of rosemary. "Sure will be glad when Amos's butter-and-sugar corn comes in. No better corn in the county."

She wondered where the conversation was going. It was not unusual for Paul to approach her like this, circumspectly, indirectly. "Looking for anything in particular?" She smiled. "Or did you just come by to talk wedding plans?"

Paul put his hat on the table. “Jules, we have to talk.”

Well, hallelujah! she thought. Paul usually took time to circle up to his point. She often wondered when he was going to say he loved her. It was probably numbered among the rules that so carefully governed their lives—that moment when he could first say the words. There was a Stoney Ridge way of doing everything, Julia knew, and that included love. “So let’s talk,” she said.

Something was wrong. Paul’s blue eyes were avoiding her. He straightened his shoulders and almost looked at her face again before he let his eyes slide down to the ground at their feet.

She sidled around the table and tilted her head. “Paul?”

He rubbed his forehead. “Jules, I have to tell you something and I don’t want you to get upset. Just hear me out.”

“What is it?”

Paul cleared his throat. “It’s about the wedding. I’ve given this a lot of thought—quite a lot—and I’ve prayed about this and . . . well, we need . . . I think we ought to just put things on hold for a while.” He swallowed hard, then whispered, “I need more time.”

Oh no. Please no. Not again. This was some strange, cruel joke. Julia felt as if she was going to be sick. She gathered her breath to speak, but when she tried to find the words, there were none to be found.

“Please, Jules,” Paul said. “Try to understand.” He reached over to her, but she backed away. “Hold on. I know you’re upset. Let me try to explain.”

Outrage swooped in to displace her initial shock. “What is there to explain? Why do we need to postpone the wedding? Give me one good reason!”

He studied the ground and kicked a dirt clod away. “There’s a number of good reasons.”

“Name one.”

He rubbed his temples, stretching his hand across his eyes. Hiding his eyes is what Julia was thinking. “There’s that incident at church.”

“That happened weeks ago! And besides, it was Uncle Hank’s doing—it had nothing to do with me!”

“Sure, but you know as well as I do that a person marries an entire family. And you can’t deny that your uncle lives up to his reputation as the town character.”

Julia crossed her arms. She kept her voice low and measured. She was trying not to sound hysterical. “Sounds as if your mother’s been influencing your way of thinking, Paul.” She closed her eyes. “It’s all because of that auction last summer.”

He frowned. “I don’t deny my mother has always worried about appearances. And I admit she’s fretted quite a bit about us. But this isn’t about the price your quilt fetched at the auction.”

“I couldn’t help that price. Your mother thinks I’ve gone proud over it, but I’m not. Not one bit!” She hadn’t created another quilt top since Edith’s criticism. She helped her friends with their quilts, but she had lost her desire to piece another one herself. To be accused of being proud—what could cut her more deeply?

Paul nodded. “I know that, Jules. But then your Uncle Hank pulls a stunt like he did last month, and it only added to Mom’s perception that your family is a little . . .”

She glared at him. “A little what?” But she knew what he was struggling to say. She loved her family dearly, but she wasn’t blind to their quirky ways. She waffled between feeling

fiercely protective of them and feeling . . . a little embarrassed. Still, she was a Lapp. This was the family God had given to her.

Paul risked a direct look at her. “My mother’s concerns aren’t the only reason I want to hold off, Jules. It’s . . . we’re so young. We’re both barely twenty-one. What’s the rush?”

“That’s what you said last year, Paul. So we waited, just like you wanted to.” She took a deep breath. “So now you want to wait until . . . when? December? January? It can’t be past February because there’s too much to do in the fields.” When Paul didn’t say anything, she felt a chill run down her spine. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re not ready to get married? Or you’re not ready to get married to me?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

She was hysterical now, her breathing ragged, her tears hot and salty; her eyes stung. “You don’t know? You don’t know?”

Paul took a deep breath. “No. I don’t.”

She couldn’t believe how angry, how upset she was. Not only was she humiliated, but bitterly disappointed. “This is the second time you have postponed our wedding, Paul! The second time!”

