

THE INN at EAGLE HILL • 2

The Calling



A Novel

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER


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Suzanne Woods Fisher, *The Calling*
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Dedicated to
my youngest son, Tad,
who spent days during Christmas 2012 reading
through the messy first draft of this manuscript,
and nights walking and rocking his newborn niece to sleep.

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1



As far as Bethany Schrock was concerned, this summer was hotter than a firecracker lit on both ends. A little rain would certainly be welcome, she thought, as she untied her stiff prayer cap strings and tossed them over her shoulders, but the heat wave held Stoney Ridge tightly in its grip. All the more reason to set to work in the cool of the basement of the Sisters' House.

At the bottom of the basement stairs, she held the lantern up to gaze around the dusty, cobwebby basement, and blew out a puff of air. If it were even possible, there was more clutter down here than in the rest of the house. She'd been steadily trying to organize the Sisters' House for weeks now and had barely made a dent. Sylvia, the youngest of the five elderly sisters of the Sisters' House, had told her she was doing a fine job and they didn't know how she worked so quickly. "You are a doggedly determined young lady," Sylvia had said.

Bethany had smiled, pleased that Sylvia was so pleased. She had always considered doggedness to be a rather unappealing characteristic, but it had been valuable at the Sisters'

House. “Thank you,” she told Sylvia. “It’s easy when you know how to organize things.”

The sisters, on the other hand, did not know how. They were in desperate need of someone with dogged determination after the deacon had gently reminded them they were overdue in taking a turn to host church. Overdue by years and years. They needed to get their house tidied up first, they told him, giving him their sweetest smiles. And that’s where Bethany came in.

Jimmy Fisher had done the sisters a very great favor by suggesting they hire Bethany to organize their house. If it wouldn’t cause his big head to swell even bigger, she might even tell him so one day.

But she wouldn’t tell him how much she needed to work, to keep busy, to get her mind off the near shipwreck she had made of her life. It still galled her to think that just four weeks ago she was *this* close to running away with Jake Hertzler, only to find out he wasn’t the man he said he was. Not even close. He was a no-good, low-life skunk, that’s what he was.

In the end, as her stepmother Rose often reminded her, she hadn’t run off with Jake. Something deep down in her knew better, Rose insisted. Her grandmother, less forgiving in nature, had left a 1948 edition of *A Young Woman’s Guide to Virtue* on Bethany’s pillow, a not-so-subtle poke about her disastrous judgment in men. Bethany thought she might use it to start a fire.

Bethany carefully pushed and pulled boxes so she could carve a path to the small window. She needed fresh air in this stuffy, musty basement. Hands on her hips, she looked around and wondered where to begin.

The sisters had left for a quilting at Naomi King’s house

this afternoon, which suited Bethany just fine. She much preferred working without them anywhere nearby. Just this morning, her younger sister Mim had asked if she minded working for such ancient ladies.

Mim was right about them being old. Ella, the eldest, was in her 90s. Sylvia, the youngest, was in her early 80s. Fannie, Lena, and Ada fell somewhere in between. But they were lovable sisters, spinsters, who had lived together all their lives.

No, Bethany didn't mind their ages. What she minded was that they were so extraordinarily messy. Yes, it gave her a job to do and, yes, the sisters paid her well. But it was not an easy job. These old sisters saved everything. Everything!

The cleanout and organizing of the Sisters' House could have gone faster but for two reasons. First was the sisters' involvement. They were constantly rummaging through Bethany's system of three boxes: keep, throw, give away. The sisters were particularly interested in the giveaway box. Somehow, nearly everything Bethany tossed into it was quietly removed and slipped into the keep box.

The second reason the cleanout job moved slowly was Bethany's doing. There was prowling to be done, especially in the basement. Being her share of nosy, she took her time examining wondrous things she had never seen the likes of—treasure chests overflowing with fancy old clothes, ruffled parasols, lacy unmentionables. Who knew that these ancient sisters had an exotic past? How thrilling! How worrisome.

