
STONE RIDGE SEASONS • 3

The
LESSON

A Novel

Suzanne Woods Fisher


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This story is for my youngest daughter,
Meredith,
who happens to be a full-time teacher
and a part-time detective.

1

The year Mary Kate Lapp turned nineteen started out fine enough. Life seemed full of endless possibilities. But as the year went on, a terrible restlessness began to grow inside of her, like sour yeast in a jar of warm water on a sunny windowsill. There were days when she thought she couldn't stand another moment in this provincial little town, and days when she thought she could never leave.

On a sun-drenched afternoon, M.K. was zooming along on her red scooter past an English farmer's sheep pasture, with a book propped above the handlebars—a habit that her stepmother, Fern, scolded her about relentlessly. She was just about to live happily ever after with the story's handsome hero when a very loud *Bwboom!* suddenly interrupted her reading.

Most folks would have turned tail and run, but not M.K. She might have considered it, but as usual, curiosity got the best of her. She zoomed back down the street, hopped off her scooter, climbed up on the fence, and there she saw him—an English sheep farmer in overalls, sprawled flat on the ground with a large rifle next to him. The frightened sheep were huddled in the far corner of the pasture. Doozy, M.K.'s big

old yellow dog of dubious ancestry, elected to stay behind with the scooter.

M.K. wasn't sure what to do next. Should she see if the sheep farmer was still alive? He didn't look alive. He looked very, very dead. She wouldn't know what to do, anyway—healing bodies was her sister Sadie's department. And what if the murderer were close by? Nosir. She was brave, but you had to draw the line somewhere.

But she could go to the phone shanty by the schoolhouse and make a 911 call for the police. So that's what she did. She waited at the phone shanty until she heard the sirens and saw the revolving lights on top of the sheriff's car. Then she jumped on her scooter and hurried back to the sheep pasture.

The sheriff walked over to ask M.K. if she was the one who had called 911. She had known Sheriff Hoffman all her life. He was a pleasant-looking man with a short haircut, brown going gray around his ears, and a permanent suntan. Tall and impressive in his white uniform shirt and crisp black pants, radio clipped to one hip, gun holster on the other. He questioned M.K. about every detail she could recall—which wasn't much, other than a loud gunshot. She didn't even know the farmer's name. The sheriff took a pen from his back pocket and started taking notes. (What would he write? *Amish witness knows nothing. Absolutely nothing.*) But he did tell her she did the right thing by not disturbing the crime scene. He took her name and address and said he might be contacting her with more questions.

M.K. stuck around, all ears about whatever she could overhear, fascinated by the meager clues the police were trying to piece together. When the county coroner arrived in his big black van, M.K. decided she had gleaned all she could. Besides, the trees were throwing long shadows. The sun would

be setting soon and she should get home to let her father and Fern know about the murder. It was alarming news!

She took a shortcut through the town of Stoney Ridge to reach Windmill Farm as fast as she could but was intercepted by her friend Jimmy Fisher. Standing in front of the Sweet Tooth Bakery, he called to her, then ran alongside and grabbed the handlebars of her scooter to stop her. She practically flew headfirst over the handlebars.

Men! So oblivious.

“I need your help with something important,” Jimmy said.

“Can’t,” M.K. said, pushing his hands off her scooter. “I’m in a big hurry.” She started pumping her leg on the ground to build up speed. Doozy puffed and panted alongside her.

“It won’t take long!” Jimmy sounded wounded. “What’s your big hurry?”

“Can’t tell you!” she told him, and she meant it. The sheriff had warned her not to say anything to anyone, with the exception of her family, until they had gathered more information. She felt a prick of guilt and looked back at Jimmy, who had stopped abruptly when she brushed him off. She liked that he was a little bit scared of her, especially because he was older and much too handsome for his own good.

She glanced back and saw him cross the road to head into the Sweet Tooth Bakery where her friend Ruthie worked. Good! Let Ruthie solve Jimmy’s problem this time. M.K. was always helping him get out of scrapes and tight spots. That boy had a proclivity for trouble. Always had.

Distracted by the dead body and then by Jimmy Fisher, M.K. made a soaring right turn near the Smuckers’ goat farm, and possibly—just possibly—forgot to look both ways before she turned. Her scooter ended up bumping into Alice Smucker, the schoolteacher at Twin Creeks where M.K. had

spent eight long years, as Alice was herding goats across the road into an empty pasture.

A tiny collision with a scooter and Alice refused to get to her feet. “I AM CONCUSSED!” she called out.

M.K. was convinced that Alice was prejudiced against her. And she was so dramatic. She insisted M.K. call for an ambulance.

Two 911 calls in one day—it was more excitement than M.K. could bear. She hoped the dispatcher didn’t recognize her voice and think she was a crank caller. She wasn’t! Nosir.

Naturally, M.K. waited until the ambulance arrived to swoop away with Alice, who was hissing with anger. When M.K. offered to accompany Alice to the hospital—she knew it was the right thing to do, though the offer came with gritted teeth—Alice glared at her.

“You stay away from me, Mary Kate Lapp!” she snapped, before she swooned in a faint.

Alice. So dramatic.

After M.K. rounded up the goats and returned them to the Smuckers’ pasture, she arrived at Windmill Farm, her home and final destination. She couldn’t wait to tell her father and Fern about the news! She was sorry for the sheep farmer—after all, she wasn’t heartless. But finally, something interesting had happened in this town. It was big news—there had never been a murder in Stoney Ridge. And she had been the first one on the scene.

Well, to be accurate—and Fern was constantly telling her not to exaggerate—M.K. wasn’t *quite* on the scene. But she did hear the gunshot! She absolutely did.

She knew Fern would be irritated with her for being so late for dinner. Fern was a stickler about . . . well, about most everything. But especially about being late for dinner.

The unfortunate incident with Alice Smucker had slowed her down even more. The accident did bother M.K.—she would never intentionally run into anyone. Especially not Alice Smucker. Of all people!

M.K. set the scooter against the barn. She heard her mare, Cayenne, whinny for her, so she went into the barn, filled up the horse's bucket with water, and closed the stall door. She latched it tightly, her mind a whirl of details. It wasn't until she had pulled the latch that she noticed her father's horse and buggy were gone. She peered through the dusty barn window and saw that the house was pitch dark, its windows not showing any soft lampshine. Where could her father and Fern have gone? They were always home at this time of day. Always, always, always.

This day just kept getting stranger.



