

THE BISHOP'S FAMILY #1

THE  
IMPOSTER  
—  —  
*A Novel*

SUZANNE  
WOODS  
FISHER

  
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*To those 2 a.m. pastors,  
for all you do as Keepers of the Faith*



# Cast of Characters

**David Stoltzfus**—in his early 40s, widowed minister, father to five children: Katrina, Jesse, Ruthie, Molly, Lydie, and Emily. Owner of the Bent N’ Dent store in Stoney Ridge

**Katrina Stoltzfus**—19 years old, oldest daughter in the family

**Jesse Stoltzfus**—16 years old, oldest son

**Ruthie Stoltzfus**—14 years old, in the eighth grade

**Molly Stoltzfus**—age 11

**Lydie and Emily Stoltzfus**—8-year-old twins

**Freeman Glick**—in his 50s, bishop of Stoney Ridge

**Levi Glick**—late 40s, minister of Stoney Ridge

**Birdy Glick**—32, only sister to Freeman Glick

**Thelma Beiler**—(touchy about her age), elderly widow to former bishop, Elmo Stoltzfus; runs a farm called Moss Hill

**Andy Miller**—20-something, farmhand for Thelma Beiler on Moss Hill

**Hank Lapp**—60ish, uncle to Amos Lapp of Windmill Farm; runs a 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*

# Prologue

Surprises come in two shapes—good and bad. This one, though, felt indeterminate.

David Stoltzfus awoke in the middle of the night with a clear prompting in his heart: leave what was familiar and comfortable and go forth into the wilderness. He had developed a listening ear to God's promptings over the years and knew not to ignore them. God who had spoken, David believed with his whole heart, still speaks.

But where was this wilderness?

A week passed. David searched Scripture, prayed, spoke to a few trusted friends, and still the prompting remained. Grew stronger. A month passed. David's daily prayer was the same: *Where is the wilderness, Lord? Where will you send me?* Another month passed. Nothing.

And then David received a letter from a bishop—someone he had known over the years—in a little town in Lancaster County, inviting him to come alongside to serve the church. *Go*, came the prompting, loud and clear.

So David packed up his home, sold his bulk store business, and moved his family to the wilderness, which, for him, meant Stoney Ridge, Pennsylvania.

As the first few months passed, it seemed puzzling to David to think that God would consider Stoney Ridge as a wilderness, albeit metaphorically. The bishop, Elmo Beiler, had welcomed him in as an additional minister, had encouraged him to preach the word of God from his heart. It was a charming town and he had been warmly embraced. A wilderness? Hardly that. More like the Garden of Eden. When he casually remarked as much to Elmo, the old bishop gave him an unreadable look. “There is no such thing, David.” Elmo didn’t expand on the thought, and David chalked it up to a warning of pride.

No place was perfect, he knew that, but the new life of the Stoltzfus family was taking shape. His children were starting to settle in. They were a family still adapting to the loss of Anna, David’s wife, but they weren’t stuck, not like they had been. It was a fresh start, and everything was going about as well as David could expect.

Then, during a church service, Elmo suffered a major heart attack. In a dramatic fashion for a man who was not at all dramatic, Elmo grabbed David’s shirt and whispered, “Beware, David. A snake is in the garden.”

Later that evening, Elmo passed away.

Two weeks later, Freeman Glick, the other minister who had served alongside David, drew the lot to become the new bishop, his brother Levi drew the lot to replace him as minister, and in the space of one month, the little Amish church of Stoney Ridge was an altogether different place.

Almost overnight, David sensed the wilderness had arrived.

# 1

When Hank Lapp burst through the door of the Bent N’ Dent in Stoney Ridge, Katrina Stoltzfus whirled around from stocking the shelves to see what was wrong. He’d lost his hat and his white hair was poking out in every direction, like a dandelion puff. His dog was right on his heels, barking like he was chasing a bear.

“What in the world, Hank?”

“Candidates! I’ve got candidates!” He waved a fistful of envelopes in the air. “From the letter I wrote in the *Budget*.”

“About . . .”

“Your father! Needing a bride! I think we’ve got some suitable options.”

Katrina stared at him while the words sank in. “No!” The word came out sharper than she intended, so she softened it a bit. “Hank,” she said, “what have you done?”