She took care to hide the unmentionables in the bottom of giveaway boxes. It would never do to have such things end up at a Sisters' House yard sale. Word might get out that the sisters were fallen women. Unrepentant jack-a-dandies. She could just imagine the dour look on her grandmother's face,

sorting through a box of ladies' whale-boned corsets. Next thing you knew, the old sisters would end up on the front row of church, kneeling for confession before the entire congregation, promising to mend their ways. How awful!

Well, never mind. The old sisters' secrets would stay safe with her.

It was fascinating to sift through the lives of these eighty-plus-year-old women. There were old newspapers and musty books, boxes of clothing, old quilts, even an old diary. One box held little bottles filled with liquid. Bethany hoped the bottles might be perfume, that she had found another delightful secret about the fallen sisters. But when she opened one, it smelled like medicine. Evil smelling, strong and sickly sweet.

She came upon a soft black leather trunk, packed underneath other boxes at the bottom in a corner of the basement. It looked like it hadn't been touched in years. The leather straps were cracked and dry, the brass nails that held it together were black with tarnish. She tried to open it but the latch was jammed, so she found an old iron fireplace poker and pried the lid open. Bethany peered into the trunk and stood with a start. A coppery cold moved along her spine and the perspiration on her skin turned to ice. She'd never had a sensitive bone in her body, unlike her friend and neighbor Naomi King, who'd imagined seeing ghosts and angels and demons her whole life. But this . . . this!

Shootfire!

She backed toward the stairs, trembling. It would take a raging river to wash from her mind the sight of what was in that trunk. Human bones, including two skulls, with their empty sockets looking back at her. She hurried up the base-

ment stairs, thinking of all the things she had to say to Jimmy Fisher to singe his tail feathers.



The day was so hot that Jimmy Fisher waited until the sun wasn't directly overhead to do some needed training exercises out on the road with Galen King's newly purchased sorrel gelding. The blacktop was hot enough to fry an egg, and they wouldn't last long out here, but he wanted to expose this gelding to a few passing cars or trucks.

In the afternoons, his employer and partner, Galen King, gave Jimmy conditioning exercises to do with a few of the horses. At first Jimmy was nervous when Galen watched him work a horse. Galen's silences had a way of making him lose track of his thoughts—some of which were perfectly good thoughts, in their way. He felt Galen might be watching because he was doing something that needed correcting. But one afternoon after another passed by, and Galen merely observed.

Today, Galen had left him with instructions to walk the gelding onto the road to start conditioning him to traffic. Most of the racehorses were accustomed to the unexpected—loud noises, distracting movements—but their response was to run, hard and fast, to the finish line. That wouldn't do for a buggy horse, which was Galen's and Jimmy's main objective: take young and retired racehorses and train them to become buggy horses. Today was the first time Galen wasn't hovering and Jimmy didn't want to mess up. He walked the gelding up and down the road for nearly half an hour, hoping a car or truck would come by. Naturally, there was nothing. Just as he thought about heading to a busier road, he saw Bethany Schrock come zooming toward him on her scooter, mad as a wet hen.

As she drew close to him, she jumped off the scooter and let it drop to the ground with a thud, startling the sorrel gelding. She came at Jimmy with a pointed finger, aimed at his chest. "I should have known! Whenever someone talks fast and fancy like you do, I should have known better than to listen. You were just trying to pass off a skunk as a swan."

Beautiful. She was beautiful. She might be the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. With that crazy tumble of pitch-black hair, as shiny as a child's, that never stayed put for long under that pinned and starched prayer cap. She had high, wide cheekbones and a dainty, pointed chin that gave her face a Valentine's shape. Her skin was like freshly skimmed cream. Her body was lean and long-limbed, but not at all delicate. She exuded confidence and strength, even arrogance.

After a pause, Jimmy spoke. "Okay. I'm not following."

"Those sisters! They're nuttier than loons! They have a box of bones down in the basement. Human bones! Are they killing people and stuffing them in trunks? Why would you get me a job at a crazy house? It was pure meanness on your part. Is this your idea of a big joke? Because it's not funny, Jimmy Fisher!" Her hands were on her hips, her brows knitted in a fierce frown.

Jimmy tried to make sense of what she was saying, but he kept getting distracted by sinful thoughts that would require some confession on his part before the day ended, stirrings in places he shouldn't even be thinking about.

