

Fisher, *The Haven*
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

Stoney Ridge Seasons • 2

The Haven

A Novel

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It never failed to amaze Sadie Lapp how the most ordinary day could be catapulted into the extraordinary in the blink of an eye. She was still a little dazed. She couldn't shake the feeling that it seemed her whole life had been leading to this particular moment. She had a strange sense that this day had come into her life to change her, to change everything.

But that didn't mean she felt calm and relaxed. Just the opposite. She felt like a homemade sweater unraveling inch by inch. As she caught her first glimpse of Windmill Farm, she hoped that, maybe, things could get straightened out, once she reached home.

Sadie had spent the winter in Berlin, Ohio, helping Julia and Roman, her sister and brother-in-law, settle into Rome's childhood home. A part of every day was spent shadowing Deborah Yoder, an elderly Old Order Amish woman who was known as a healer. Knowing of Sadie's interest in healing herbs, Rome arranged a meeting with Deborah that resulted in a part-time job. A part of Sadie wished she could have spent years studying and watching the wise old woman.

But last week, Sadie woke and knew she needed to return home. When Sadie told Julia, her sister's face fell with disappointment. She had expected Sadie to stay through the summer and tried to talk her out of leaving. But Old Deborah understood. "The wisest people I know," she had told Sadie, "learn to listen to those hunches."

The taxi swerved suddenly, jerking Sadie out of her muse. A few more curves in the road and she would be at Windmill Farm. She hoped the family was there for her homecoming. Wouldn't it be sad to try to surprise everyone, only to arrive to an empty house?

Maybe she should have called first, to let her father know she was coming. But he would have asked her why she was changing her plans and she didn't want to say. Maybe she should have at least tipped off Fern, their housekeeper. The one person she knew she couldn't confide in was Mary Kate, her twelve-going-on-thirty-year-old sister. It was well known that M.K. liked to babble and tell. She was the self-appointed bearer of all news—truth or otherwise.

Sadie gazed out the window. Coming home felt harder than she thought it would be. The family was much smaller now. It would be quieter without Rome and Julia. Without her brother, Menno. Even Lulu, Menno's dog, was living with Rome and Julia now. Sadie leaned her head on the back of the seat and closed her eyes for a moment, remembering. They used to be a family with a mom and a dad, three sisters and a brother, and crazy Uncle Hank. Pretty normal.

Until her mom passed and her dad, Amos, developed heart trouble. Then Uncle Hank found a housekeeper in *The Budget*. The sisters secretly called her Stern Fern. She took some time to warm up to, but she was just what the Lapp family needed. Sadie would have to add the Bee Man to the "just what we needed" list too. When Roman Troyer came to live at Windmill Farm last summer, life took a happy upturn. For Julia, especially.

But then Menno died in a terrible accident and his heart was given to his father. Everything changed again.

They weren't a normal family anymore. Julia had married Rome and moved to Ohio. And wasn't that also the way life went? Sadie thought, moving the basket beside her out of the direct sun. One minute you felt like laughing, and the next thing you knew, you were crying. She glanced at the basket. Would she ever feel normal again?

As the taxi passed along the road that paralleled Windmill Farm, Sadie scanned the fields, horrified. Dozens of cars were parked along the road. Near the barn, horses and buggies were stacked side by side. The amount of people up there looked like ants at a picnic. There was even

a television van with a large satellite on top, like a giant sunflower turning to the sky. She unrolled the car window to get a better look. What on earth was going on?

She told the taxi driver to pull over at the base of the hill rather than go up the drive. After paying the driver, she stood by Julia's roadside stand, a small suitcase flanking her on one side, an oval-shaped basket on the other, a small box in her hand. She wasn't quite sure what to do next. The thought of walking up that hill into a crowd of strangers mortified her. Strangers were on Sadie's avoid-at-all-costs list. She was shy to the point of sickness among strangers. When she was out in town, she almost swooned with fear.

Why had she let the taxi drive off? Why hadn't she called her father first, to let him know she was on her way from Ohio and to find out what was going on at home?

What *was* going on at home?

Suddenly, a familiar voice came floating down the hill, followed by pounding footsteps. "Saaaa—dddieeeee!" Mary Kate was running toward Sadie, full blast, arms raised to the sky, a look of pure joy on her face.

Sadie threw open her arms and hugged her little sister. "Mary Kate, you've gotten so tall!" Fresh and tall and sleek, though starting to fill out her dress. Her little sister was on her way to becoming a woman.

"You didn't let anyone know you were coming!"

"I wouldn't even recognize you if I passed you on the street!" She handed M.K. the small container. "Rome sent along a new queen bee for your hives. I worried through the whole trip that the queen would escape out of that box and sting me."

