

THE BISHOP'S FAMILY #3

THE
DEVOTED
—  —
A Novel

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER


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Suzanne Woods Fisher, *The Devoted*
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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To the Salch family: Kim, Clayton, and A.J.

There's a little bit of you in every book.



Cast of Characters

David Stoltzfus—mid-40s, father to six children: Katrina, Jesse, Ruthie, Molly, Lydie, and Emily. Formerly widowed, now married to Birdy Glick. Owner of the Bent N’ Dent store and bishop to the church of Stoney Ridge.

Ruthie Stoltzfus—17 years old, middle child to David. Bright, ambitious, restless, she’s right on the cusp of leaving the Amish to pursue a higher education.

Luke Schrock—17 years old, brother of Miriam (Mim), son of Rose Schrock King (owner of the Inn at Eagle Hill). Smart as a whip, irreverent, loves to live on the edge.

Patrick Kelly—20 years old, Canadian Catholic, guest at the Inn at Eagle Hill. Eager to convert to Amish church.

Jesse Stoltzfus—19 years old, owner of the buggy shop, hovering on the precipice of manhood.

Dokdor Fraa—nicknamed Dok, but her name is Ruth Stoltzfus. Dok is David’s sister. Raised Amish but left to go to college, then medical school, a doctor to the Amish.

Ed Gingerich—late 40s. Highly regarded neurologist (both professionally and by his own assessment) at the local hospital. A fascinating, exasperating love interest to Dok.

Matt Lehman—mid-40s. Police officer for Stoney Ridge. Has a desperate crush-from-afar on Dok.

Jenny Yoder—19 years old. Made her first appearance in Stoney Ridge in *The Lesson*.

Katrina Stoltzfus Miller—22 years old, oldest daughter in the Stoltzfus family, now married to Andy Miller. Two little children, a girl and a boy, and lives at Moss Hill.

Molly Stoltzfus—14 years old.

Lydie and Emily Stoltzfus—11-year-old twins.

Birdy Glick Stoltzfus—35, married to widower David Stoltzfus. Bird aficionado.

Thelma Beiler—touchy about her age, elderly widow to former bishop, Elmo Stoltzfus. Runs a farm called Moss Hill.

Hank Lapp—60ish, uncle to Amos Lapp of Windmill Farm. Former owner of the buggy repair shop. Made his first appearance in *The Keeper*.

Fern Lapp—50ish, wife to Amos Lapp of Windmill Farm. Arrived in Stoney Ridge in *The Keeper*.

Miriam (Mim) Schrock—19 years old, older sister to Luke Schrock. On-again, off-again love interest for Jesse Stoltzfus.

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The bad thing about Ruthie Stoltzfus’s job was that it barely paid minimum wage and she had no job security. She was only employed when someone from the Schrock family, who owned the Inn of Eagle Hill, was busy or unavailable, like now.

The good thing about her job was that it was across the road from her home. She liked to think of the now-and-then job as a hotel concierge-in-training, minus the hotel. The Schrocks referred to the position as a filler.

But as for what happened last evening . . . nothing ever—ever!—could have trained her for that. She was still shaky from the shock. The guests who had checked out of the inn yesterday had trashed the little cottage. Completely *trashed* it! Just as she was locking up after she had worked all day long to clean it up, she saw a man stagger over to her.

“Is this a motel?”

“Not really,” Ruthie said. “It’s a bed-and-breakfast.” And then she noticed the man had a cut on his forehead. “You’re bleeding.”

He lifted a hand to his head as if startled by the thought. “It’s nothing. Look, I need a room for the night.”

She looked back at the main house. The lights were out. It was late and they'd gone to bed. But the guest cottage was empty, and she knew Rose would appreciate the income. Still, this man seemed odd. Not in a dangerous way, but he seemed dazed, a little confused. Drunk, maybe? She should send him on his way. But then again, what would he do if she turned him away? He was miles from town. "You'll have to pay cash, up front."

He reached behind him, then patted his pants, his shirt front, alarmed. "I don't seem to have my wallet." He reached into his pockets. "I'm good for the money. If you could just trust me. Just for tonight. In the morning, I'll take care of everything. I promise." His eyes pleaded with her.

In the end, Ruthie ignored her usual overriding caution and let him stay. She walked him over to the guest cottage, showed him how to use the kerosene lights, and left him there. As she closed the cottage door behind her, she felt a hitch in her heart. Had she done the right thing? Or the wrong thing. Birdy, her father's wife, often said that the Bible warned they might entertain angels as strangers in need. Nothing about this man seemed particularly angelic, but he definitely was a stranger in need.