Guilt pinched the edges of Chris Yoder's conscience. Old Deborah had taught him better manners than to ignore a neighbor's greeting, but he wasn't interested in being neighborly. All that interested him was fixing up his grandfather's house. For now, it was a disaster. It looked as if a good puff of wind would be all that was required to bring the house tumbling down.

Jenny turned around to peer out the buggy window. "I think she was hoping you would stop and say hello, Chris. She's seems like such a nice old lady."

"Can't," Chris said. "Gotta get home." Erma Yutzy was a very nice old lady, and he had done some odd jobs for her, but she liked to talk and he could never find a way to break in and excuse himself. But it wasn't just that he wanted to avoid Erma Yutzy today. He was always in a touchy mood after a trip

to town. People were everywhere—on the sidewalks, in the stores, riding bikes, eating ice-cream cones, sipping expensive coffees. As if nothing bad could happen. As if nothing could hurt them or threaten their sense of security.

“This isn’t going to work,” Jenny whispered. “We’re going to get caught.”

Chris glanced over at his thirteen-year-old sister. The last few months had taken a toll on her. She had always been a worrier. She worried about everything and everybody. “It’s been working for over six weeks now, Jenny. If we were going to have a problem, we would have had it by now. I think we’re home free.” He didn’t entirely believe that, but he knew it was best to ease Jenny’s concern.

Jenny’s chin jutted forward. “Plunking me in school is the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“No, it’s not,” Chris said. “You need schooling. And I need you to not be underfoot.”

“I’m going to need new shoes for school.” She scowled at him. “We can’t afford them.”

She had him there. He had no cash to spare, but he had been prepared for lean times. And he wasn’t going to let a few dollars stop his sister from getting an education. Schooling was something he didn’t take for granted.

“Think of school as an adventure. Something new.” Chris kept the smile on his face and the worry out of his voice.

Jenny leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes.

For a moment he was lost in another time of his life, another season. Was it only two months ago? It seemed like much longer. That was the week that Old Deborah, as close to a grandmother to him as anyone ever would be, passed to her glory.

Hours before she had died, she had covered his hand with

hers. “Every now and then, Chris, life throws you something you’d never have chosen in a million years. I know that’s how you feel right now.”

He looked into her tired brown eyes. “How am I going to do it?”

She smiled. “The Lord taught us to pray, ‘Give us *this* day our daily bread.’ We’re supposed to live one day at a time, not to borrow another day’s troubles.”

One day at a time. That’s how they had been living ever since they arrived in Stoney Ridge two weeks ago, but he hadn’t expected things to be this hard. They were scraping by on a wing and a prayer. But there were good things too. They were settling into a new home. He had picked up some odd jobs, like mowing Erma Yutzy’s lawn, that provided ready cash. Just today he had gotten a tip at the hardware store about a man named Amos Lapp who needed a fellow to help with fieldwork because he had some heart trouble. Wasn’t that a sign of God’s just-in-time providence?

A whinny from his horse made him smile. Chris had a magnificent Thoroughbred horse, Samson, that he had raised since he was a foal. The stallion was a legacy from Old Deborah, along with the knowledge that a little piece of real estate in Stoney Ridge was waiting, intended for him from his grandfather. It was a start.

He exhaled. One day at a time.



After Jimmy Fisher watched Mary Kate Lapp charge up the road, he started to head to the Sweet Tooth Bakery but changed his mind. He wasn’t really in the mood to try to talk to Ruthie today—she often burst into a fit of giggles when she was around him. Plus, it was getting late and he knew

his mother would be wondering where he was. Chore time on the chicken-and-egg farm.

He had really wanted to talk to M.K. She would have a good idea about how he should proceed. Much better than Ruthie. M.K., for all her shortcomings, was very reliable about these kinds of things.

Jimmy was in love. At a horse auction in Leola—his favorite pastime—he had noticed an attractive young Amish woman who was selling a two-year-old brindled mare. He couldn't take his eyes off that girl. Shiny auburn hair, snapping green eyes. And tall! He'd always wanted to marry a tall woman. It was a dire disappointment to Jimmy that he wasn't as tall as his brother, Paul. Jimmy wasn't tall at all, but he held himself very straight as if to make the most of what he had. He planned to rectify that genetic flaw for the next generation. Tall was good. It was number five on his list of critical requirements for his future wife.

The brindled mare had fetched a good price, and the young woman was saying goodbye to the horse, tears streaming down her face. Jimmy was touched. Three heartbeats later, he tracked down the auctioneer to find out to whom the mare had belonged. The auctioneer was taking a break behind the large canvas tent while the horse lot was being changed. A stub of a cigar hung from his mouth as he eyed Jimmy. "Why do you want to know?"

"I had an interest in that brindled mare," Jimmy said. That was true. It wasn't a lie. He was more interested in the mare's owner than the mare, but he wasn't lying. "Just wondered if they might be breeders or not." Jimmy kicked a rock on the ground with the toe of his boot. "Giving some thought to becoming a breeder myself. Just thought I'd talk to her, ah, him." He cleared his throat, tried to act nonchalant.

The auctioneer threw the cigar stub on the ground and rubbed it out with his shoe. “I thought you Amish knew everybody, anyway.”

“A common misperception,” Jimmy said. *Along with assuming we look alike and think alike and act alike.* He nearly said that part out loud, but held back, given that he had become so mature lately. Still, it rankled him how the non-Amish lumped the Amish into one-size-fits-all.

Take Jimmy and his brother, Paul. They might share a passing resemblance—both blond, with their father’s strong nose and high forehead—but no two brothers could be more different. Paul was thirty now, still unmarried, still at home under his mother’s very large thumb. It wasn’t that Paul didn’t want to marry and start a family of his own; he just couldn’t quite decide on a wife. He was always juggling a few girls, attracted to each one but not in love with any of them.

Jimmy had no trouble making decisions, or falling in love. He fell in love, he fell out of love—but at least it was love! He had passion, and emotion, and wasn’t afraid to make a commitment like Paul was. Or, at least, he wouldn’t be afraid to when he fell in love for the last time. He planned to marry within two years. It was all planned out. And he had just found his missus. Done! Checked off.

The auctioneer took a loud slurp of coffee and tossed the paper cup on the ground. “Her name is Emily Esh. Father is Emanuel Esh. They live near Bart. Father’s a darn good horse trader.” He handed Jimmy a card: *Domenico Guisepppe Rizzo, purveyor of fine horses.* “This is the guy you need to see if you want to get into pony racing.”

Jimmy peered at the card. “Wait. Is that Domino Joe?” He knew Domino Joe. Knew him well. “What makes you think I have an interest in pony racing?”