M.K. peered through the screen top of the box. The brown bee queen was gripping the screen with its tiny fuzzy black legs. "Oh, she's beautiful!" M.K. was enamored with bees. Sadie liked to stay clear of them. "You won't believe what's been going on around here!"

"Take a breath, M.K., and tell me what all these cars are doing here. Is everyone all right? Is Dad doing all right?"

M.K. put the bee box on top of Sadie's suitcase and glanced at the house. "Dad's having a good day today. I've never seen him look so proud and pleased. When the president of the Audubon Society gave him the letter for Menno, I thought Dad was going to bust his britches."

"What letter? What are you talking about?"

"For all those rare birds Menno found! Turns out he spotted more rare birds than anyone else in the state of Pennsylvania. The Audubon lady brought a newspaper reporter with her." She stretched her arms over her head and released a happy giggle. "And right when they were presenting the letter to Dad, the game warden drove up. He sent an intern to stock the creek with trout and he spotted another couple of rare birds. This pair is an endangered species, and it looks like they're settling down to raise a family right on Windmill Farm! So that meant the game warden had to put *No Trespassing* signs up all over the farm. Of course, that was like sending out a sky writer with the news that Windmill Farm has another rare bird. Suddenly the whole town arrived. Even a telly-vision crew." She pointed to the news truck. "They're trying to film the birds. That's got the Audubon lady all upset. She's worried so much interest will disturb the birds. But the game warden says that the public has a right to observe the birds, as long as they're not trespassing on private property. I don't think there's anyone left in town—they're all up there listening to the game warden and the bird lady and the news reporter. It's better than a volleyball game." She spun herself in a little circle and clapped her hands, her grin wide. "And now you're home too! This is the best day, ever!"

“The entire town is up there?” Sadie said. *Oh no.* “Even folks from our church?”

“Everybody! Even on a perfect spring day—folks just dropped their plows in the fields and hurried over. Fern is trying to figure out how many think they’re staying for supper.” M.K. turned to look up the hill. “There’s Dad!” She cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, “Hurry, hurry, hurry! Sadie’s home!” She turned back to her sister. “Uncle Hank is trying to get himself on the local news. It’s making Edith Fisher mad as a wet hen.” She drew herself as tall as she could, hooked her hands on her hips, made a terrible prim face and, in a husky voice that sounded eerily like Edith Fisher, said, “Pride goeth before a fall, Hank Lapp!”

As kerfluffed as Sadie was, she couldn’t help but laugh. M.K. was a regular little mimic, as good as a tent show, Uncle Hank said, and he would know. Under normal circumstances, Sadie would have enjoyed M.K.’s imitation of Edith Fisher, but these weren’t normal circumstances. She was preoccupied with the mighty flood of news M.K. had dropped on her. The timing for her homecoming could not be any worse. How had this happened? Why, oh why, did she feel she should come home on this day, of all days? Why did she happen to be in the bus station—at that exact moment—earlier today? She had to believe it was meant to be. What other explanation could there be? The circumstances of the day couldn’t be accidental.

Nearly down the driveway, Amos Lapp held his arms out wide for Sadie and she ran into them. She breathed in the sweet familiar smells of her father, of rich coffee and pine soap. Maybe . . . everything was going to be all right.

“What a wonderful surprise, Sadie! Today of all days! Why didn’t you let us know you were coming?” Amos leaned back to look at her, hands on her shoulders. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Not a bit. You always had a way of knowing the right place to be at just the right time.” He sounded so pleased. “Did M.K. tell you the news about our Menno? Did you hear that the president of the Audubon Society brought a letter congratulating us on Menno’s keen eyes for birding?” He shook his head. “Our Menno. He would’ve been pleased.”

“I think Menno would have wondered what all the fuss was about,” Sadie said. “He would have told all these folks that they should be out looking for rare birds themselves.”

Amos smiled, a little sad. “You’re probably right. You always knew him best.”

Sadie looked at her father, really looked. He had gained a little weight and it suited him. But his warm brown eyes had dark circles underneath, as if he wasn’t sleeping well. He looked positively careworn.

“Let’s get you up to the house, through that clump of people, so you can wash up and get something to eat.” He reached down for her suitcase, noticed the bee box, picked it up and peered into it. Then he handed the bee box to M.K.

“Dad, there’s something—”

“Say, does Gideon know you’re coming?” Amos lifted his head as he picked up the suitcase. “He’ll be anxious to see you. I wish I had a silver dollar for every time he asked me when I thought you’d be coming back.”

