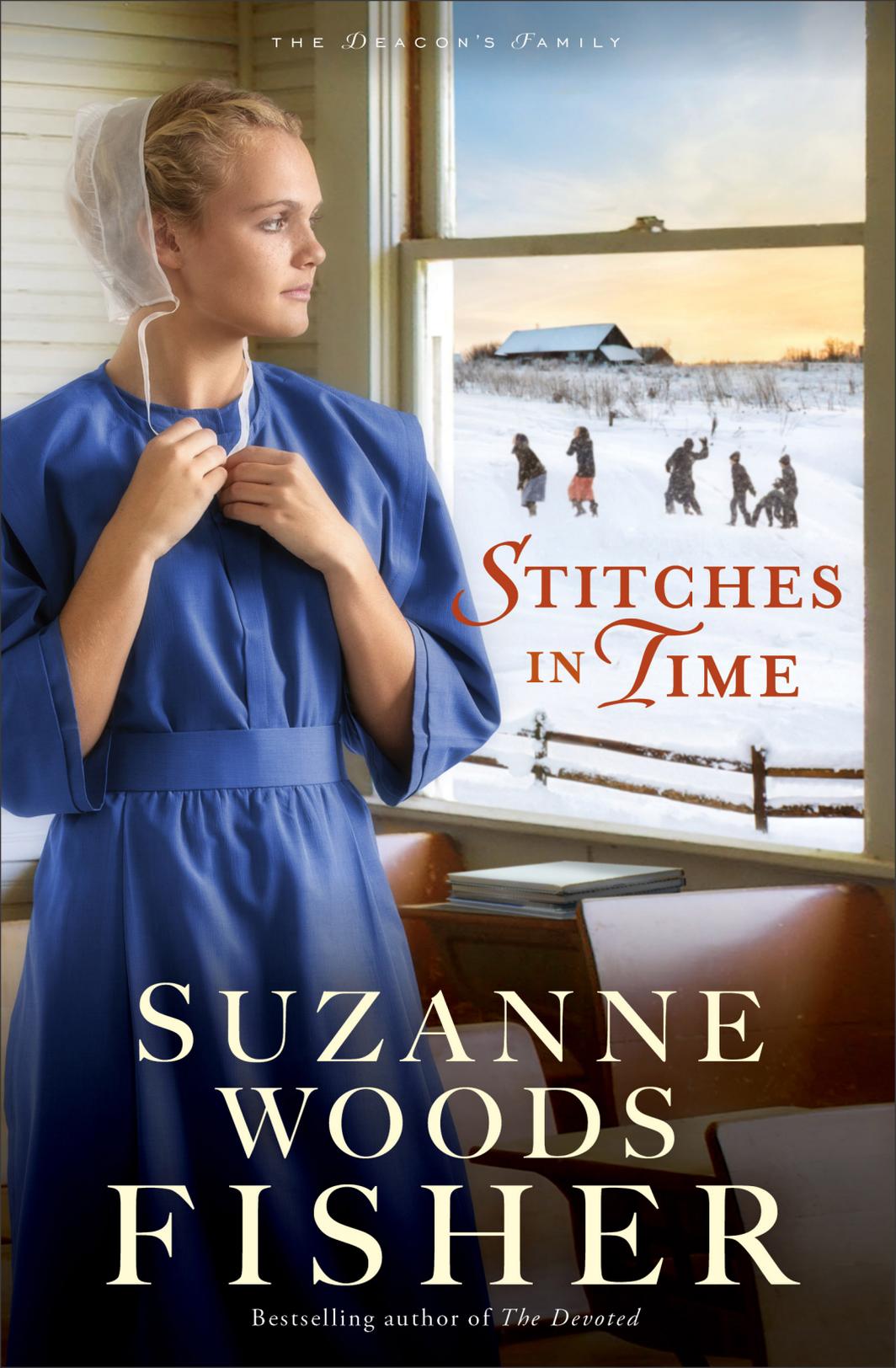


THE *DEACON'S* FAMILY



STITCHES
IN TIME

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER

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“Fisher weaves together a pleasing romance that sets a high standard for future series installments.”