Bethany Schrock intrigued him. Quite a bit. But there were plenty of attractive girls around Stoney Ridge. If that was what appealed to him, all he had to do was show up at a youth gathering. Any number of good-looking girls were eager for his attention.

Why her? Why this feisty, hot-tempered girl? Why now?

He didn't have the answers to those questions any more than he knew how to draw traffic along the road right now to condition this horse to unexpected noise.

It was something in her eyes, he decided. Deep, dark, intense. Yes, she was attractive, but it was the intensity in her eyes that spoke to him. There was some kind of fathomless depths to those eyes, and in them, something vulnerable. It quivered around the edges of her all the time, something a bit lost, lonely. Confused, maybe.

It wasn't as if Jimmy didn't have a few reservations about pursuing Bethany. He had plenty. Mainly—she'd been planning to run off with Jake the Snake, and though Jimmy had a quick-to-forgive nature, he wasn't about to let himself be runner-up in any girl's estimation. It was true—Bethany did refuse Jake—but Jimmy wanted a girl's whole heart. Not the leftovers.

"Simmer down, now," he said, his voice what's-the-weather-today calm, trying not to stare at her rosy lips and deep blush. "I'm sure whatever is bothering you is just a misunderstanding."

That made her all the more upset. For just an instant, he pressed his fingers against her mouth, but she pushed him away, furious. "I am not one of your horses! You can't speak to me with soft words and think you'll win me over, just like that!" She stamped her foot fiercely and that set the gelding dancing on its lead.

Jimmy held tight to the lead and stroked the horse's back, whispering sweet words to it. After the gelding settled, he turned his attention back to Bethany. "Calm down and start from the beginning." He tried to keep his voice even sounding, yet firm. The same way he spoke to this skittish gelding.

She had been watching the gelding, but with those words, she swung around on him so fast her capstrings bounced. She flashed her dark eyes at him with one single, pointed glance, a glance that managed to be both accusatory and frightening. “You try calming down after opening up a trunk and finding a skeleton staring back at you! With *two* skulls. *Four* empty eye sockets!”

The gelding pinned its ears back at Bethany’s loud voice and Jimmy tightened his hold, keeping one eye on that horse. One more shout from her and his horse would bolt to kingdom come.

Bethany shuddered. “I will never sleep again.” She was furious, shoulders rigid, chin tilted at that arrogant angle.

But at least she wasn’t shouting anymore. “Maybe there’s a reasonable explanation. Did you ask the sisters about the trunk?”

“No, of course not. They weren’t home.” She crossed her arms. “They’re hardly ever home. I don’t know what they do with their time, but it sure isn’t spent cleaning their house.” A little laugh bubbled up in her throat. “Besides, why would I want them to know that I knew they were killing people and stuffing them in trunks? I’m not stupid.” She gave him one last look of utter disgust and marched back to her scooter.

The gelding pointed its ears at Jimmy. He stroked the horse along its neck and spoke to it softly. “Did you understand a word of that?” The horse stood as if planted to the ground. “Me either. Well, Bethany may not have been a passing truck, but she does have a way of creating a maelstrom. I think she took care of your conditioning exercises for today.”



For the past three summers, Miriam Schrock's twice-removed third cousin from York County had invited her to come along on a vacation to visit relatives in Maine with them, and each time she thanked them and thanked them, then said no.

Her older sister, Bethany (her half sister—same father, different mothers—to be precise, and Mim valued being precise), couldn't get over this. A free trip to Maine! Weeks of swimming and lobsters and hiking and fir trees. No chickens to feed. No stalls to muck. No goat to stir up trouble. All that sounded nice, but Mim didn't want to go. She just wanted to spend the summer in Stoney Ridge—to watch Galen King and Jimmy Fisher train Thoroughbreds, play with her younger brothers if and when she felt like it, and read piles of library books. What if she were to get sick while she was away? She had never been away from home without her mother, and she wasn't about to start now. Her mom needed her. Ever since her father had died suddenly in a drowning accident last year, Mim just wanted things to be safe and familiar.