Bethany Schrock, her best friend and best employee, walked over from behind the front counter, a horrified look on her face.

“How many times have I been in this very store and heard you girls talk about how much David Stoltzfus needed a wife? So I got to thinking, ‘Now, Hank, what was it you done to get Amos a wife?’ I couldn’t remember, not ’til I was halfway home. Then it hit me, like a brick from heaven dropped on my head! For Amos, I put a letter in the *Budget* and next thing you knew, Fern showed up at the door and married him.”

“Please, please, please don’t tell me you advertised for a wife for David in the *Budget*,” Bethany said in a slow, shocked voice.

“Not an advertisement, exactly. More like a gentle appeal.” He pulled out the newspaper from the back of his coat and pointed to it.

CALLING ALL SINGLE LADIES EAGER TO LAND  
A MAN! THE MINISTER OF STONEY RIDGE IS IN  
DESPERATE NEED OF A WIFE AND A MOTHER  
TO HIS SIX REDHEADED CHILDREN. PLUS, HE’S  
A REAL NICE GUY. SEND A LIST OF YOUR QUALI-  
FICATIONS TO HANK LAPP.

He jabbed his finger at the quote that wrapped up his scribe letter. “Look at that. ‘From an old maid you get a faithful wife.’ I thought that was an especially fine touch. Just to be sure I got the point across.”

Katrina felt sick to her stomach, an uneasiness she couldn’t place. “Oh, Hank. Dad is not going to be happy about this.”

“Well, neither was Amos. But Fern was the best thing that ever happened to him. She tells him so every morning.”

A heavy, awkward silence covered the room. Hank looked from Katrina to Bethany. “You both said he needed a wife.

Just a few weeks ago, I heard you both say so, standing right in this very spot. Birdy was here too, and she agreed wholeheartedly. Now, what's so wrong about doing something about it?"

Bethany put her hands on her hips. "It seems like David should do the choosing of a wife."

"He can do all the choosing he wants to do!" Hank said, hurt. "Plenty to choose from. All I did was let the ladies know that he was interested."

And that was the problem, right there, Katrina thought. Her father wasn't interested in getting remarried. She watched Hank try to jam the letters into his coat pocket, only to miss his pocket so that the bundle of letters scattered on the ground. She felt a twinge of guilt as she watched his happiness evaporate. The more he picked up, the more fell out of his coat. He had become a clumsy bundle of anxiety.

And that made her think of her father, the number one anxiety in her life at the moment—no, scratch that. Definitely the number two anxiety in her life, if she allowed herself to think of her boyfriend, John, which she tried not to do but couldn't help herself.

*John.* The thought of his name sent a sharp pain through her ribs, an invisible dagger into her heart. She refused to believe it was truly over between her and John. Surely he would come to his senses soon. They were supposed to be forever.

Her father strongly—strongly!—disapproved of John, for all kinds of reasons that Katrina thought were unfair and biased. After the accident that took the life of her mother and nearly took hers too, her father had become ridiculously over-protective. Katrina had worried him to pieces in the hospital.

She knew her behavior lately was spiking his concern that

she was still suffering effects from the accident. She'd been quieter than usual and kept to herself as much as she could. He suggested, more than once, that she see a doctor. But what could a doctor do to mend a broken heart? And fix dreams that had turned to dust?

Hank cleared his throat, pulling her back to the matter at hand. Katrina placed her fingers on her temples—a headache was threatening. “*What* were you thinking? When I said that I hoped my father would find someone, I didn’t mean to imply that it was our business to do something about it.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Katrina was doing something on her own—she had made a list of every eligible female over the age of forty in Stoney Ridge who bore some resemblance to her mother, either in some physical attribute or in personality. And she was systematically inviting each woman over to dinner. Two, so far. Two disastrous dinners in which her father never even showed up—though, to be fair, his untimely absence was through no fault of his own. His work as a minister meant he was often called away from home at unusual hours. When all was said and done, Katrina decided it was not such a bad thing to have a test to weed out those women who might not have the patience or endurance to be a minister’s wife. After all, interruptions were part and parcel of the calling.

The only sound in the store was the crackle of the letters as Hank stuffed them into his coat pocket. “That’s the trouble with the world today. All talk, no action.” Insulted, Hank spun around, muttering about women and their lack of understanding.