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Phoebe's Light
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The Light Before Day

THE DEACON'S FAMILY

Mending Fences
Stitches in Time

THE *D*EACON'S *F*AMILY

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STITCHES
IN *T*IME

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER



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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.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To my daughter-in-law, Amanda.
We are so blessed that you married into our family.
A moment I'll never forget:
your delicious "heartbreak" cake.
On top of you just being you,
you've also given us the *best* gift: grandchildren.



“LORD, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO TODAY?”
THE OLD BISHOP TOLD THE CHURCH LEADERS.
“THAT’S A DANGEROUS PRAYER. BUT IT’S MORE
DANGEROUS NOT TO ASK.”

Cast of Characters

Mollie Graber—niece to Fern Lapp. Moved from Ohio for a fresh start and is teaching school in Stoney Ridge.

Sam Schrock—younger brother to Luke Schrock. Trains young horses from the racetrack for buggy work. Originally introduced in *The Inn at Eagle Hill* series.

Luke Schrock—recently returned to Stoney Ridge after a stint in rehab (or two. Or three). Originally introduced in *The Inn at Eagle Hill* series. His story continued in *The Bishop’s Family* series.

Isabella “Izzy” Miller Schrock—wife to Luke Schrock. Introduced in *Mending Fences*.

Amos Lapp—deacon of Stoney Ridge, husband to Fern, owner of Windmill Farm. Originally introduced in the *Stoney Ridge Seasons* series.

Fern Lapp—wife of deacon Amos Lapp. Originally introduced in the Stoney Ridge Seasons series.

David Stoltzfus—bishop of Stoney Ridge. Originally introduced in *The Revealing*, book 3 of The Inn at Eagle Hill series. Main character in The Bishop’s Family series.

Hank Lapp—uncle of deacon Amos Lapp. Originally introduced in the Stoney Ridge Seasons series.

Edith Fisher Lapp—wife of Hank Lapp. Originally introduced in the Stoney Ridge Seasons series.

Jesse Stoltzfus—son of bishop David Stoltzfus. Introduced in *The Revealing*, book 3 of The Inn at Eagle Hill series. His story continued throughout The Bishop’s Family series.

Jenny Stoltzfus—wife of Jesse Stoltzfus, half-sister to Izzy Schrock. Introduced in *The Lesson*, book 3 of the Stoney Ridge Seasons series.

Alice Smucker Zook—wife of Teddy Zook. Introduced in *The Haven* and *The Lesson*, books 2 and 3 of the Stoney Ridge Seasons series.

Teddy Zook—Amish carpenter, church Vorsinger (music leader)

Freeman Glick—former bishop of Stoney Ridge who experienced a “Quieting” and was removed from his responsibilities. Introduced in *The Imposter*, book 1 of The Bishop’s Family series.

Ruthie Stoltzfus Kelly—wife of Patrick, daughter of bishop David Stoltzfus. Manages The Inn at Eagle Hill. Main character in *The Devoted*, book 3 of The Bishop’s Family series.

Patrick Kelly—husband of Ruthie. Together they manage The Inn at Eagle Hill. Main character in *The Devoted*, book 3 of The Bishop’s Family series.

Mattie Riehl—wife of Solomon Riehl. Main character in *The Choice* and *A Lancaster County Christmas*.

Carrie Miller—wife of Abel Miller, mother of Rudy Miller. Main character in *The Choice*.

Rudy Miller—son of Carrie and Abel Miler. Introduced in *Mending Fences* as an ardent admirer of Luke Schrock.

Foster teenagers from the Stoney Ridge Group Home

Tina and Alicia—foster teens for Mollie Graber

Cassidy—foster teen for Fern Lapp

Chloe—foster teen for Alice and Teddy Zook

Social workers from a private foster care agency in Stoney Ridge

Roberta Watts—supervisor

Mavis Connor—assistant to Roberta Watts

ONE

It took a lot to shock Luke Schrock. Generally, he was the one who did the shocking. So on the day that Bishop David Stoltzfus received whispered suggestions from each church member of Stoney Ridge to choose a deacon to replace Amos Lapp, it never once occurred to Luke that his name might be submitted. Never ever crossed his mind. Not once. Why would it? Luke was newly married, only twenty-five years old, and on his best days, he was just now starting to feel like a grown-up.

Yet someone had indeed whispered Luke's name to David as a choice to be deacon. Just *one* person. Who? Who would do such a thing, think such a thought? Surely not his wife, Izzy. When a man drew the lot to become a minister or deacon, it was a lifelong obligation. The poor wives of church ministers took the brunt of their husbands' responsibilities. Year after year, Luke had seen Amos called away from family gatherings for deacon business, and his wife Fern was left to manage alone. No, definitely not his Izzy.