The auctioneer glanced at his watch and strolled back to the auction block. Over his shoulder, he tossed, “If you’re already acquainted with Domino Joe, then why would I think you don’t?”

Jimmy frowned and stuffed the card in his pocket. Emily Esh. What a beautiful name. It had a musical sound . . . what was it M.K. called that kind of thing? Allit, alliter, alliteration. That was it!

Now . . . how to meet Emily Esh? He remembered that M.K. had talked Ruthie into going to a youth gathering in Bart this summer, hoping to meet a more intelligent crop of boys, she had said. “I’ve known these Stoney Ridge boys forever,” she said airily to Jimmy. “And most of them have no idea how to carry on an intelligent conversation. They just want to talk about the latest prank they pulled or about what the best hunting sports are or all about their dogs.”

At the time, Jimmy took offense. M.K. was always showing off her big brain, as if it wasn’t obvious to everyone that she had a different way of thinking. He had a hunch that she could go to the ends of the earth and she still wouldn’t find what she was looking for, because that fellow didn’t exist. But now, the Bart youth gathering sounded very intriguing to Jimmy.

He just needed M.K.’s help. He wanted to meet Emily Esh, his future missus.



M.K. waited restlessly for her father and Fern to return home. She went down to the honey cabin, tucked at the far edge of Windmill Farm’s property, and wrote on some labels for honey jars, but her hands felt shaky with excitement. She didn’t like the way her handwriting ended up looking—like

she was nine, not nineteen. Just yesterday, she had finished spinning her most recent supply of honey from her brown bees' honeycombs into long, thin clean jars. She sold her honey at Fern's roadside stand. She wished she had left some chores to do. She swept the floor and straightened up, then went back to the house.

In her bedroom, she spent some time looking for her old detective notebook. She finally found it, tucked deep under her mattress. She opened it to a clean page and wrote SOLVE SHEEP FARMER'S MURDER!!! in bold letters across the top and underlined it three times, breaking the pencil point in the process. She found another pencil and numbered the page from one to ten.

But how?

She pulled out her detective books from the bottom bookshelf and spread them out on her bed.

- #1. Look for overlooked clues that the culprit might have left in his haste.
 - A. Go back to the pasture.

She spent the next ten minutes drumming the pencil against the page as she searched in vain for ideas to proceed. When her head began to ache from thinking too hard, she put her books away and stuffed the notebook back under the mattress.

She thought the house seemed stuffy, so she opened the windows downstairs in the living room and kitchen. A breeze moved into the room, carrying a faint perfume from Fern's rose garden. M.K. sat down, stood up, walked around, sat down again. Her mind was spinning, like dandelions in the wind. She was so antsy that Doozy gave up following her. He curled up in the living room corner and went to sleep. She

jumped up and went into the kitchen, knowing just what to do to keep her mind and hands busy.

After her sister Sadie married Gideon Smucker and left home, M.K. was at loose ends—she had finished formal schooling, she was missing the companionship of Sadie and Julia, her married sisters, and she was driving Fern crazy. A serious case of “ants in her pants,” Fern diagnosed. M.K. needed something to do, so Fern taught her how to bake bread.

M.K. went into the kitchen and pulled out the flour canister. On the windowsill was a jar filled with a noxious-looking substance, placed where the late afternoon sun would warm it but not too much. She picked up the jar, remembering the first time Fern had shown it to her.

It was the winter after Sadie and Gid’s wedding, two years ago. The lower half was a thick gray pillow, looking like something you’d find on the moon. Fern had shaken it up, then opened it. A strong sour smell exploded into the air.

“Phew!” M.K. pinched her nose like a clothespin. “What is that horrible thing?” She leaned closer to inspect it.

“It’s my sourdough bread starter,” Fern said. “It’s been in my family for generations. It came from a carefully tended mother dough that my great-great-great-grandmother brought over from Germany in 1886.”

“How could all those grandmothers have kept it alive all that time?”

“Some mysteries are best not to examine too closely,” Fern said in her matter-of-fact way. “Starters are sturdier than they appear. But I guard that starter like gold at Fort Knox.” She scooped out a hefty measure of foamy pale-yellow-white starter and put it in a bowl. “I refresh it every week so it stays healthy.” She turned on the tap, testing the temperature with

her fingers. “I add water that’s just barely warmer than your fingers.” When she got it right she gestured to M.K. “Try it.”

M.K. stuck her fingers under the stream. She hardly felt the water. M.K. filled a glass measuring cup and stirred it into the jar of starter. It foamed up.

M.K. jumped back, then stared at it. “Why, it’s alive!”
“Exactly.”

Danger! M.K. was hooked.

A noise outside jolted her back to the present. She peered out the window, hoping to see a buggy roll up the driveway. But no—it was only a noisy bluejay, gorging himself on black oiled sunflower seeds that filled the blue bird feeder on the porch. M.K. rapped on the window to shoo the greedy bird away.

She took out a large bowl and measured a cup of flour. She used a sturdy wooden spoon and stirred the flour into the heady sponge, filling the air with a sour scent, unique to yeast. She turned the dough out on a layer of fine white flour that she scattered across the surface of the counter. As she began to knead the bread, back and forth, over and under, pushing and pulling, her restlessness began to slip away. Like it always did. She didn’t like to admit it, but Fern was right. Her hands needed to be busy.

Two hours later, the loaves were baked and cooling on the counter. They were far more dense than Fern’s would have been. M.K. never had the patience to let dough rest as long as it needed. But the kitchen was clean and shiny for Fern’s critical inspection just as she walked in. M.K. met her at the door. Over Fern’s shoulder, she saw her father near the barn, untacking the horse from the buggy shafts.

“Where have you been?” M.K. asked. “I’ve been waiting for hours!”

A wall came up, chilled the air. Fern didn't speak immediately. Doozy let go of a soft, joyous woof and his tail wagged slowly, then stopped.

"Where have *you* been?" Fern replied, sharp as a pinch. "You were due at the schoolhouse at six. There was a work frolic to get the schoolhouse ready for school on Monday."

M.K.'s hands flew up to her cheeks. "I forgot! I forgot all about it."

Fern frowned at her. "If you were a bird, you would be a hummingbird. Flitting from place to place. You can't be still."

"But there's a reason! Something has happened!"

"So we heard," Amos said in a weary voice as he opened the kitchen door and walked into the room. His weather-tanned face, with its work wrinkles running down his cheeks, looked exasperated. "You ran into Alice Smucker. How did you happen to do that?"