Paul reached for her and she surrendered. She buried her face against his chest and started to cry. His shirt, his smell, her Paul, she loved him so much. He was all she wanted, the one she had always wanted. But she waited one minute, two minutes, and he said nothing. He was shushing into her ear, but he wasn’t telling her it was all a mistake, that he was sorry he upset her. It was true, the unthinkable was true! A promise had been broken and it lay shattered at her feet.

She pulled back from him. “You have to go. Leave. I don’t want you here.”

“Jules, you don’t mean that.”

“Don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me Jules again.” Her own voice sounded strange to her. She turned from him and ran up the long drive that led to the farmhouse. If she had any pride at all, she thought, when she reached the top she would not look back to see if he was watching her.

She had no pride.

She whirled, but his horse and buggy were gone.



On the way home from school, eleven-year-old Mary Kate Lapp took a shortcut through the Smuckers’ pasture. She didn’t use this shortcut every day, only when she was playing hide-and-seek on the way home from school with Ethan and Ruthie. Before she jumped into the pasture, she shielded her eyes with her hand and scanned the woods behind her to see if her friends had caught up with her. No sign of them. That didn’t surprise her. They had no detective skills whatsoever.

Running through the pasture cut the trip in half and it added a little danger to the day. To M.K.’s way of thinking, the time saved was worth the risk of getting charged at by Ira Smucker’s mean and ugly goat. The goat was dirty yellow, with intimidating horns, and a long beard that dangled impressively from his chin. M.K. thought that beard was longer than the bishop’s, just as straggly too.

She tiptoed quietly. On a normal day, as soon as she reached the fence, she would yell and yell at the goat so it would see her—she liked having it know she had crept through its pasture without permission—then jump the fence and take off for home. Today, she didn’t have time to aggravate the goat. She had much on her mind, as she often did.



Sadie Lapp was idly scrubbing potatoes at the sink, gazing out the kitchen window to the end of the yard where her brother Menno's two bird feeders stood, their platforms heaped with sunflower seeds and cracked corn. The cardinal couple was there, the vivid red male perched on the peak of the roof, keeping watch, as his dull-colored wife was eating. Sadie let out a big sigh.

Even in the natural world, love was a wonderful thing.

Sadie glanced up when Julia came inside. "I saw you talking to Paul down by the stand," she said. "Did you remember to ask him what flavor wedding cake he wants?" She poured cooked and drained noodles into her Ham 'n' Noodle casserole. "I'm thinking that vanilla is safest. Everybody likes vanilla. Of course, it isn't my wedding. It's yours. Yours and Paul's. And you should pick the flavor *you* want." When Julia didn't answer, Sadie turned around. "Jules? Did you hear me?"

Julia had come into the kitchen and slid into a chair at the long harvest table. Her elbows were propped on the table, chin in her hands. "We don't have to decide for a while."

"Well, I just wanted time for plenty of practice. I want it to be perfect." She glanced at her sister. Julia's face was white and pinched. "Is something wrong?"

Julia didn't answer.

Sadie put down the wooden spoon she had been using to stir the casserole and sat next to Julia at the table. "There is something wrong, isn't there?"

Julia shook her head—vigorously; so vigorously, in fact, that Sadie's suspicions were immediately confirmed. Sadie laid her hand on her shoulder, gently. "Julia, you can tell me. What happened?"

Tears filled Julia's eyes. "Paul wants to postpone the wedding."
"Again? Not again!"

Slowly, Julia gave a slight nod of her head.

Sadie covered her face with her hands. "Oh Julia. Why?"

A tear leaked down Julia's cheek and she quickly wiped it away. "He said he didn't really know why, that he just needed more time. When I pressed him for a reason, he gave a vague excuse about the Incident."

"Uncle Hank and the root beer bottles? But that was a month ago!"

"I know, but you remember how upset Paul's mother was."

The sound of popping corks in the basement had panicked the horses and caused a small stampede. Quite a bit of damage was done to buggies. What made things worse was that Uncle Hank had a buggy shop. It wasn't long before rumors started to fly that Hank Lapp might have done it on purpose, to drum up business for himself.

"But Paul's a reasonable fellow. He must realize that Uncle Hank is just being . . . Uncle Hank. That his . . . unfortunate incidents have nothing to do with you. With any of us. Surely he knows!"