Ruthie crossed the road and turned around, walking backward, as she climbed the steep driveway to her family's home. The light in the little cottage was already snuffed out. The man was probably in bed. She'd made her decision. She had to trust it was the right one, even if the stranger-in-need didn't end up paying for the stay.

She slept fitfully, tossing and turning. In the morning, she woke and dressed in a flash. She left a note for Birdy and her dad on the kitchen table, that she had to get to work early and would miss breakfast. She grabbed her shawl from the

wall peg and rushed down the driveway. The cottage still looked as quiet as it did last night, though she wasn't sure what she had expected to find. Burned down? Exploded? *Don't be ridiculous, Ruthie*, she told herself. *You're letting your imagination run away with you.*

Rose was already in the kitchen at the main house of Eagle Hill as Ruthie walked right in. She looked up at Ruthie in surprise. "You're here early."

"There's a guest in the cottage," she said. "Late last night, as I was heading home—a man came and asked for a place to stay."

Rose straightened up. She looked out in the driveway. "Where's his car?"

"He didn't have one."

Rose got that look on her face, the one that seemed as if she knew this story wasn't going to end well.

"I might have made a mistake, Rose. He seemed to be in some kind of trouble."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No. Nothing like that. He was very polite." She explained the whole story.

Rose went to the window to peer at the cottage. "It's early. Let's wait another hour or so, then I'll take him some coffee."

"Are you mad at me?"

Rose swiveled around. "No. Not at all. Please don't worry, even if the man doesn't pay for the night. You were put in a tough spot and made a decision that felt right to you." She turned back to peer out the window, looking at the cottage, crossing her arms against her chest. "But maybe I'll have Galen take him the coffee."

An hour later, that's just what she did. Galen King, Rose's husband, a no-nonsense kind of man, took a pot of coffee

over to the man in the cottage. Not two minutes later, he returned with the untouched coffee tray.

“Is he all right?” Ruthie asked. “Should I call for a doctor?”

Galen set the tray down and slumped into a chair at the kitchen table. “Not a doctor. He definitely doesn’t need a doctor.” He swallowed. “He needs . . . the county coroner.”

And that’s why Ruthie couldn’t stop shaking. The coroner arrived, and after he saw the cut on the man’s forehead, his bleeding knuckles, and discovered there was no identification to be found, he called the Stoney Ridge Police Department. They dispatched their only two cars, sirens blaring, which alerted all kinds of townspeople to come out and see what on earth had happened at the Inn of Eagle Hill. A reporter from the *Stoney Ridge Times* said this was the biggest story to hit the town in two years, since someone had blown up Amish farmers’ mailboxes with cherry bombs.

“Perhaps there’s a link,” the reporter said, sniffing for any clue he could find to flesh out his story. Hard news, in Stoney Ridge, was as scarce as hens’ teeth.

“No link at all,” Luke Schrock said with certainty. Rose’s son, Luke, was Ruthie’s on-again, off-again boyfriend, depending on how much patience she had for him. Lately, it was off-again. Luke seemed almost amused by the activity that was quickly filling up the front yard of his family’s property.

Ruthie found Luke’s attitude to be callous and would have told him so, but the reporter kept pestering her with questions. When the reporter overheard one policeman tell the other that Ruthie was the only one who had seen and spoken to the man, he cornered her. “What kind of weapon was used to murder him?”

“Murder? Who said anything about a murder?” How

awful. What horrible chain of events had Ruthie set into motion last night?

“It’s obvious,” the reporter said. “The bedroom window was open. The man was found on the floor. It’s a cut-and-dry case, elementary crime solving. Someone came in through the open window, killed him, and left through the front door. And now”—the reporter muttered to himself, taking down notes—“we’ve got ourselves a John Doe, right here in sleepy Stoney Ridge.”

The policemen were unrolling yellow crime-scene caution tape over the front door of the guest cottage. Ruthie knew one of the officers, Matt Lehman. He was talking to Rose, so she started toward them, hearing him tell Rose to call tonight’s inn guests to explain that their reservation had to be canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. Then he turned to Ruthie and told her, twice, that she wasn’t to talk to anyone about what she’d seen or done until she’d been questioned.

“Right,” Ruthie said. “So don’t say anything about the blood.”

Suddenly the *Stoney Ridge Times* reporter was by her side again. “What blood?”