“Gid’s my teacher this spring, Sadie,” M.K. said, eyes fixed on the queen bee. “Did you know that? He’s the best, the very best! So much more interesting than his crotchety old maid sister—”

“Ahem,” Amos interrupted, giving M.K. the look.

“Yes,” Sadie said. “Of course I know Gid is your teacher. You’ve told me hundreds of times. And no, Gid doesn’t know I’m coming. I was trying to surprise all of you.” She turned to her father. “Dad, before we go up to the house, I need to tell you something—”

A strange little squeaking sound came out of the basket behind Sadie's feet. M.K. peered into it and looked up, shocked. "Sadie, it's . . . you . . . you have a baby!"

Amos crouched down to look. He pulled back a little quilt blanket to reveal a tiny baby. The baby started waving his arms and crying like a weak lamb. Amos looked up at his middle daughter, stunned. "Sadie, what's this?"

Sadie took a deep breath. "Dad, that's what I've been trying to tell you. I need . . . some . . . help."

Will Stoltz pulled out the tape to rope off the area below the ridge where the American peregrine falcon pair had claimed their nest—just a scape, because falcons didn't use nesting material. They were smart, those birds. Very possibly the shrewdest birds of all. Falcons chose the highest point in the area to provide an easy vantage point for hunting.

A week ago, in late March, Will had been stocking streams with trout for the game warden, and lo and behold, he spotted a pair of American peregrine falcons. The male—actually called a tiercel—was about one-third smaller than the female, and the pair seemed to be soaring in the sky in specific flying patterns. When Will saw the male bring food to the female, he knew they were courting. He smiled. Falcons mated for life. The male would select a few sites for a scape and let the female pick the place she wanted to raise her clutch. Very civilized, he thought. He would do the same, if he ever married.

He nailed one end of the yellow *Keep Out* tape to a tree. There was a line of people standing behind the tape, with telescopes and cameras fitted with enormous zoom lens. This was a big event to hit Lancaster County. Even for the state of Pennsylvania—an endangered species on its list had chosen a little Amish farm to nest in. Will knew the game warden was determined to squeeze every ounce of publicity he could out of this American peregrine falcon pair—partly for the sake of the falcon pair but mostly to breathe life into his sagging career.

Last year, Game Warden Mahlon Miller had been criticized for not giving enough protection to a bald-headed eagle pair that had built a nest in a tree in an unfortunate location—a popular civic park. One of the eaglets had been killed by a kid messing around with a BB gun and Mahlon Miller had been publicly chastised. Eagles were increasingly common to parts of Pennsylvania, unlike falcons, and Mahlon wasn't going to let anything happen to jeopardize these rare birds.

Will thought Mahlon was taking the right precautions as game warden, but he felt a little sorry for the Amish family who hosted these falcons. He didn't know how the family would be able to stand having a protected nesting site on their farm. Talk about a loss of privacy for utterly private people! Strangers would be crawling all over the farm, eager to see the falcons. And these falcons weren't going to be leaving soon. They looked like they had taken their time finding just the right piece of real estate and were settling in for a long stay. If these raptors liked the location, they would return year after year.

A crow flew into a nearby tree and let out a loud caw. Another answered back, and soon it sounded like a full-fledged heated family discussion was going on.

Will started to walk back to the farmhouse to tell the game warden that he had finished marking off the area for the falcons. At the top of a ridge, next to a red windmill with spinning arms, he paused to look around. It was a beautiful farm. It was talked about in the birding community. There were more species of birds identified on this farm than any other farm in the

county, including eight rarities. It made Will curious. Why here? Why this farm? What made this place more bird friendly than another? So many farms around here were Amish—most were very eco-friendly, used minimal pesticides, and welcomed birds. So why were more birds sighted on this farm than the one next to it?

Will had been to Windmill Farm once before, though no one would have recognized him. Last year, he had come to see for himself when he heard about the American pipit on the Rare Bird Alert. He couldn't believe it when he saw it, but there it was. A small, brown, nondescript bird, half the size of a robin, sitting on a woodpile. It ate crickets out of an Amish teenage boy's hand.

Will's interest was piqued. He wanted to know more about this farm and this family. Especially now. Windmill Farm might prove very useful to him, if he went through with this opportunity that had fallen, out of the blue, into his lap and promised him a way to get out of the mess he was in, without having to involve his father . . .

Late in the afternoon, Twin Creeks Schoolhouse was bathed in warm, sleepy sunlight that fell in speckled patterns across the polished wood floor. The old walls and ceiling beams creaked and moaned, sounding every bit like an old man stretching as he rose from his favorite chair. Gideon Smucker had been hearing the sounds for a few months now, and found them oddly comforting.