Julia sighed. "Paul thinks that a family is a family. No one makes decisions alone. His mother thinks Dad could have done something to prevent the . . . the Incident." She smoothed out her skirt and pulled in her lips. "Maybe he's right. Dad lets Uncle Hank do whatever he wants."

"Uncle Hank may be a little eccentric, but he's the closest thing Dad has to a parent."

"Paul said he wasn't being influenced by his mother, but I find that hard to believe . . . why else would he have changed his mind?" Julia's voice broke on the words. A single tear

fell and dropped onto her apron, followed by another and another.

Sadie got up from her chair and put her arms around her. Over Julia's shoulder she saw the cardinal husband lift his wings and swoop away, leaving his dull little wife behind. Maybe happiness, Sadie thought, was like a bird, fixing to take wing. Maybe it was never meant to stay.



Julia heard the little bell ring from her father's room. Amos Lapp rang it insistently.

"Dad's tea! I forgot to take it to him." Sadie jumped up from the chair to pick up a mug left on the counter.

"I'll take it up to him," Julia said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. The bell continued to ring as she hurried up the stairs with the mug of tea, trying to pull herself together. "You're supposed to be patient," she said as she walked into her father's room and found him sitting in a chair, engrossed in a game of checkers with his youngest daughter. "Where do you think the word comes from?" She set the tea on the table next to his chair. "How are you feeling this afternoon?"

"I'd be better if my children didn't keep me jailed up like a common thief," Amos grumbled.

"Doctor's orders." Julia leaned her back against the windowsill and crossed her arms. "Dad, you've got to do something about Uncle Hank."

Unruffled, Amos picked up a red checker piece and leaped over Mary Kate's black one. He collected the black checker and stacked it on the side of the board. "Uncle Hank is a fine old fellow." He looked over at her. "And he's kin. We take care of each other."

“I know, I know.” This conversation wasn’t a new one between Julia and her father.

“Jules, Hank is a man who has never worried about what others think of him. Few men can say that.”

“That’s just it! He doesn’t even care that he makes us the laughingstock of Stoney Ridge! What happened last month at church was . . . outrageous!”

“Plenty of folks brew root beer,” Amos said. He gave a mock scowl as M.K. double-jumped his checkers.

“But look at the aftermath . . .” Julia stopped short as she noticed that M.K. was listening. Listening hard.

“What aftermath?” Amos asked.

Julia looked away.

“Paul Fisher canceled the wedding,” M.K. whispered to him.

Amos looked at Julia, shocked. “What?! When?”

“Postponed!” Julia hurried to amend. “Paul *postponed* the wedding. There’s a difference.” She glared at her sister. “You were eavesdropping on Sadie and me in the kitchen just now, weren’t you?”

M.K. studied the checkerboard with great interest.

Amos frowned at M.K. “Why don’t you go downstairs and help Sadie with dinner?”

“I happen to have some real interesting news I might be willing to share and instead I get sent away, like a dog,” M.K. said glumly.

“What’s your big news?” Julia said, eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

Amos looked over at Julia. “Is it true about the wedding? Does Paul really want to postpone it?”

Julia tucked her chin to her chest. She gave a brief nod.

“And you think the reason is because of Uncle Hank and

the exploding bottles?” Amos asked finally, sounding pensive. “Paul’s no stranger to Uncle Hank’s ways.”

“What else could it be?” Julia said. She turned to M.K. “What news did you hear at school today?”

M.K. shrugged. “I might have heard a few things. Got me to thinking . . . maybe . . .”

“Maybe . . . what?” Julia asked.

M.K. lit up like a firefly. “Jacob Glick called off his wedding to Katie Yoder. And Henry Stoltzfus broke off courtin’ with Sarah Miller.”

Julia tilted her head. “What? All of them? But . . . why?” She paused. “Oh . . . you don’t mean . . . don’t tell me!” She covered her cheeks with her hands. “He’s back, isn’t he?”

M.K. nodded, pleased to deliver the news. “He’s back. The Bee Man is back.”

“Ah,” Amos said, leaning back in his chair. “That explains quite a bit.”

“It’s happening all over again,” Julia said. “Just like last year.” Her sadness over the postponed wedding dissipated. In its place was anger. Hot, furious, steaming-like-a-teakettle anger. Directed at the Bee Man.

