


STONEY RIDGE
SEASONS



3-IN-1 COLLECTION

THE KEEPER
THE HAVEN
THE LESSON

Suzanne Woods Fisher


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The
KEEPER

To the world's best sister, Wendy,
who is just the right blend of Julia's and Sadie's best qualities.

Guess who inspired M.K.?

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

The Keeper

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.”

The Keeper

“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

The Keeper

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.

The Keeper

“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.