“The man’s forehead was bloody.”

Matt Lehman scowled at the reporter, led Ruthie to the backseat of his police car, and told her to sit there, say nothing, do nothing.

Luke Schrock watched Matt lead Ruthie to the car. “Don’t say anything without a lawyer present, Ruthie! You have rights!”

Matt turned to Luke with a sigh. He was well acquainted with him. “She’s not being arrested.”

“Oh,” Luke said. He waved a hand in the air. “Well, then, carry on.”

Ruthie sat in the police car, arms tightly folded against her chest. *Murder*. She had let an injured man into the cottage, a criminal, probably, only to have him brutally killed in his sleep.

What did I do? she thought miserably.

A little later, Matt Lehman and the other policeman walked over to the police car to question Ruthie about everything she could remember from last night. It was surprising how many details her mind had taken in and filed away without realizing it. The stranger was surprised when she pointed out there was blood dripping down his forehead. He had seemed dazed and confused. Even still, he was very polite, very appreciative.

“Why didn’t you ask for the man’s name?” Matt said.
“Why didn’t you ask him for any information?”

For that, she had no answer. It was a set of circumstances that had flustered her, made her feel as if she just wanted to get the man settled in so she could go home. The main house was dark, she was alone, the man seemed like he needed to rest. Looking back, she realized how many mistakes she had made. But the stranger hadn’t seemed dangerous.

“Who might have broken into the cottage to murder him?” she asked Matt, and he looked at her strangely.

“What makes you think he was killed?”

“The reporter said so. He called it a homicide.”

“Aw, no,” Matt said, turning to the other officer. “He’s gonna get everyone twitchy.”

The officer frowned. “They’ll all be hearing things go thump in the night.”

“But . . . *was* the man murdered?”

The two police officers exchanged a look. “We aren’t sure of anything,” Matt said. “Not until we get the coroner’s report.”

“What about the open window?”

“The innkeeper said there’d been a group in there the other night who trashed the place.”

“That was true, but I was the one who cleaned up the cottage yesterday and I didn’t notice an open window.”

“Ruthie,” Matt said. “Are you positive? Absolutely positive?”

“No. I guess not.” She wasn’t positive of anything anymore.

“Can you think of anything else? Anything at all?”

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to make herself remember. Her cousin Gabby should have been the one here last night but had moved to Kentucky with her new husband, Dane. With Gabby’s unique attention to detail, she could’ve given the policemen a blow-by-blow detailed report.

Her eyes popped open. “He had no wallet.” Something else tickled her memory. “When he reached for his wallet, he pulled out a ticket stub. It was to a Lancaster Barnstormer baseball game.” She recognized the logo because her brother Jesse often slipped off to go to home games. She was rather pleased with herself. Such recall!

The officers were not as pleased. In fact, they seemed rather disappointed as they closed their notepads.

Matt handed her a card. “If anything else comes to mind, give me a call.” A stain of pink started up the sides of his cheeks. “Or you could have your aunt track me down.”

“My aunt?” Her aunts lived in Ohio.

His cheeks went redder still. “The doctor.”

Oh! *That* aunt. “You know Dok? How?”

“I’ve bumped into her a few times at the hospital.” His face was now streaked with red blotches.

Oh. *Oh!* Matt Lehman was *sweet* on her aunt! How curious.

As soon as the policemen finished with their questions,

Ruthie walked over to the porch of the farmhouse, where Rose King stood waiting for her.

“Are you all right?” Rose asked.

“I suppose so.” Ruthie looked at the cottage, at the ribbons of yellow caution tape covering the door. “I’m so sorry. I should never have let that man stay here last night.”

Rose put an arm around her shoulders. “You did what you thought was best. Innkeeping is all about dealing with strangers. I’m not sure what I would’ve done if I’d been in your shoes.”

“But look at what it’s turned Eagle Hill into. A human zoo.”

Rose’s gaze swept over the driveway to the cottage. A police car, a handful of horses and buggies, dozens of scooters, clumps of Amish men and women standing together, all curious onlookers. “Well, no doubt it’ll all blow over soon.”

Ruthie hoped so, but something deep inside her felt this was just the beginning.



It was a beautiful July day. Life had its twists and turns, but right now, it was smooth sailing. David Stoltzfus had never felt more content, more optimistic about the future. He felt light as air.

He gave the horse’s reins a shake to back up the buggy, eager to return home.

Home. What a beautiful word.

Home to Birdy. His wife.