Oh. *Oh!* M.K. had forgotten all about the collision with Alice Smucker. Her mind was wholly preoccupied with the shocking murder. "Well, there's rather a lot of Alice."

Amos raised a warning eyebrow at M.K. "Alice Smucker will be unable to start the school year due to a mild concussion."

"Really? She *actually* has a concussion? The doctor really, truly said that? Because—"

Amos sent M.K. a warning frown, but too late.

"—Alice can be a bit of a hypochondri—"

Amos held up his hand to stop her. "Mary Kate, it doesn't matter whether the doctor said so. That's what Alice Smucker believes she has, and it was because you didn't look where you were going on the scooter and you crashed into the poor woman."

"Dad, it wasn't really that big of a crash. More like a tiny bump."

Amos shook his head. “She has a ferocious headache and can’t teach for the foreseeable future.”

“That’s a shame,” M.K. said.

Amos and Fern exchanged a look.

The first ripple of concern fluttered down M.K.’s spine. “What?”

“The members of the school board were at the work frolic,” Amos said. “They came to a decision about who can fill in for Alice.”

“Well, Gideon, of course. He’s done it before. He’s a fine teacher. Better than Alice.” M.K. hoped Sadie wouldn’t mind having Gid gone all day. She had little twins, a boy and a girl, who ran her ragged. At least, they ran M.K. ragged whenever she popped in for a visit. To M.K.’s way of thinking, children ran everybody ragged.

Amos and Fern exchanged another glance, and M.K. sensed something dreadful was coming, like the stillness right before a storm hit. She felt the hair on the back of her neck tingle. “If not Gid, then who? Who?” In the quiet, her question sounded like an owl.

“The school board has decided you will fill in for Alice,” Amos said.

“Me? Me?” she said with a squeak. “Teach school? You want me to teach school?” She was outraged! It was just an accident. She hadn’t run into Alice on purpose! “No! No, no, no, no, no. I can’t do it! Absolutely not!” The very thought terrified her. Stuck in a hot room with twenty-five slow-witted children, all day long? *Boring!* Supremely boring! “Dad, you’ve got to tell the school board that I just can’t do it. Tell them you and Fern need me to help at Windmill Farm.” She swept her arms in a wide arc, accidentally knocking over something from the counter onto the floor, where it

shattered. She looked down, horrified. It was the jar that held Fern's one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old bread dough starter. She covered her face, then peeked through her fingers to gauge Fern's reaction.

At first, Fern looked stunned. Then her mouth set in a straight line. "Clean up that mess. Then you'd better get ready. The school board wants to meet with you tomorrow, 8 a.m. sharp, at the schoolhouse."

M.K. said nothing. As she scooped shattered glass and tangy-smelling starter into the garbage, she felt that the whole day had taken an unsatisfactory turn. She had encountered a shocking murder, she had been suspected of intentionally running her scooter into Alice Smucker (when all she had been doing was riding her scooter), and now there was this uncomfortable expectation that she would teach school.

Suddenly M.K. was looking ahead, into the terrible future. Her life had been completely rearranged. This was too much. It was all too much!

What a day. The worst of her life.

2

The early morning air was quite sharp, hinting of summer's end. Amos stood by the barn and watched his youngest daughter zip off on her scooter to meet with the school board. Mary Kate had a woebegone look on her face, as if she were heading off to the gallows. He nearly caved, nearly gave her an excuse to tell the school board that she was needed at the farm and couldn't possibly teach school. But then he would have to face his wife with that news and the thought stopped him short.

Besides, he knew Fern was overly blessed with a sixth sense about his children. Last night, she told him that Mary Kate had turned down Ruthie's request for her to go through baptism instructions this fall. For three years now, Ruthie had pleaded with M.K. to join her in the classes and M.K. always said no, that she wasn't ready. This time, Ruthie was going ahead without her.

"That restive spirit has always worried me about M.K.," Fern told Amos. "It's nothing new, though it's getting worse. She slips around rules, she reads books in church, she sticks her nose where it doesn't belong, and now look at this." Out

of her apron pocket she pulled a folded piece of paper and thrust it at Amos.

He unfolded the paper. "A passport application?"

"I sent her to the post office to mail a package to Julia and Rome, and look what she came back with."

"Where did you find it?"

"It had slipped under the bench in the buggy."

He folded it and handed it to her. "Put it back where you found it. She'll be looking for it."

Fern slipped it back into her pocket with a sigh. "You're not going to let her know we are aware she is planning to flee the country?"

"She's young," Amos said in M.K.'s defense. His greatest hope in life would be that his children would accept his beliefs and join the church, but he was a believer in free will. He would never insist or put a timetable on that important decision. Time belonged to God. "Younger than most."

"She's nineteen. And I don't think age has anything to do with it."

"Then what do you think her problem is?"

"It's that quick mind of hers. It's got to be kept busy or it gets her into trouble. Teaching school would be challenging for her, Amos. She'll end up learning more than the scholars."

But would the scholars survive her? Amos loved his youngest daughter, but she had a unique way amidst a community that frowned upon uniqueness. How many times had Deacon Abraham taken Amos aside, in his quiet, gentle manner, to suggest ways of redirecting M.K.'s bottomless pit of energy? His daughter always meant well, her intentions were good, but she had a nose for trouble, a knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. She thought her real job was to know everyone in Stoney Ridge and everything that was happening.

And she was filled with excuses. Nothing was ever her fault. Just like careening into Alice Smucker last night.

Amos wouldn't have said so at the frolic yesterday, with the school board tsk-tsking over Alice's concussion, but he had to agree with M.K. about Alice's hypochondria. Alice was rumored to be absent more days than she was in the schoolhouse teaching. He'd never known Alice not to have an ailment, magnified to serious proportions.

Even Sadie, his middle daughter, who never said an unkind word about anyone, gave Alice a tea remedy each week to help manage her sensitive digestion. Earlier in the summer, Sadie had confessed to Amos that the remedy was just tea and sugar, nothing more. "Alice just wants someone to listen to her," Sadie said. "Since her father remarried, she's just lonely. Once I figured that out, I realized I was wasting time trying to find remedies for her symptoms. I gave her tea and sugar one time, and she said that was the best cure of all." Sadie lowered her voice. "I didn't tell her it was just tea and sugar."

Amos straightened his straw hat. He had a full day ahead—and a young fellow was coming by to see about cutting hay for him.

Maybe Fern was right. Maybe teaching would challenge M.K. and keep her mind out of trouble—like the trouble she could get into by trying to solve the murder of that poor sheep farmer. "Leave that to the police!" Amos had told M.K. last night. But he could see that she was itching to get involved and solve the crime. She gave him six different scenarios last night, accusing every single surrounding neighbor of the terrible deed. As Fern frequently pointed out, once she latched onto an idea, she was like a fox with an egg in its mouth—all the hollering in the world wouldn't make her drop it.