Fern wouldn't have whispered his name, would she? No. No way. She, more than anyone, knew that Luke wouldn't be any good at deaconing.

What about Fern's niece, Mollie? She was new to Stoney Ridge, stepping in as a much needed schoolteacher. Mollie loved to play practical jokes. Was she playing him for a fool? Sammy might know. His brother, he had a hunch, was sweet on Mollie.

Hank Lapp! It had to be him. He was sitting right in front of Luke with his wild and wispy white hair, blocking the view.

Luke leaned forward and gave Hank a poke in the ribs. "Did you give my name to David?"

Hank jerked like a fish on the line. "WHAT'S THAT, BOY?"

Luke sighed. Hank Lapp had one volume: loud. "Hank, don't say a word. Just nod or shake your head. Do not speak. Just let me know if you were the one who gave my name to David."

Hank turned around to look at Luke, one lazy eye trailing off to the side. "SON, I DID NOT."

Heads turned. Lips pursed. Edith Lapp hushed them from across the room. Hank frowned at Luke and swiveled around to face forward.

Leaning forward, Luke put his hand on Hank's shoulder to whisper, "If you didn't, then who did?"

Hank batted Luke's hand away. "I DON'T HAVE THE FOGGIEST NOTION. BUT WHOEVER DID SHOULD HAVE HIS HEAD EXAMINED."

Luke heartily agreed. But that didn't help him in the slightest. He was trapped.

He shook off all those troubling thoughts. It really didn't matter who had whispered his name to David. All that mattered was his complete confidence in God's great wisdom. Certainly, the Lord God knew better than to guide him to

draw the lot. He relaxed and dropped his chin to his chest, praying for the poor soul who would open the hymnal and find the piece of paper that would drastically change his life. There were four other choices, all good picks. Any one of them would make a fine deacon.

One hymnal opened. No lot. Second hymnal opened. No lot.

Luke glanced across the barn and caught Izzy's panicked look. He shook his head slightly to reassure her. Not a chance, he silently mouthed. Third hymnal opened. No lot.

Oh no. Oh Lord, please no. In case you need reminding, I am barely gaining some respectability. In fact, it's only because Izzy finally agreed to marry me that my reputation has improved a little among the church. Please, Lord, not me. Please don't make me do it.

David motioned to both Luke and Teddy Zook to step forward and claim their hymnals. *Lord, pardon my advice giving, but Teddy's the man you want.* Teddy Zook would be an outstanding deacon. In fact, he was the one Luke had nominated to David. Teddy Zook had a big heart, a great reservoir of patience, and an admirable tolerance for difficult people. Luke had none of those qualities.

He let Teddy reach out to pick a hymnal first, praying—pleading—all the while for him to grab the one with the piece of paper in it. Teddy picked up one hymnal, closed his eyes, and then put it down again. He picked up the other one. At that moment, Luke expected Teddy to open the hymnal and find that slim piece of paper, but no. Teddy didn't budge. Holding the old book against his chest, he waited for Luke to pick up the last hymnal. David cleared his throat, a gentle nudge.

Luke's heart started pounding, so loudly he was sure everyone in the church could hear it. A drumbeat, an audible warning.

A barn swallow darted overhead and disappeared into the rafters. He'd never envied a bird before, but at this moment, he wished he could sprout wings and fly out through the hay door. His eyes shifted to the open barn door. Could he make a break for it? Run for his life? No. That was the old Luke. He was the new and improved Luke. A happily married Luke, who wouldn't dare embarrass his Izzy with such childish behavior. She told him once that she had married him because of his potential. What kind of potential was he showing now? A pathetic lack of it, that's what kind.

He needed to man up. When he became baptized, he knew this day might come. He sucked in a deep breath, let it out. He should do this. With God's help, he could do this. But he did send one more silent, begging prayer upward. *Not me, Lord. Not me. Don't forget what I promised Amos, Lord, just before he passed. Amos gave me a big project. A huge undertaking. Not me, Lord. Choose Teddy.*

With a shaking hand, Luke reached out for the lone hymnal. He could sense the entire church sitting with bated breath, waiting to see who had drawn the lot. Teddy gave him a solemn nod, and they both opened their hymnals at the same time. A sudden coldness trickled down his spine.