Besides, who would visit with Ella at the Sisters' House? Ella was the oldest of the five ancient sisters who lived together in an even more ancient house. Mim tagged along now and then when Bethany worked at the Sisters' House trying to organize their enormous accumulation of clutter. Mim did odd jobs for the sisters and had become rather fond of Ella. She was round and short, warm and steamy like a little teapot. She always smelled of fresh-baked gingerbread. Whenever Mim would stop in at the Sisters' House, Ella would look up from her crocheting or quilting or newspaper reading, pat the chair next to her so Mim would sit down beside her, and say, "So tell me everything."

Ella said she considered Mim to be the granddaughter she

never had. Mim wished Ella *were* her grandmother. That had to be a private wish, though, since she already had a grandmother. Mammi Vera. Well, Mammi Vera was just Mammi Vera. Mim thought she was born old and cranky.

Yesterday, Mammi Vera said that Luke, Mim's brother, who would soon be eleven, was full of the devil. He had memorized a Bible verse to a snappy tune and taught it to Mammi Vera. It was one of those tunes that got stuck in your head. A neighbor named Hank Lapp stopped by to say hello and heard her humming it. He asked her about it, so she sang the Bible verse. Then Hank laughed so hard tears rolled down his leathery cheeks. Turns out Luke had been singing Bible verses to a radio jingle for fine-tasting filter cigarettes. That was when Mammi Vera said Luke was full of the devil.

The devil seemed to be lurking around Eagle Hill on a regular basis, in Mammi Vera's mind, and she was often warning Mim, Luke, and their eight-year-old brother Sammy with strange proverbs from the Old Country: "Speak of the devil and he will flee."

Awhile ago, Mammi Vera caught Mim peering into a mirror. In a loud voice she said, "Wammer nachts in der Schpig-gel guckt, gucket der Deiwel raus." *When you look into the mirror at night, the devil peers out.*

The thought scared Mim so much she didn't look in a mirror for an entire month. She even took down the mirror in her room, just in case she happened to forget and glance at it during the night. Finally, she discussed Mammi Vera's saying with her very good friend Danny Riehl and he thought it didn't sound at all logical. Why would the devil only look at you in the night? That's the kind of thinker Danny was. Logical. He made everything easier to understand.

Mim was so touched that Ella thought of her as a granddaughter that she nearly confided in her about her great devotion for Danny Riehl. In her diary, she had filled the margins with versions of her name connected to Danny Riehl: Mrs. Daniel Riehl, Miriam Riehl, and her very favorite, Danny's Mim.

Mim had never told a soul how she felt about Danny. Although she shared almost everything with her sister Bethany, she had never mentioned Danny to her, because sometimes, oftentimes, her sister could be a little insensitive. If Danny found out, even accidentally, about Mim's deep feelings for him, it would be the most humiliating thing she could ever imagine.

Today, as Mim ran to get the mail, she was glad she had turned down her York County cousin's invitation and for an entirely different reason than Danny or Ella. Nearly every day, there was a letter in the Inn at Eagle Hill mailbox addressed to Mrs. Miracle from someone who direly needed an answer to a problem.

A few months ago, when Mim's mother, Rose, had first opened the Inn at Eagle Hill, she had asked Mim to paint a sign for the inn. Mim was known far and wide for her excellent penmanship. Excellent. She worked long and hard on the large wooden sign, penciling the letters, painting them in black with a fine-tipped paintbrush. At the bottom of the sign, Mim had added a little Latin phrase she had found in a book and liked the way it rolled off her tongue: *Miracula fieri hic*. At the time, she didn't realize what it meant: Miracles occur here.

A newspaper reporter, who happened to have taken five years of high school Latin, he said, translated the phrase and

said *this* was the story he'd been looking for. There was a human-interest angle to spin from the Latin phrase—it spoke to a longing in everyone for a place that fed their soul and spirit. He wrote up an article, weaving in truth and mistruths, about the miracles that occurred at the Inn at Eagle Hill. The article was picked up by the Pennsylvania newspapers, then the internet, and so on and so forth. Soon, the inn was considered to be a place where people could practically order up a custom-made miracle like a hamburger. And then people started to write letters to Mrs. Miracle. Buckets and buckets of letters. They kept pouring in. Mim's mother, overwhelmed by the quantity, was relieved when Mim offered to answer the letters. But she told Mim what to say: "The Inn at Eagle Hill couldn't solve their problems. Only God could provide miracles."