Gid closed the math book, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. He was barely able to keep one day ahead of his brightest scholar, Mary Kate Lapp. He thought the complicated problems in this book would keep M.K.'s nimble mind busy, but he didn't realize how many mental cobwebs he would need to brush off just to correct her work. He leaned back in his desk and clasped his hands behind his neck. He was glad the other scholars weren't as precocious as Mary Kate. He'd be sunk.

He still couldn't believe he was here, teaching the twenty-one scholars of Twin Creeks School. He loved book learning but never imagined himself a schoolteacher. His sister, Alice, had been teaching at Twin Creeks for seven years. A week before school started up again after Christmas, Alice was injured in an unfortunate sledding accident. She broke both of her legs, requiring a long, slow rehabilitation. Desperate, the school board asked if he would fill in for Alice. How could he refuse the three members of the school board, or Alice? But even more startling was the discovery that Gid loved teaching. He felt he had been born to teach, in a way that he never felt behind a plow. His mind felt so challenged by teaching, so active and alive.

Gid glanced at the clock on the wall: five o'clock. He needed to get home soon and help his dad with evening chores. He wanted to finish the letter to Sadie before he went home. He'd been writing steadily to her over the last few months and was hoping she'd be coming back from Ohio soon. If he mailed it tomorrow, she would receive it on Saturday. Too soon? Did he seem too eager? He didn't want to come across like he was pining for her. He wasn't. He most definitely wasn't. Not much, anyway. Maybe he should hold off mailing it for another day or two.

He went through this every week. He would send her a favorite book or two of his, scribbled with marginalia, along with a brief note at least once a week. He worried constantly that he was going to push Sadie away by being too obviously smitten by her.

To him, Sadie was like a delicate hummingbird, easily frightened off. And why should a girl like her ever be sincerely interested in a fellow like him? He was clumsy, tongue-tied, awkward

socially. He hoped that through the books they shared, she might see what was in him that he couldn't seem to express in person. Why was it so much easier to write something to her than to say the same thing to her? If he could describe things with words, couldn't he do the same aloud? Maybe when Sadie came back, he would be able to say these things to her.

He overheard someone describe him once as a young man without deep feelings. He did feel deeply, he knew he did. But what he felt was so confusing and required so much work to figure out, and then even more to get it to the surface and express it, that it was easier to keep quiet and concentrate on writing, something he could see. He imagined all kinds of sweet things he wanted to tell her: how there were times in church when a beam from the sun caught her hair and glinted and he thought she looked like an angel. How much he loved those pronounced dimples in her cheeks. And those freckles that covered her nose and cheeks. He knew she hated them and tried to get rid of them with lemon juice, but he wished she wouldn't because he liked them. And her laugh . . . it was like the sound of wind chimes. He sorely missed Sadie, as much today as when she left for Ohio four months ago.

Gid was in eighth grade when he first realized he was in love with Sadie Lapp. Not that he let anybody know he was besotted. Especially not Sadie.

He had learned the hard way that just because you felt something didn't mean you had to tell other people. His friends had a way of twisting things around, finding something in the most commonplace remarks to jab at a person and make fun.

He had plenty of reasons to keep his mouth shut on any romantic topics. First off, nobody would believe he knew what love was at his age. Second, Sadie was even younger than he was. Third, Sadie had never given him the slightest indication that he was anything more than just another boy to ignore at school.

But then, last December, Gid gathered enough courage to ask Sadie if he could take her home from a singing, and she nodded shyly. The night was clear and cold and their breath was frosty on the air as the horse pulled the buggy across the frozen ground. In the soft moonlight it was easier to talk, and both of them seemed reluctant to reach her farm and have the evening end. That one time led to another ride home from a singing, then an ice skating party, and a few other times when they didn't need a gathering as an excuse to see each other. Then came the last time together, just after Christmas, the night before Sadie left for Ohio with her sister and brother-in-law. Gid didn't know when he would see Sadie again.

Gid had stopped the horse near the side of the barn, where M.K. couldn't peek out the farmhouse window and spy on them like she did on a regular basis. He helped Sadie out of the buggy.

Sadie glanced toward the house. "Perhaps we should say good night here," she said.

Gid moved in front of her to block the cold wind. He had never kissed a girl, but he'd given it a great deal of thought. Quite a great deal. He lifted her chin so she would look at him. For a moment they stood quite still. Then he dropped his head down to softly cover her lips with his. Her hand came up to touch his cheek, and when he lifted his lips from hers, they stood there with their warm breath intermingling for a moment. None of the books or poetry he had read had done kissing justice.

It was the single finest moment in Gid's nineteen years of life.