Oh no.



Mollie Graber had to cover her mouth so she didn't laugh out loud at the look on Luke Schrock's face when he opened the hymnal and found the paper. He looked utterly stricken,

as horrified as if he'd just witnessed a grisly murder. Next to her on the bench, sitting stiff as a grave marker, was his pretty wife, Izzy. Mollie heard her gasp, then exhale as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. "It's not possible," she said. "It's just not possible."

But it was. Luke Schrock was the new deacon for Stoney Ridge. Mollie thought it was an outcome so unexpected that it sent the most spectacular chills down her spine. But then, the drawing of the lot for ordained officials had that effect on her. Think, just think. The almighty Lord was directing a man's hand to choose the lot and accept the mantle of lifetime leadership. To her it was a rippling of wonder that ran through the church. Evidence of the sovereignty of God, right in their midst. Astonishing.

She had to admit, though, that her own pick had been Teddy Zook.

All around her was the sound of sniffles and tears, sorrowful mumblings. It was always like this. Only twenty-one, Mollie had been through four lot drawings for ministers or deacons that she could remember, and each time was the same. When names were called out to draw the lot, everyone acted like it was a burden of enormous proportion. While she didn't know how she'd feel if she were a man, newly facing a lifelong obligation, she just didn't think that God wanted everybody to have such safe, comfortable lives. She thought he wanted to shake things up a little, get folks aware of how fragile life could be, how precious it was. The deacon role was an honor. Special.

If she were a man, and if her name was ever thrown in the drawing for a lot, she'd want it to be for deacon. Not so much a minister or bishop—that would require too much

brainy Bible study. But a deacon? She'd love it. Deacons had the reputation for having the most difficult job of all three ordained officials. But how hard could it really be? Helping others, figuring out their problems, making sure folks in need were taken care of. And then there was the *Schtecklimann*, the go-between when a couple wanted to marry. The bridegroom would speak privately to the deacon, and the deacon would then go speak to the bride's parents to make sure nothing stood in the way. If all went well, the bishop would then announce the couple's engagement in church. Fun.

She knew there were some other pieces of the role that were less appealing—washing everybody's feet during communion, or being sent by the bishop to sniff out transgressions, or the worst of all, the very worst, bringing the message of excommunication to someone who had strayed off the straight and narrow path. How *awful* an errand that would be. Ghastly.

And yet, she didn't think that happened all that often. At least, not in the churches she'd been in. In fact, never once that she could remember. She'd seen plenty of folks—mostly young men—sit with remorse on the sinner's bench, heads hung low, feet shuffling nervously, but she'd never known a person to turn completely away from the faith.

The fellowship meal took place right after the church service. Today was so pleasant that the men moved the benches to the lawn and quickly rearranged them to form both tables and benches. The women and children ate separately from the men, and they always served the men first.

Sam Schrock, Luke's younger brother, was seated at the table where Mollie was serving. The men were squished together, with little elbow room. She placed a basket of home-

made sliced bread and a jar of peanut butter in the center of the table, trying to catch glimpses of Sam while his chin was tucked to his chest. Oh my, that face of his could make a girl feel weak in the knees. A pair of creases between well-shaped brows. A knife-straight nose and a fine mouth. His face was long and lean, like the rest of him, with blue eyes that worked hard to keep the expression out of them. Same with his voice. Quiet-spoken, that described Sam Schrock. He didn't talk much. Or smile, not much.

She brought a pitcher of coffee to the table and started to fill the cups, one by one, casting furtive glances in Sam's direction. He lifted his head and startled in recognition when he saw it was Mollie filling the cups, so much that he spilled his coffee. "No problem, no problem," she said, whipping out a dishrag tucked into her apron belt. She dabbed at the spilled coffee, tucked the rag back at her waist, and took his cup to refill it.

Smiling down at him, noting the pleasure in his eyes, she thrilled at the realization that she had put it there. Sweet.

Heaven's sake, what a smile did to Sam Schrock's face—eyes crinkled up at the corners, prominent cheekbones lifted, lips softened, that emotionlessness gone. Normally he kept that face taciturn and reserved, serious to the point of solemn, which only added to his appeal. No one could figure him out. In church, she saw how girls stole looks at him. Sam Schrock, relaxed and smiling, made a fetching sight, no question about it. She was charmed.