Maybe Fern was right. Maybe teaching school was the answer for M.K. He hoped so.



“Whoa.” Chris Yoder pulled back on the reins, drawing the horse to a halt. He leapt from the buggy seat and hopped down to find the owner of this big farm. A soft meow greeted him. He bent over and scooped up a barn cat that wove between his feet. “Who are you?”

“That’s Buzz.”

Chris looked up to see a tall, muscular, middle-aged Amish man facing him. “Amos Lapp?”

The man nodded. “Are you the fellow sent to me by the manager of the hardware store? Chris Yoder?”

Chris nodded. “How did a cat get a name like Buzz?”

“I always let my children name the animals. My youngest daughter went through a stage when she was naming every animal names that sounded like sounds.”

“Onomatopoeia.”

“That’s it! That’s it exactly!” Amos laughed. “I couldn’t come up with that word if my life depended on it.”

Chris set Buzz on the ground and reached out a hand to shake Amos’s. “I was told at the hardware store that you needed some help with fieldwork. The manager, Bud, said you’d had some heart surgery.”

“You heard right,” Amos said. “I had some serious surgery awhile back and there are limitations as to what I can do in the fields.”

“I’ve had a lot of experience with growing crops.” Chris looked over the fields. He could see that the corn tassles were drying out, which meant the corn was about ready to pick. The third cutting of hay needed to get done before the

predicted rainstorm at the end of the week. “Should I get to work on the hay? Or the corn?”

“Not so fast!” Amos grinned. “Though I like the way you think. Can you tell me a little about yourself?”

This was the part Chris dreaded. He kept his gaze on the fields. “What would you like to know?”

“What brings you to Stoney Ridge?”

“I need a job.” Chris didn’t mean to sound rude, but he didn’t want to volunteer anything he didn’t need to. The less people knew about him and his little sister, the better.

Amos watched him for a while. A long while. Then, to Chris’s relief, all that Amos said was, “Let’s give it a day’s trial, then.” He put his straw hat back on his head. “When you hear the dinner bell clang, come up to the house and join my wife and daughter and me for lunch.”

“I brought my own lunch. I’ll be fine.” That was a lie. His first lie. He didn’t have a lunch. But he didn’t want to get chummy with Amos Lapp and his family. For now, it was better to keep his distance.

Amos Lapp shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Chris chanced a look at him. “Tools for haying in the barn?”

“Yes. Back room.”

Chris nodded. “I’ll go get started.” He hurried to the barn before Amos Lapp thought of anything more to ask him.



A single brown horse grazed under the shade of an oak tree, and a bright flash of blue and orange darted across the road—a bluebird. It was going to be another hot, humid day. Mary Kate’s face felt beet red. A bead of sweat dripped down her back. She slowed the scooter as she rounded the

bend in the road that led to the schoolhouse. The door of the schoolhouse was wide open. The school board members were already there, waiting for her. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot. This was a terrible thing. A terrible, terrible thing.

She set her red scooter against the building, told Doozy to stay, took a deep breath, and walked into the schoolhouse. At the sound of her arrival, the men stopped talking and looked up. Orin Stoltzfus, Wayne Zook, Allen King. She knew each of these men—had known them all her life. Yet right now, she felt like she was being judged and came up lacking. Orin Stoltzfus stood up. He had the most experience on the school board. School board members were voted in and served a three-year term. Each year, an old board member finished his term and a new member was voted in.

Orin gave her a warm smile, showing the gap in his front teeth. “Good morning, Mary Kate. So glad you offered to step in for Alice.”

Offered? *Offered?!*

Fern! This is all your doing, she thought for the hundredth time. “Just how long do you think Alice will need some relief?” M.K. planned to drop by Alice’s later today with a loaf of freshly baked bread. A peace offering. “A few days?”

The men exchanged glances.

“A week?”

Still no response.

The oatmeal M.K. ate for breakfast shifted and rolled, turning into concrete. “Surely, she couldn’t have been badly hurt.” Meekly, she added, “Could she?”

Orin exhaled. “No, she’s not too terribly hurt. But she seems to sense she might be facing imminent demise.”

“Oh, is that all? Alice has been predicting her imminent demise for years!” M.K. looked hopefully at the men. “She’s

had two feet in the grave for as long as I've known her! Everybody knows Alice is as sound as a dollar. Maybe she needs to be working, to keep her mind busy." M.K. put a finger in the air. "Was mer net im Kopp hot, hot mer in de Fiess." *If your brain doesn't work, your feet must.* "Fern is always telling me that."

Orin scratched his neck. "I'm guessing we'll need you to substitute for two weeks. Maybe three, tops."

M.K. blew out a puff of air. "Okay. Three weeks." She could do this for three weeks. "I just want to warn you. I'm not much of a teacher."

Over her head, Orin and Wayne exchanged a look: *Is she always like this?*

"You like to read," Allen King offered. His jowls jiggled through his sparse whiskers as he spoke. "Why, you've got your nose in a book all the time! Just last Sunday, the preacher pointed out that you were reading during his sermon. Remember?"

M.K. remembered. She had tried to leave the book in the buggy, but she just couldn't concentrate on a thing until she found out if Robinson Crusoe was eaten by cannibals. She didn't think so, because it would have made a very strange and abrupt ending to the book. But she had to know for sure. So she slipped it under her apron and sat in the far left corner, against the wall. Ruthie covered for her by leaning forward, keeping her out of range of Fern's eagle eyes. She still wasn't sure how Ruthie's father, preaching at the time—and everybody knew he was a long-winded, dry-bone preacher—happened to notice M.K.'s book. He had paused and pointed a long finger at M.K. "Mary Kate Lapp! Put that book away on the Sabbath."

It was mortifying.

Fern confiscated her book and returned it to the library. She gave M.K. a one-minute lecture about how even good things become idols when they distract us from God. Fern was famous for her one-minute lectures.

“Isn’t there anyone else who might like to teach?” M.K. protested weakly.

“Nope,” Orin said. “Can’t think of any.”

“Really? I can think of all kinds of people who would be wonderful teachers: Gideon Smucker, Ruthie Glick, Ethan King, even . . . even . . . Jimmy Fisher!” She nearly choked on the words because, even though she and Jimmy had made their peace over the years, he wasn’t the brightest lantern in the barn. But she was desperate! And desperate times called for desperate measures.