Amos brightened. “Maybe it wasn’t your Uncle Hank’s fault at all that Paul wants to postpone the wedding!”

“He certainly didn’t help matters,” Julia said crossly. “And then along comes the Bee Man this week to really seal the deal.”

“Or not,” M.K. added helpfully.

2

If asked, folks would say that Sadie Lapp was solid and practical, on the quiet side, and that she was a fine example to today's youth. Or if they were feeling less generous, they said that Sadie was a girl no one ever had to worry about.

What they didn't know about Sadie was that she had a deeply romantic side that she tried to keep well hidden. She felt nearly as bad as Julia about Paul's perpetual cold feet. How could he do such a thing to her sister? Twice, now. After all, getting married was the biggest thing that could ever happen in a girl's life. A dream come true. To marry the man you loved. Sadie could hardly imagine how it would feel to be a bride—though she did try. She had such dreams for her own wedding. She'd already planned the menu, chosen her material for her wedding dress, added special treasures to her hope chest. She had everything ready and waiting.

Everything but the groom, M.K. frequently pointed out.

It was never too soon to plan for such a big event, Sadie would say in her defense. Weddings took a great deal of planning.

Sadie wondered how she would feel if she were in Julia's

situation. She thought it would be like an arrow had been shot through her from front to back, leaving her with pain, longing, regret. Julia had looked so sad during dinner and excused herself after eating only a few bites of casserole.

Sadie put her fork down and leaned back in her chair. She glanced at Uncle Hank, seated across the table, scraping crumbs of gingerbread off his plate with the back of his fork. He managed to put away a lot of dinner, despite the day's tragedy. He wanted seconds on everything except the Ham 'n' Noodle casserole. He had always reminded Sadie of a character from the Bible, a prophet, or maybe a shepherd, with his longish hair and untrimmed beard. She could see Uncle Hank was completely unconcerned about Julia's change of circumstances. So was Menno, Sadie's brother, who was preoccupied with helping himself to a second piece of cake. Uncle Hank held out his plate to Menno to be served.

Surprisingly, M.K. seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. She looked up the stairs and back at Sadie. "I could take Julia some cake. She likes your gingerbread."

Sadie brushed M.K.'s cheek with the back of her hand. "I think she just wants to be alone."

"Our Jules is better off without Paul," Uncle Hank said as he reached across Menno to grab the bowl of whipped cream. "Them Fishers always think they're something." He dropped spoonfuls of whipped cream on his fresh slice of gingerbread.

"Amen to that," M.K. muttered under her breath. "Especially Jimmy."

Sadie elbowed her to hush.

"Well, it's true," M.K. said. "In school today, Jimmy Fisher put a black racer snake in the girls' outhouse."

“That is pretty low,” Menno said in his slow, deliberate way.

“You can say that again,” M.K. said.

“That is pretty low,” Menno repeated, ever literal. “That must have scared the snake.”

M.K. stared at him. “The *snake*? It scared the living day-lights out of me.” She coughed. “I mean, out of the *girls*!”

Sadie cut the last piece of gingerbread cake—after all, why save it?—and slipped it on her plate.



Julia couldn't sleep. She was assaulted by an avalanche of thoughts, rolling, tumbling. How could life change so fast? This very morning she had woken earlier than usual, so filled with joy she could have burst. A taste of something unspeakably sweet—a wedding—and then, this afternoon, she had lost it. Paul took her dream and broke it like a fistful of spaghetti over a pot of boiling water. Snap, in half. Gone.

All thanks to the Bee Man.

Out of the blue, the Bee Man arrived in town and filled Paul's head with doubts. Paul had never been particularly confident. She knew that he had difficulty making even the smallest decision, let alone a firm decision about a wedding date. The Bee Man had a way of bringing doubts into Paul's mind—just enough doubts to convince Paul to postpone the wedding . . . again.

The bishop's sermon two Sundays ago was about the necessity of loving one's fellowman. Not only did Julia not love the Bee Man, she thought she might hate him. Wholeheartedly hate him! She knew it was wrong to hate anyone, but how could she love someone so despicable? How was it even possible? She knew that with God all things were possible . . . but this?

She couldn't get that exasperating man out of her head. After two years, the mental ledger of her grievances against the Bee Man had grown thick with entries. Finally, she decided to commit this big mess to prayer. She believed in prayer. Prayer worked.