His wife. It still amazed him, to wake up each day beside this woman, whom he dearly loved and grew more attached to each day. It was a different kind of love he had for Birdy than for Anna, his first wife and the mother of his children.

Different, but in a way, it was more precious. He knew how fleeting life could be, how quickly things could change.

Yes, David thought, he had much to be thankful for: his calling to be bishop, his health, his friends, his family, and now his wife. Life had certainly thrown him some curves, and doubtless there would be further tests, trials, and tribulations. But just for now, on this beautiful summer day, it was to be enjoyed in all its fullness and with all its wonders.

He thought back to this morning, to holding his beautiful little newborn grandson in the crook of his arms. The baby was mewling away when Katrina passed the bundle to David and his crying stopped immediately. He opened his dark blue eyes and peered at him, as if he knew he already had a place deep in his heart.

A grandchild. His second. A boy! His first.

For a long while, he studied this little baby who stared back at him. He lay still, silent, his fists closed tight, his wispy hair fine as silk. David kissed the baby's forehead. He was sure no baby on earth held a candle to how beautiful his little grandchildren were at birth, not even his own six children. He watched the baby's pulsing scalp, counted his tiny toes and fingers. So miniature, so perfect. A miracle.

Too soon, Thelma Beiler, a beloved elderly woman with whom Katrina and her family lived at Moss Hill, insisted he relinquish the baby and return him to his mother. As he placed the baby in Katrina's arms, Thelma gently scolded him like a mother hen, practically shooing him out of the house. "You've got bishop work to tend to." And she was right. He had a full schedule and then some ahead of him.

As David watched Katrina rest the baby against her shoulder, a wellspring of emotion emerged within him, a memory

so powerful and vivid that it made his eyes sting and he had to turn away. She reminded him so much of Anna. Maybe that's why people enthused about becoming grandparents: it brought up so many poignant memories, long buried.

The horse nodded her big head, making the harness jingle, snapping his attention to the present. A police car, lights flashing, siren screeching, was flying down the road past Moss Hill's turnoff. How odd. It was rare to see a police car over in this part of Stoney Ridge—it was made up almost entirely of Amish farms. And then his thoughts drifted to Luke Schrock and, perhaps unfairly, he automatically assumed the police visit had something to do with Luke. What might the boy have done now? Luke wasn't a boy, David thought to himself. Nor was he a man. He was stuck somewhere in between.

As he flicked the reins, clucking to the horse, Thistle, to turn left from the driveway onto the road, his mind traveled from Luke's frequent brushes with the law to the farms he passed, all belonging to church members of Stoney Ridge, and settled on the church that bound them together. Two years ago, the little church had weathered a great wound and survived. More than survived. It was thriving. The baptism class this last spring was the largest one in years. No families had moved away for over two years. In fact, the church's population had increased with new families moving in.

He stopped the horse for a moment to watch the pumpjacks atop Moss Hill, bobbing their heads up and down as they pulled oil from deep inside the earth. Those oil pumps—they were a blessing to this community. It astonished him, and humbled him too, to think the oil had been there, all this time, waiting to be discovered. More Amish families had leased their land after having it surveyed for oil traps.

Those oil leases had given Stoney Ridge a fresh wind. The church was able to pay off substantial bills, to build a reserve for future emergencies, and to offer aid to other churches.

The role of bishop still felt new and a little uncomfortable to David, as if he were wearing a coat that was much too big for him. The previous bishop, Freeman Glick, a tall and broad man, had a powerful presence. Even his long beard, gray and flourishing, conferred considerable authority.

David's beard was the opposite of Freeman's, short and trimmed, a little like his own presence, which was not at all authoritative. "Truth discovered is better than truth told" was his motto as a bishop, as a father. He believed in letting church members, including his own children, embark on their own journey to faith. The Lord God desired obedience, but only if it came from the heart.

He felt an unexpected sense of peace and well-being on this beautiful summer morning. A rare day!

Slapping the reins again to get Thistle trotting, he glanced in his rearview mirror and saw a tiny vehicle gain on him from behind his buggy. The driver extended his arm out the side, waving it like a flag. David slowed the horse to see if there was a problem.

The arm belonged to Hank Lapp, driving up the road in a bright yellow golf cart. "HELLO THERE, DAVID!" he yelled in his everyday voice as he passed the horse and buggy. "Somethin's brewing over at the Inn at Eagle Hill. I'm heading there now!"

Hank drove on past him as if it was the most normal thing in the world for an Old Order Amish man to drive himself around in a golf cart.