“No,” Orin repeated, shaking his head. “We are confident you are the one.”

All three men looked at her, waiting for her to agree with them. And what could she say? It was her fault that Alice was injured. The families were counting on the start of school. The scholars shouldn’t be penalized. She grabbed her elbows. “The thing is, Orin, the thing is, I really don’t *want* to be a teacher.”

That was putting it mildly. She was absolutely sure she would be bored to death if she were confined to these four walls in this stuffy room. Every day, the same as the day before. Hadn’t she put in her time? Eight long years. How much more could she endure from this little schoolhouse?

A general silence met M.K.’s confession. The men exchanged awkward glances. Orin walked up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Mary Kate, being Amish means you care less about what’s best for you and more about what’s best for the church.”

Certainly, the inside of M.K.'s head had gone numb. Against her will, she had been strategically cornered. There was no way to respond to Orin's comment without sounding like she was a fence jumper. And she wasn't a fence jumper. She definitely wasn't. Well, maybe a little. Lately, she'd even been thinking of jumping all the way to Hong Kong. Or maybe Madrid. She couldn't quite decide.

This is all your doing, Fern! she thought for the hundred and first time. Inwardly, M.K. sighed, defeated. Outwardly, she agreed with Orin and spent the next half hour getting a tutorial about how to keep the coal heater from acting up on a cold winter morning. She started to explain that she would only be here for three weeks, gone long before winter, so she didn't need to learn how to feed coal into the stove, but she decided to keep her mouth shut. No one listened to a word she said in this town, anyway.

Orin seemed enraptured with this heater, describing each part with loving detail. *Blah, blah, blah.* She stopped listening to Orin when he got distracted with a loose seam holding the stovetop pipe in one piece. She had a bad experience with a stovepipe once—courtesy of Jimmy Fisher—and liked to stay clear of them. Finally, Orin ran out of things to inform M.K. about.

And then M.K. and Doozy slunk home.



As soon as his mother had gone to town, Jimmy Fisher made a beeline to Windmill Farm to talk to Mary Kate. No one answered his knock at the farmhouse. He crossed over to the barn to look for Amos but couldn't find him. Then he saw Fern hanging wet laundry on the clothesline. The soapy scent of fresh laundry perfumed the morning air. Jimmy

breathed in deeply—it was one of his favorite smells. But he thought twice about meeting up with Fern and scooted behind a tree. Fern thoroughly intimidated him. Thankfully, he spotted Hank Lapp in his buggy shop. The shop was an old carriage barn, with a small apartment up above where Hank lived. Buggies and parts, in various stages of disarray, littered the shop floor.

“JIMMY FISHER!” Hank boomed, when he caught sight of him. “You’re a little late for fishing today, boy. I went out before dawn.” Hank Lapp’s sun-leathered face exploded into a smile.

Being around Hank always reminded Jimmy of the effects of electricity—instantly, a dark room would be filled with dazzling light and a fellow had to blink rapidly to allow his eyes to adjust to the brightness. Jimmy leaned against the buggy Hank was tinkering on. One side of the buggy was dented, as if it had been broadsided by a car. Buggy and car collisions were a frequent occurrence in Lancaster County, and the buggies always took the brunt of it. But, as Hank often said, it meant he would always have plenty of work.

“I didn’t come to go fishing, Hank. Wish I had joined you this morning, though. No, I came by to talk to Mary Kate. Is she working at the honey cabin?”

“Naw. She’s down at the schoolhouse. Should be back any minute now.” He picked up a long piece of cut fiberboard and held it up against the side of the buggy to see if it would fit as a replacement part. “But she’ll be in no mood for yik-kity yakking.” He motioned to Jimmy to hand him a screw. “BLAST. Cut it too short.”

Jimmy’s gaze shifted to the hay field. He saw someone out there behind Amos’s two draft horses, cutting hay, but he could tell that someone wasn’t Amos. “Who’s that?”

Hank looked out to the field. “Young fellow Amos hired to cut hay.”

Jimmy squinted his eyes. “I can’t tell who he is. Someone new? Why didn’t Amos hire me?”

“Probably cuz you have a knack for disappearing whenever there’s a need for hard work.”

Jimmy was deeply offended. “That’s not true.” Maybe it was partially true.

Hank bore down on Jimmy with his good eye. “I hear you’ve developed a fondness for pony racing these days.”

“I just prefer the front end of the horse to the back end. But I could use some extra cash, seeing as how I have a girlfriend.”

Hank strode to the workbench and rummaged around for some tools. “Oh? A new flavor of the month?”

“It’s not like that this time, Hank. I think I have found my missus.”

Hank frowned at one tool, threw it down, picked up another. “Just how long have you been courting your potential missus?”

“Well, see, that’s why I need to talk to M.K. I haven’t quite met my missus yet.”

Hank jerked his head up. A big “HAW!” burst out of him. “You and Paul are cut out of the same cloth! Immer gucka. Nie net am kaufen.” *Always looking, never buying.*

Jimmy frowned. Hank Lapp was hardly one to give marital advice. He was a dedicated bachelor. Hank had been mildly courting Jimmy’s mother for years now—if you could call it courting. He showed up regularly for Sunday dinner, followed by a long nap in a recliner chair.

Why Jimmy’s mother put up with Hank was a mystery. But then, in a way, the casualness of Hank’s courting must appeal to her as well. Edith Fisher could remain in complete

charge of her life—and her sons—and didn't have to change anything to suit a man. Jimmy loved his mother, but he wasn't blind to her faults. He remembered how henpecked his own father had been. Ironic for a man who had raised chickens and sold eggs for a living.

"Whose buggy is this?" Jimmy said. He recognized his friends' buggies because they had customized the interiors: fuzzy dice hanging down from the rearview mirror, red shag carpet, a boom box. But this buggy looked pretty plain, stark. Clearly, an adult's.

"Bishop's." Hank turned the fiberboard right side up. "WELL, LOOKY THERE! I had it upside down."

"I thought the bishop's accident happened months ago."

"It did, but it's hunting season, in case you hadn't noticed. I've been needing to spend my time at Blue Lake Pond. Under my watch, many a goose has flapped its last over that lake."

It was always hunting season in Hank Lapp's mind. "Ooooo-eee! I'll bet Bishop Elmo's breathing down your neck to get it fixed."

Hank glared at Jimmy, and that wasn't a pretty sight. He had one eye that wandered and when he tried to glare, it gave him a frantic, wild-eyed look. Crazy as a loon. "BOY, DON'T YOU HAVE SOMEPLACE YOU NEED TO BE?"