She bowed her head and asked God to help her love the loathsome Bee Man and to give her the strength she lacked. "Amen," she said and snapped her head back, smacking the back of her head on the headboard of her bed. "Ouch!" She rubbed her head where it hurt. Really, wasn't this also the Bee Man's fault? Everything about that man created trouble—even thinking about him inflicted pain. Who was he, anyway? Where did he come from? She had always noticed how the Bee Man skillfully deflected questions about himself. Even her father—who knew him better than anyone in Stoney Ridge—was reluctant to ask the Bee Man anything of a personal nature.

Julia had known Roman Troyer—the Bee Man—for six summers. He seemed to be particularly fond of Windmill Farm and spent time with the Lapp family each year, and still she didn't know a single thing about him other than he went from town to town with his bees. And he was Amish.

What pleasure did Roman Troyer take in breaking up her engagement to Paul? Twice! What did he hope to gain from it?

The sounds of Sadie and M.K., as they changed into nightgowns and brushed their teeth in the hallway bathroom, drifted through the transom above her door. She heard Sadie remind M.K. to scrub her face because no boy would look at her twice with that milk mustache. M.K. answered back by saying she didn't *want* a boy to look at her, not even once.

Julia's eyes flew open. Suddenly, it dawned on her. Of course. Of course! How could she not have realized? It was all so simple—as plain as day. Roman Troyer was in love with Julia himself.

Too bad, Bee Man. I'm not interested. I never will be! She wasn't going to let Roman Troyer stand in her way with Paul Fisher.

Her thoughts drifted back to Paul, feebly telling her he wanted to postpone the wedding. What would Paul tell others? Her mind was racing—she felt deeply humiliated. But on the heels of her humiliation was an overwhelming sorrow. She loved Paul. Would he ever be ready to get married? Or would he always just like the idea of getting married?

She sighed. A more courageous woman would have told Paul to forget it. A tougher woman would have told him in no uncertain terms what he could do with this halfhearted plan to postpone. But Julia was neither brave nor tough. She just wanted Paul back. She wanted things back the way they were, yesterday, or last week. Before the Bee Man arrived.

Oh Paul. What was he doing tonight? Was he at home with his family, or out with his friends? He had to be missing her. He had to be thinking about her. He was in love with her! She was sure of it. Tomorrow, Julia decided, he would come to Windmill Farm and tell her it was all a big mistake.

Prayer worked, she reminded herself. And so she prayed.
Please please please please please please please.



The last chore of the evening was to move the three cows out to the pasture with the creek flowing through it. It was usually Menno's job, but he told M.K. that he had something

he needed to do first, and then he disappeared with a trowel in his hand.

M.K. opened the gate and pushed the rump of the first cow, Pizza. If she could get Pizza moving along, chances were good that Pepperoni and Linguica would follow behind her. They used to have thirty cows, a herd, and it was M.K.'s job to name each new calf. Her father had given her that task the year her mother had passed, and M.K. felt very important whenever a cow was due to calve. After her father's heart started to act up last year, he sold the dairy cows and sheep at an auction. It broke M.K.'s heart to part with the animals. "Just for a little while, M.K.," her father had promised. "Just until I'm back in the saddle, fit as a fiddle." He let her keep a few—her favorites—as long as she promised to care for them. And she did, most of the time, unless she forgot and then Menno would remember. Caring for the animals was the main thing on his mind.

Where was Menno, anyway? She hitched the lock on the gate behind Linguica and ran up the hill. Menno met her as she reached the barn, near Julia's garden. M.K. gasped. In his hands were Julia's prized pink Parrot tulips, dug up, with bulbs attached. Julia loved those tulips! This very morning, she had made the whole family come to the garden to admire them. They were in their glory. At their peak!

"Menno, *what* were you thinking?"

He looked pleased with himself. "Julia is so sad. These will cheer her up."

"Oh, they'll be sure to get a reaction out of Julia! If I were you, I'd hide out in the hills for a few days."