As Mollie moved around the table, filling cups with coffee, men walked up to offer Luke condolences, like a family member had died. She heard Luke murmur back a woeful response, something about how he couldn't believe this had

happened, no idea how he could do the deacon job, and something stirred inside her until it bubbled up and overflowed. “Luke Schrock, you’ll do this the way every other deacon does it. By depending on God. That’s how.”

Luke’s head snapped up when he realized who had spoken. “You! Mollie Graber. Are you the one who whispered my name to David? I heard that only one person voted for me. Did you play a prank on me?”

Sam’s eyes had been following her as she moved down the table. “Mollie?” he said softly, as if he couldn’t believe she would do such a thing.

“Me?” Mollie said. A laugh burst out of her, then more giggles. “No. Not me.” She stopped behind Jesse Stoltzfus and tipped her head. “Just one vote? Oh Luke . . . that’s so . . .” Sad.

“Pathetic! I know! That’s why I have no business being deacon.”

She shrugged. “Apparently God has a different point of view on that.”

“Mollie’s right on two counts.” David Stoltzfus had walked up to the table and squeezed in next to Luke. “Mollie was not the person who whispered your name, and the drawing of the lot is God’s business. Not man’s.”

“But David, hold on,” Luke said, shifting over to make room. “Teddy pulled his hand back from that one hymnal. You saw him do it. Everyone did. My guess is that he saw the paper. He wasn’t about to claim it.”

Teddy, digging his knife into the jar of peanut butter, looked up when he heard his name mentioned. “I saw no such thing, Luke.” He took a piece of bread from the basket and spread the peanut butter back and forth, back and forth,

then took a corner bite. “But I did feel something. Like a hand had been placed on top of my hand, making me put that hymnal down.” With the back of his sleeve, he wiped his mouth. “Somehow, I just knew that one book wasn’t meant for me.” By now, others had gathered around the table to hear the conversation. Teddy pointed his peanut-buttery knife at Luke. “I did not see that slip of paper.”

Alice stood behind her husband, a swaddled baby in her arms. “I’m thrilled Teddy isn’t deacon. We’ve got enough on our plate.”

Alice and Teddy had a newborn baby with the worst colic in history. So said Alice, anyway. That baby never stopped crying. Even now, his little body would go rigid in his mother’s arms, and he let out little mewling shrieks, like a kitten with its tail stepped on.

“Glad it wasn’t Hank Lapp in the lineup,” Edith Lapp said. She stood behind Luke, arms crossed, a scowl on her face aimed in Mollie’s direction meant to hurry her along with the coffee. She knew she didn’t move fast enough for Edith Lapp, but when wasn’t there a frown or scowl on that woman’s face? “Hank’s got a to-do list a mile long.” Jeering laughter followed.

Luke leaned forward on his elbows. “Well, I’ve got a lot to do too.”

“Like what?” Mollie asked. She didn’t mean for it to come out sounding as blunt as it probably did, but she didn’t think Luke had too much to worry about. Newly married, they lived rent-free at Windmill Farm. They didn’t have any children yet. What could possibly make him think he had more to do than anybody else?

Luke frowned. “Well, for one, I promised Amos Lapp

that I would empty out the foster care system in Lancaster County.”

“You did *what*?” Izzy said, coming to the table with a basket of freshly sliced bread.

Luke snapped his head up. “It was Amos’s idea,” he said quickly, eyes fixed on his wife. “Something he had wanted to do for Fern. He and I talked about it a lot, especially when he knew his time was growing short. I promised him I’d do my best, Izzy. Get those children into Amish homes.” Meekly, Luke looked around at all who had gathered around the table. “Anyone interested? Any takers?”

That question had the effect of a drenching of rain on the group. Men and women who had been standing nearby, eavesdropping, slipped away. The few still seated turned their attention to their plate of food, as if it was suddenly the most delicious meal they’d ever had.

Mollie remained near the table. This notion of making a difference, of meeting a need head-on, of taking on life as a grand adventure—it was the very reason she had uprooted her life and moved to Stoney Ridge. “Count me in,” she said with a big smile. “I’d love to have a foster child. Maybe two. Siblings, perhaps?”

Sam Schrock stared at her like she had just sprouted horns.