A flash of red down on the road caught Jimmy's eye. It was M.K., zooming along on her scooter. "I do! There's M.K." He started down the hill. Over his shoulder, he tossed, "Talk to you later, Hank."



Mary Kate saw Jimmy Fisher running down the driveway to meet her, and considered turning the scooter around and zooming away. She didn't know what was on his mind, but

when he kept turning up like he had been doing lately, it usually meant he needed advice or money or both. She was in no mood to be generous with either.

She hopped off the scooter as the driveway's incline began, and walked the rest of the way. Doozy ran off to chase a jackrabbit. Poor pup. He tried so often to catch one of those long-eared, long-legged jackrabbits and never could. As M.K. met up with Jimmy, she wiped her forehead with her sleeve. Today was going to be a scorcher.

"What?" she said flatly.

Jimmy gave a look of mock offense. "Is that any way to greet your most devoted friend?"

"I'm in no mood for small talk." She kept walking. "What do you want?"

He kept up with her. "Why is everybody so concerned with your mood today?"

She stopped abruptly. "They're not. That's the *whole* problem. No one is concerned about my mood today or any other day." She blew air out of her cheeks. "Jimmy, do you ever feel like you're a horse in a pasture and all you can think about is getting out of the pasture?"

"No. I feel as if I'm a horse in a race, and I'm in the lead by two stretches. That's how I feel."

She rolled her eyes. The ego of Jimmy Fisher was legendary. "I have just been roped into being the next schoolteacher at Twin Creeks."

"What?" Jimmy tilted his head, as if he hadn't heard her properly. A beat of silence followed. Then another. "You? Of all people, you?"

And then Jimmy started laughing so hard that M.K. thought he might pass out from a lack of oxygen to the brain. Infuriating! She started marching up the hill.

Jimmy rushed to catch up with her, gasping to get his laughing fit under control. “I can’t remember a single week going by that Spinster Smucker didn’t end up plunking you in the corner, face against the wall, or making you stay in for recess, or keeping you after school. Not one! Not *one* single week!” He was overcome with another laughing fit and had to bend over at his knees to wheeze for air. He patted his knees for effect.

M.K. was disgusted. But what he said was true—she had constantly been in trouble during her years at Twin Creeks School. And it was never her fault! Never. Maybe a few times. She wasn’t sure who was happier on her eighth-grade graduation day: she or Alice Smucker.

A straw hat in the distant field caught her attention. She shielded her eyes. “Who’s Dad got cutting hay?”

Jimmy inhaled a couple of deep breaths and tried to wipe the amused look off his face. “Some new guy your dad hired.” He shifted his gaze out to the field. “I don’t know why he didn’t hire me.”

M.K. watched the new hire. From here, he looked young—twenty, twenty-two-ish. She thought she knew everybody in Stoney Ridge. How did someone slip in without her knowledge? She blamed this teaching job. Too upsetting. “Probably because you’re always running off to horse auctions.”

Jimmy frowned at her. “I am conducting research.”

M.K. snorted and started up the hill again. “Research for pony races, you mean.”

Jimmy caught up with her again. “I’ll ignore that insult because you’re having a bad day. But since we’re discussing my future, I’d like to ask for your help in a very delicate matter.”

M.K. stopped, intrigued. “What do you need help with?”

“I’ve found the one.”

“The one what? A horse?”

“No! A woman. I’m in love.” He covered his heart. “A deep, enduring love.”

“Really?” That was a very strange thought for M.K. She often wondered what it felt like to be in love. Being in love, she imagined, would make all the colors in the world more vivid, all the stars shine more brightly, all the moments of her life dance and crackle with excitement like flames leaping in a bonfire.

“I met my future bride. Someone whom I am sure you know. After all, you know everybody.”

She smiled. Finally, someone appreciated her. “Who is that?”

“Emily Esh.”

“Emily Esh? Oh Jimmy, she’s . . .” She paused, trying to find the right words to say. It was easy to see why Emily Esh had attracted Jimmy’s attention. She had huge, dinner-plate-sized eyes, an enigmatic, slightly-turned-up-at-the-corners smile, and a figure that curved in all the right places.

“What?”

“She’s . . .” How to say this? “She’s super brainy.”

“So?” His face clouded over. “What’s your point?”

“It might be hard to impress a girl like Emily. Not to mention that she has plenty of guys fluttering around her.”

Jimmy kicked a dirt clod with his boot. “You think I’m not smart enough for her?”

M.K. looked at Jimmy. “You’re enough for any girl, Jimmy.” That wasn’t the problem. She might be a little hard on Jimmy—he was spoiled and impulsive and insensitive and egotistical—but there was a good heart somewhere under that handsome exterior.

“Will you help me, then? Will you arrange an introduction for me with Emily Esh?”

M.K. let out a puff of air.

“Please? I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Anything.” He gave her a sly look. “Besides teach at Twin Creeks School.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Help me solve the murder of the sheep farmer.”

“What murder?”

M.K. closed her eyes, thoroughly exasperated. Did she have to do everything around here? “Yesterday afternoon, a sheep farmer was shot to death in his field. Orin Stoltzfus told me this morning that the police can’t find any clues. That means the culprit is still on the loose.”

Jimmy looked at her as if she’d lost her mind.

The sound of a clanging dinner bell floated down the hill. M.K. hadn’t eaten much for breakfast and she was starving. “That’s the deal. As soon as we solve the crime, I will introduce you to Emily Esh.” She hurried up the hill. When she got to the top, she heard Jimmy call her name. She spun around.

“OK!” He grinned. “It’s a deal!”



The first thing Chris did when he got home from work was to take a shower. Cutting alfalfa hay all day made his entire body feel scratchy and itchy. But he did a good day’s work, Amos Lapp had said, and told him to come back tomorrow. And he paid him generously too before he left for the day. Cash. Enough to buy new shoes for his sister to start school in a few days. And maybe enough to splurge on an ice cream cone afterward.

When he told Jenny that they were heading into town tonight to go school shopping, she balked. “We should go back to Ohio, so Mom knows where we are.”

“We’ve been over this, Jenny. If we stayed in Ohio, Child Protective Services would step in and put you in a foster home. And Mom doesn’t need to know where we are. All that matters is we know where she is.”

Jenny scowled. But then, she was always scowling. Her face was going to be set in a permanent scowl. “She’s going to get out soon. Then things will go back to normal.”