Menno looked confused and M.K. was just about to explain when she heard Sadie call out to them from the kitchen

window. Menno spun around on one heel and headed toward the house, and M.K. shook off her shock and followed him. Let Sadie untangle this. Sadie made things clear to Menno. He walked into the kitchen, dropping clumps of dirt from the tulip bulbs wherever he went. M.K. came in behind him, stepping around the clots. Boys. So messy!

Sadie was at the kitchen sink, soaking the last few dishes from dinner. She caught sight of what was in Menno's hands and froze. She threw a questioning look—filled with horror—at M.K., who shrugged her shoulders.

“They're for Julia,” Menno said. “To make her happy again.”

Sadie put the dish towel down on the counter and exhaled a deep sigh. “Let's get those into a pitcher of water, Menno.”

He walked over to the counter and placed the tulips down. “You fix 'em and I'll take them up to Julia.”

Sadie found a glass pitcher and started to fill it with water. “She's sound asleep, Menno. Let's wait to show her the pretty flowers until the morning.”

He tossed M.K. a smug look. “Mary Kate thinks I should hide in the hills.”

“No, you shouldn't hide.” Sadie cut the bulb off of each tulip stem. “Once Julia recovers from the . . . surprise . . . I'm sure she will think they're a lovely gesture.”

And then she added, so softly that M.K. thought she might have imagined it, “I hope.”



Gray light streaked the windows. Julia showered, turned off the water, stepped out, dried off, and ran a comb through her chestnut-colored hair. She'd always been secretly proud of

her hair, thick and sleek and luxurious. She took a washrag and wiped the steam off the mirror. She didn't look too bad, did she? Tired, a bit frayed on the edges, but nothing that would frighten the birds off the trees, as her father used to say about people who didn't feel up to snuff.

Fooling yourself, her reflection said. Sore head, sore heart.

In the kitchen, Julia threw herself into a chair, bone-weary after a sleepless night.

"You look lovely, Jules," Sadie said, coming in from the other room with a basket of laundry in her arms. "You're the prettiest girl in our church. Paul will come to his senses soon." Sadie quietly folded the stiff, dry towels and piled them on the table.

Julia made herself smile at her sister. That was an interesting thing about Sadie, she observed. Sadie spoke with a quiet certainty as if she knew what she was talking about.

"I was just going to bring breakfast up for you. In case you'd rather not see anyone . . ." Sadie's voice drizzled to a stop as she fastened her eyes on Julia's face. "I only meant, you can take a day off, Jules."

Julia didn't want to talk, and Sadie—despite the subject of Paul Fisher hovering over the table like a hummingbird—wouldn't make her. Sadie knew that you didn't need to talk all the time. She had a great sense of stillness, making it very restful to be near her.

"I'm fine. Really."

Julia picked up a towel and started to fold it as Sadie poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. Then she put bacon in the fry pan. The hot bacon sputtered and popped, so Sadie cracked the window open to fan out the smoke. Julia took a sip of the coffee and spit it out. Grounds were floating on top.

This time Julia had no trouble smiling. No sisters could be more different, Julia thought as she spooned out the grounds. Sadie had always been most like their father, a peacemaker. She was quite lovely in a round, soft sort of way, with curly light brown hair, a round face covered with freckles, and a shy, friendly smile, mild-mannered and dreamy. A listening person. She was of a fearful nature, but she knew that about herself and said it wasn't such a bad way to be because it led to so many nice surprises when frightening things didn't happen.

Julia glanced out the window. M.K. was having trouble coaxing the cows out of the barn into the paddock. The silly animals milled in a stubborn bunch, jamming the opening and squeezing her against the doorjamb.

M.K. would be twelve come winter. Too soon to tell what kind of woman she would grow into, but Julia thought M.K. took after their mother, at least in personality. Maggie Zook Lapp had been known as a woman who had a curious way of thinking.

Menno appeared at the barn door and pushed the cows through, rescuing M.K. Julia's heart ached sweetly as she watched Menno's gentle ways. Nearly seventeen, Menno had the body of a man, but his mind hadn't developed quite as far.

To an outsider, Menno seemed like any other healthy, handsome young man. But when he spoke, it was obvious that he was different. You'd know from watching or even talking with him briefly that something was unusual. The wheels of his mind turned slowly, cautiously. The doctors never could decide what exactly was wrong with Menno. The consensus was a lack of oxygen caused brain injury during birth.