Mim believed that part about God and miracles, but after reading a few letters, she thought she could help the people solve their problems. Most of the problems were pretty simple: injured feelings, sibling rivalry, how to cook and clean. All of that she had plenty of experience with, especially with the sibling rivalry. Her two little brothers couldn't be in the same room without some kind of fuss and tussle. So she decided to answer a few letters, offering advice, posing as Mrs. Miracle. Then a few more and a few more, until she finished the big pile. She knew she hadn't done what her mom had expected her to do, but it was just a small disobedience, a slight adjustment to the truth, and for the best of reasons. She was helping people, and hadn't she been taught to help others? Plus, Mim was sure the letters from people seeking advice would dwindle down as the Inn at Eagle Hill miracle story blew over. After all, with this heat wave they'd been

having, the inn had been getting cancellations for reservations as soon as people discovered there was no air-conditioning. If they really thought the inn could dish out miracles, they wouldn't let a little hot weather stop them, would they?

Maybe, maybe not. But letters addressed to Mrs. Miracle kept coming. Mim made a point of meeting the mailman each day so her mom wasn't made aware of this interesting development. Each afternoon, she listened for the squeaky mail truck to come down their road and bolted to the mailbox when she heard it. So far, so good. The letters continued to arrive, stealthily, and the problems in the letters were still pretty simple to solve. She hadn't been stumped yet.

In today's mail was a letter from the local newspaper, asking Mrs. Miracle if she would like to have a regular column in the *Stoney Ridge Times*. Mrs. Miracle would be paid five dollars each time the column ran. Five whole dollars! Mim would be rich!

There was just one glitch. The letter from the newspaper stated she needed to be over eighteen and they wanted her signature and birth date on the W-2 form. Mim was only fourteen. She didn't mind bending the rules for a good cause, and this was definitely a worthy cause. But she would need help. First, she thought about asking Naomi King, her friend and neighbor, who had turned eighteen recently. But then she dismissed that notion. Naomi followed rules the way she quilted: even, straight, tiny, perfect stitches. No mistakes. Keeping a secret like Mrs. Miracle's true identity might cause Naomi to unravel.

Then she thought of her sister Bethany, who had just turned twenty and didn't mind bending rules at all. But the tricky part was catching Bethany in just the right mood to ask for a

favor. It all depended if Bethany was feeling friendly or not. Anticipating Bethany's moods lately took skill—often, she seemed pensive and just wanted to be left alone. It was all because of Jake Hertzler. He was Bethany's ex-boyfriend, a charming fellow who had worked for her father at his investment company. When Schrock Investments went belly up, Jake Hertzler, along with Mim's oldest brother Tobe (again, to be precise, Tobe was her half brother), went missing.

On a cheerier note, this newspaper column was a wonderful opportunity for Mrs. Miracle. It was disappointing that Mim needed to keep this opportunity top secret—her mother, and *especially* her grandmother, must never find out! The way Mim rationalized it, it was only a tiny breaking of all the rules her church was so fond of and she was helping all kinds of people and that was worth keeping a secret or two. But if her grandmother found out—oh my! Then Mim would be full of the devil.



As soon as Geena Spencer arrived at her church office this morning, the elder board of the New Life Church of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, had called her into a meeting and told her, gently and firmly, that they were very sorry but things weren't working out the way they had hoped and they had to let her go. They had already found another interim youth pastor, an enthusiastic young man fresh out of seminary, to fill in for her. Starting today. They thanked her for her service, said they'd provide a glowing letter of recommendation, and asked if she needed any help cleaning out her office.

Stung and ashamed, Geena bent her head, and went to her office.

Objectively, she could see that they were right. The elder board had wanted a youth pastor who could preach the paint off the wall and act like a magnet for the youth of Ardmore. They had a plan to triple the size of the youth group, thereby drawing parents into the main sanctuary. Geena had a way with people, especially teens, as long as it was one-on-one, but as hard as she tried, she was a terrible public speaker. That was why she'd been passed over for so many positions. She only received the church in Ardmore because her favorite seminary professor, who happened to be her uncle and a good friend of the head elder, had called in a few favors and promised Geena would improve with time and practice.