Normal? What was normal? Their mother was a part-time house cleaner and a full-time drug addict. Old Deborah had been a godsend to them. She was an older Amish woman who became connected to the Ohio Reformatory for Women by fostering prisoners’ children—an informal arrangement, outside of Child Protective Services but blessed by them, that suited everyone. Chris and Jenny had been living with Old Deborah, off and on, since Chris was eight and Jenny was one.

Once a month, year in and year out, Old Deborah took them by bus to Marysville to visit their mother. The program Old Deborah participated in wasn’t trying to convert children to become Amish. Its goal was to keep incarcerated mothers involved in the lives of their children. Studies showed that there was less recidivism if mothers felt like they were continuing to parent their children. The Marysville warden had created all kinds of programs to enhance the bond with mothers and children. But Chris and Jenny had stayed with Old Deborah longer than they had lived with their mother. They couldn’t help but look Amish, act Amish, talk Amish, and mostly, think Amish. For Chris, for the first time, the whole of his life really began to be transformed into something other than what it had ever been, something leaning toward normal.

It rankled their mother. She made sharply pointed comments about the Amish, but what could she really do about

it? Old Deborah was raising her children for her. And doing a wonderful job with it too. She was grandmother, counselor, mentor . . . all wrapped into one warm, loving package. She fed them, washed their clothes, combed out Jenny's tangled hair, took them to the dentist or doctor if they needed medical attention. Old Deborah and her church family were loving toward them. Chris had no doubt they wanted them there. Life was stable at Old Deborah's. No one was on edge—waiting for his mother's dip into addiction. Chris knew what to expect each day at Old Deborah's. It was peaceful and safe and good.

On some level, Chris's mother must have known that her children were better off with Old Deborah than with CPS. Or maybe she just liked having the visits. She never registered any formal complaints about the Amish school or Amish church Chris and Jenny attended, though she gave Old Deborah plenty of informal complaints. But when Chris became baptized in the church last fall, she blew her top. It still chilled Chris to think of his mother's outburst, filled with horrible accusations. He just stood there, taking it, not answering back, just like he always had, but he hadn't been back to see her since.

Jenny didn't remember what it was like before Old Deborah's, but Chris did. And he would do everything in his power to make sure he and Jenny never went back to that. After that scene his mother had made about his baptism, Old Deborah quietly took him aside. She told Chris that his grandfather had sent her some legal papers, right before he died. He was leaving a house in trust for Chris and Jenny, and property taxes were paid out of the trust each year. When Chris turned twenty-one, he would inherit the house and land. When Jenny turned twenty-one, half of the house would belong to her.

Old Deborah gave Chris a package with all of the legal paperwork, including a key to the house. “There’s just one little hitch. Your mother is the executor of this trust.” Old Deborah took a deep breath and closed her eyes, scrunching up her wrinkled face. “I might not have shared that piece of knowledge with her.”

“What? Mom doesn’t know? Why not?” It wasn’t in Old Deborah’s nature to deceive anyone.

Old Deborah opened her eyes. “Your grandfather put a condition in the will—as long as your mother wasn’t using drugs, wasn’t in jail, the house could go to her first. That was the condition until you turned twenty-one. Your grandfather asked me to use my judgment about when your mother should be informed about the will. So I kept waiting for the right moment to share it with her. I wanted to make sure she was truly freed from her drug habit . . .”

“But she never has been.”

“No, not for long.” She offered up a smile, but it didn’t travel to her eyes. “Not yet, anyway.”

Not ever, Chris thought. His grandfather must have thought so too. Why else would he create such a will? He knew that Grace Mitchell would spend her life skirting in and out of jail or rehab. Or both.

“I think it’s time to go back to Stoney Ridge. This winter, you’ll be twenty-one. Your mother is . . . indisposed. The house was meant for you and Jenny.”

Chris fingered the cold metal key. A simple little door key that unlocked so many memories. “Stoney Ridge? Go back to my grandfather’s house?”

“Yes. This is your chance to start a life of your own.” She covered his hand with hers. Her hand was so small and fragile compared to his work-roughened one, but it was powerful

in its own way. Like the rudder of a ship. “Chris, one thing I have learned over the years—your mother may not be able to be a good mother, but she does love you and your sister. Her problems get in the way of that love. Lord only knows I wish your upbringing had been different, but maybe you had an extraordinary upbringing, because it has made you an extraordinary young man.”

He had trusted Old Deborah in every way, and though she was gone, he trusted her judgment even now. After her funeral, the very next morning, before news of Old Deborah’s passing had time to spread outside of the Amish community, he had quietly packed their few belongings, and he and Jenny set off for Stoney Ridge in Lancaster County to claim their inheritance. He felt bad that he hadn’t said goodbye to the friends who had been so kind to him and Jenny—the Troyers, especially—but the fewer people who knew where they were headed, the better. He didn’t want any news of Stoney Ridge to trickle to his mother. Not now. Not until late January, after his birthday.

What a crazy thing he had done! Traveling the back roads of Ohio and Pennsylvania with a horse and buggy. It took weeks! Many days, they only covered twenty to thirty miles, and on Sundays, they stayed put. It didn’t matter how long it took—Chris wasn’t going to jeopardize Samson’s well-being. And time was one thing he had plenty of.

Finally, the day came when they arrived in Stoney Ridge. The little town hadn’t changed much. The Sweet Tooth Bakery was still on the corner of Main Street, across from the post office and the brick bank. They walked down Main Street and he knew, instinctively, to turn right down Stone Leaf Drive, as if he’d never left. When he came to the lane that led to the house, he stopped and took a deep breath.

Jenny looked up at him. “Did you forget where it is? Has it been too long?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t forget.” From Ohio—a four-week trip. From his childhood—an eternity.

They walked up the lane and turned into a cracked and crumbling concrete driveway that led to the house. The property wasn’t large—it was surrounded by farmland.

“Here it is, Jenny.”

“Yuck.”

“Hello?” he called out softly.

All was quiet. The house was deserted and looked it. The clapboard frame of the house was just the way he remembered it—brownish gray with chipped, flaking paint, the trim painted white. The porch sagged on one side. A clothesline with bleached-out wooden clothespins was looped between the posts, just under the rafters. A memory wisped like a fast-moving cloud through Chris’s head. He remembered his mother hanging her underwear there and his grandfather raging at its impropriety. His grandfather cared about things like that. His mother didn’t.

Chris walked up to the front door. He tried the doorknob, expecting nothing, but when it turned in his hand, he let out a surprised gasp.

“What?” Jenny rushed to his side.

He pushed the door open, its hinges screaming a protest.

What he saw made him want to back right up and run. “I guess we’re home,” he whispered.