Unless it was something he felt passionate about, Menno wasn't much of a talker, but he hummed. He was always

humming from memory, and off-key, every tune that he ever heard. Uncle Hank had taught Menno to be a first-rate bird-house builder. He sold the birdhouses at Julia's farm stand and also at the hardware store in town. Menno loved birds. His favorite book was *Bird, Birds, Birds!* and he spent far too much time at the telephone shanty by the schoolhouse listening in to the Audubon Rare Bird Count. He loved all animals, dogs and birds best of all.

The one thing that defined Menno's life more than any other was his relationship with animals. He held them, raised them, loved them, cared for them, healed them.

Julia smiled as she saw Menno and M.K. race up to the house, like they always did, eager for breakfast.

As M.K. and Menno reached the kitchen porch and pulled off their shoes, the front door banged open.

"ANYBODY TO HOME?" boomed Uncle Hank, who always spoke as though he were addressing the deaf.

"Oh no . . . not this early." Julia sighed and rubbed her forehead. Uncle Hank had always been a sore trial to Julia, but the exploding bottle incident put him on very thin ice. Not that he was aware of it.

"Come on in, Uncle Hank!" Sadie said.

Uncle Hank stood in the doorway, grinning like he just tagged everyone in a game of hide-and-seek. In his hand was the lit stub of a cigar.

"No smoking in the house, Uncle Hank," Julia said. "You know the doctors outlawed it for Dad's sake." She put her hand out, palm up, until Uncle Hank forfeited the stub. Julia opened the kitchen door to throw it out. She turned and frowned at him, but he didn't seem at all offended.

“Still settin’ to your breakfast!” he bellowed. “I had mine at 4:30!”

The entire town of Stoney Ridge was awake now. Julia filled a coffee mug and handed it to him.

“Say, Mary Kate, if I’d a knowed I’d see you, I’d a put my choppers in.” Uncle Hank fumbled around in his pocket and pulled out a full set of fake dentures. They grinned out of his fist. Menno whooped out a big laugh. M.K. and Sadie started to giggle.

Julia shaded her eyes with her hand. It really was too early for this.

“Well, Uncle Hank, how are you today?” Amos asked, standing at the bottom of the stairwell. He was still in his pajamas, Julia noted. More and more often, there were days when he never changed out of them.

“Better’n you, Amos. You’re gettin’ to look more and more like a plucked chicken ever’ time I lay eyes on you.” He spied Julia and pointed at her. “That Fisher boy come to his senses yet?”

Julia thought, *Move on. New topic.* “Uncle Hank, was there some reason you came over so especially early this morning?”

His bushy eyebrows lifted on Julia in surprise. “Why, so I did!” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and unfolded it. He hooked his spectacles over his ears and gave the envelope a close look.

“I’ve got news. I found somebody to help out while Amos is ailing.” He glanced at the return address. “A lady named Fern Graber from Millersburg, Ohio.”

“Is she Amish?” asked M.K.

Uncle Hank turned his spectacles on M.K. “Of course she’s Amish!” he roared.

“What’s this Fern lady like?” Menno asked in his slow way. “Can she cook five meals like Sadie?”

“No one can cook like Sadie Lapp!” Uncle Hank pounded his fist on the table for added emphasis and Sadie blushed.

M.K. had a sudden coughing fit and Julia elbowed her to hush up. Sadie was just starting to learn to cook when their mother passed. She had learned how to make five recipes and that’s as far as she got. She didn’t waver off those same five recipes: A big ham on Saturday night which gave them leftovers for Sunday, Ham ’n’ Noodle casserole on Monday to finish off the ham, Haystacks on Tuesday, Tater Tot Casserole on Wednesday, Cheesy Chicken and Rice Casserole on Thursday, pizza delivered from a local shop on Friday if the budget allowed. If not, grilled cheese sandwiches. The family knew what day it was by what was being served for dinner. Julia, who never had much interest in learning to cook, wouldn’t let M.K. or Menno complain about the lack of variety in their meals. She knew how much mastering those five recipes meant to Sadie. They were a link to their mother, just like quilting was for Julia. A reminder of life like it had been.