Also, no other candidate accepted the call.

It had been an opportunity for Geena to prove herself, but after only six weeks, the elders started to pay her Monday morning visits with what they considered to be helpful suggestions: "Don't read your notes. Make eye contact. Speak up. Slow down. Speed up." Their feedback only made her all the more nervous. During youth group each Wednesday night, a handful of elders would come and sit in the back of the room. She would glance out at the sea of young faces, then at the back row of old faces, and feel a startled jolt, a deer in headlights, as if she were preaching to a room full of dour seminary professors.

Geena knew she wasn't a gifted orator, but she thought by now the church might have developed an appreciation for all she did do well: She'd been told she was a "2 a.m. pastor"—the kind families wouldn't hesitate to call in a crisis. During spring break, she organized a youth group trip to help on a Habitat for Humanity building project in Kentucky. She started weekly Bible studies—one for the boys and one for the

girls. While the youth group wasn't exactly tripling—not by a long shot—she was discipling a core of committed teens. She tried to equip them so they could influence their peers in any situation—at school, in sports, or just hanging out. She never forgot anyone's name. And she loved them, every single one of them.

But obviously, all that wasn't enough.

It was humiliating to suddenly be let go, released. Fired. As she took books off the shelves and placed them in boxes, she kept telling herself to pull it together, to find a way to get over this, to stop being a big baby. But it wasn't working.

She felt sorry for herself. It was hard not to. She thought this was “it”—the job she'd been waiting for all her life. At long last she could set down roots. She'd been Head of Children's Ministry for five different churches since she graduated from seminary—hoping one or the other might turn into a youth pastor position. Each opportunity seemed promising, until the Sunday morning came when Geena was given a chance to fill in for the senior pastor. It was customary for the ordained staffers to preach on low attendance Sundays—after Christmas, after Easter. When the congregation heard her preach, everything went south.

No call ever came, not until the one from this church in Ardmore.

The call to ministry was a strange thing. It was exactly that—a calling, a thing you responded to not because you wanted to but because you had to.

Stranger still to have the call and not get a call.

As Geena opened her top desk drawer, her eyes fell on a gift certificate from grateful parishioners, a quirky, big-hearted couple named Lois and Tony. They had given it to her a

month ago, after she had come to the hospital when their granddaughter had been involved in a car accident. She stood vigil with them until the doctor brought good news, and they were appreciative of Geena's calming presence during those troubling hours. The gift certificate was for two nights' stay at an Amish bed-and-breakfast in Lancaster County.

Impulsively, Geena called the Inn at Eagle Hill and asked if there was an opening for tonight. A woman answered the phone, her voice as soft as chocolate. "Actually, I happen to have a week's opening because of a cancellation," she said. "The heat wave we're having is discouraging fair-weather visitors. I have to warn you, we don't have any air-conditioning."

Geena jumped at the chance to leave town. "I don't mind the heat. I just need . . . a place to take a break and do some serious thinking for a few days. I'll take the whole week." Boy, did she ever have thinking to do. Like, her entire future.

"Well, then, it sounds like you'll be coming to the right place."

Two hours and one stop at Sonic for a double cheeseburger and fries later, Geena had exited I-76, driven along the Philadelphia Pike, then followed her GPS to the country road that wound to Stoney Ridge. She noticed a siren in her rearview mirror. She pulled over, hoping the police officer just needed to pass by. Her heart sank as he stopped his patrol car behind hers. He walked to her passenger window, leaned over, and growled, "License and registration."

Geena handed him the paperwork and waited while he returned to his car. After a few more long moments, the officer reappeared at her window. "What brings you to Stoney Ridge, Ms. Spencer?"

"Reverend. Reverend Spencer. I'm a minister." She was

slightly ashamed to play that minister card, but . . . it often worked in the clutch.

He didn't bat an eye.

"What brings me here? Just a whim." She shrugged. "I needed a little vacation."

He nodded slowly. "Well, I'm sorry your vacation is starting off on a sour note," he said as he scribbled on his pad, "but as fast as you were going, I really don't have a choice." He tore the ticket off the pad and handed it to her. "You'd better start slowing down, Reverend Spencer. You're in another world."