“How did you happen to find this woman?” Julia asked. She knew from experience that if she didn’t immediately steer Uncle Hank back on course, she would be obligated to ride the path he started down, filled with infinite, unrelated details.

Uncle Hank drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “She must be reading my letters in the *Budget*. So she wrote and asked if we needed help.” Uncle Hank was a *Budget* scribe and took his weekly letter writing seriously, filling it with all kinds of news—much of which Julia considered to be the family’s private business. And then there was plenty of

community news, adding his unique “Uncle Hank” spin on events, often irking many of the ladies in the church.

Amos walked over to the kitchen to fill a mug with coffee. He gave Uncle Hank a suspicious glance. “Just what did her letter say?”

“That it sounded like we needed help and she would be just the ticket!” He scowled at Amos. “The right price too, considering you ain’t exactly rolling in greenbacks lately.”

Amos ignored that observation and took a long sip of coffee.

“What’s she like?” Menno asked, buttering his toast to the very edges.

Uncle Hank rattled the letter. His glasses slipped down his nose. “Says here she isn’t fond of rules she hasn’t made herself. She brooks no nonsense. She has strong opinions and she’s not the kind who enjoys surprises. She expects brown-caked shoes to be left at the back door and for the family to don clean socks in the house. And she’ll tolerate no muddy-bellied dogs in the house.”

M.K. dropped her head on the table with a loud clunk.

Uncle Hank turned one eye in her direction. His eyes had a tendency to wander. “And she has a mustache, fangs, and eats ten-year-olds for lunch.”

“Thank goodness I’m eleven,” M.K. mumbled glumly.

“Out of the goodness of her heart, she is dropping everything and coming to this family’s aid.” He leaned over toward Amos. “I’d be a watchin’ yourself.” His face broke into a big toothy grin. “I smell a trap brewing!”

“We don’t *need* help,” Julia said crisply.

Peering over his spectacles, Uncle Hank looked around the room. Clutter was everywhere. The kitchen was the worst.

Countertops were buried underneath a motley assortment of newspapers and mail. Last night's food-encrusted dinner dishes were still piled in the sink. Even the pattern on the linoleum floor was hard to make out, littered with grass clippings that Menno had tracked into the kitchen and somehow managed to spread through the house. Furniture was shrouded under a white film of dust. They had worked so hard to get it all cleaned up before they hosted church, barely a month ago—that infamous morning when the bottles exploded. But since then, they had been working fourteen hours a day to get the fields ready to plant.

“We’ve been pruning the orchards and planting the crops and taking care of the animals and trying to get the roadside stand up and going . . .,” Julia started, but even she couldn’t deny any longer that they were in over their heads. Her time passed in a blur of trying to get the farm ready for another growing season, caring for her sisters and brother, and tending to her father. It didn’t help that Amos was an awful patient, ornery at being so confined, short-tempered and demanding. She fell into bed exhausted each night, woke in the morning, and started all over again.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing to have a little help, Julia,” Sadie said quietly. “Just until Dad is better.”

“That’s right, Sadie girl!” Uncle Hank boomed, right into Sadie’s ear, and she cringed. “I’m sure Fern Graber is a fine housekeeper and a real good cook. And I’ll do alls I can to help out in them fields too, when I get a little more caught up out in the buggy shop.”

Julia had to bite her lower lip not to spit out the words that wanted to roll off her tongue: Uncle Hank could be counted on for one thing—he couldn’t be counted on.

Uncle Hank circled behind Menno's chair and put a large hand on his shoulder. "But as for this beautiful spring morning, Menno and I have work cut out for us. We're gonna head to town and meet this Fern Graber at the iron horse!"

Menno looked at his father. "What's an iron horse?"

"It's an old-fashioned word for a train," Amos said.

Menno thought that over for a long moment, then threw back his head and barked out that single, joyous "Haw!" that distinguished his laugh from everyone else's.

"Let's be off, Menno!" Uncle Hank shouted. "But first things first. We'll swing by Blue Lake Pond to see if the croppy is bitin'. After all, spring is upon us!"

Menno jumped out of his chair and grabbed his straw hat off the bench. Uncle Hank tipped his hat to everyone as he held the kitchen door open for Menno. Amos looked longingly after them, watching the two men—one old, one young—head down the path with their fishing poles in their hands and a bucket of bait.