Katrina hadn’t meant to hurt his tender pride. “Wait! Wait, Hank. I’m sorry. You just surprised me, that’s all.” When he slowed to turn around, she tried to feign interest and ignore

the queasy feeling that rose up in her stomach again. “Did you read the letters? Any possibilities?”

Hank patted his pockets. “Fourteen women, all sensing a divine calling to move to Stoney Ridge, all eager to meet the widowed minister David Stoltzfus.”

Honestly, that is exactly what Katrina hoped might happen. Her father needed to find someone. He hovered over her like a worried hen, objecting to any activity that might bring risk with it. He was getting worse too. Lately, he insisted on dropping Katrina off at the Bent N’ Dent as if she were nine and not nineteen. She was starting to suffocate under her father’s watchful concern. “Maybe . . . we should take a look at some of those letters.”

Hank lit up. “Now you’re talking!” He grabbed the letters from his coat and plunked them on the counter. “I like most of them. But skip that one.” He pointed to a pink envelope rimmed with flowers. “That’s from a lady who loves cats. Has over twenty of them.”

“Katrina,” Bethany frowned at her.

Katrina set the pink envelope aside, but picked up a blue one. “Look at the bright side, Bethany. One of those women might be the right wife for my father.”

“The bright side isn’t always the right side.”

“Don’t sound so sour on true love, Bethany,” Hank said. “You might give Jimmy Fisher another chance.”

The on-again, off-again romance of Bethany Schrock and Jimmy Fisher was a source of great interest to everyone in Stoney Ridge. Katrina’s brother, Jesse, held bets on who would be the first to break up. Bethany and Jimmy would teeter toward matrimony, only to have one or the other pull back as if getting too close to a fire.

“Ha!” Bethany rolled her eyes. “You know how unreliable he is.”

“That I do,” Hank said happily.

At that moment, Jimmy Fisher materialized out of nowhere. “Who’s unreliable?” he said, holding the door open.

“You,” Bethany said. “You’ve never had a plan that lasts longer than five minutes.”

“Not true!” Jimmy turned to Hank. “Want to go fishing this afternoon?”

Katrina and Bethany exchanged amazed glances.

“Where’ve you been, Jimmy Fisher?” Bethany asked, scowling. “I haven’t seen you in over a week.”

Jimmy grinned and closed the door behind him. “She can’t do with me and she can’t do without me.”

“Oh, I can do without you just fine,” Bethany said. Lately, she was the one full of doubts about Jimmy as suitable husband material. “I’m going to the storeroom to unpack some boxes.”

Jimmy watched her go, then leaned his elbows onto the countertop. “She can simmer up faster than a teapot on a hot stove.” He gave Katrina his most charming grin. “But I have learned to weather it.”

Katrina lowered her voice. “She thinks you’re suffering from a temporary case of permanent immaturity.”

“Katrina!” came her voice from the storeroom. “I told you that information in private.”

Katrina shrugged. “But she tells that to everyone. She says so all the time.” She pulled out a box of ground cumin-filled containers and weighed them to mark their price. The strong smell of the cumin made her stomach twist. Was cumin always this strong? Or was this a particularly pungent batch?

“I wish people would say what they mean and mean what they say.” John, for example. *There I go, thinking of him again!* She put the cumin container back in the box. That overly aromatic chore could wait until tomorrow.

“Which reminds me,” Jimmy said. “Katrina, your dad said to ask Bethany to close up so you could leave early. Your brother just got home.”

“Jesse?” Katrina said. “My brother is . . . home?”

“I gave him a ride from town in my own buggy,” Jimmy said. “Dropped him off a few minutes ago. That’s why I’m here. Your dad sent me to tell you. The prodigal has returned!”

“I need to get home.” Her thoughts jumbled together like tangled yarn in a basket. Jesse was home! Finally, she could stop being her father’s favorite child and let Jesse have a turn at it. “Would you mind asking Bethany to lock up? I need to get home.”

“What about these letters?” Hank roared.

Katrina reached out both hands and scooped up the letters from the countertop, all but the pink envelope from the cat lady. She hurried to the door. Over her shoulder she shouted, “I’ll handle it from here, Hank.”



Being the most favorite child of David Stoltzfus had been both a gift and a burden to bear for Jesse. It was hard enough to be the only son among five daughters, but added to that was his father’s constant attention and concern and worry . . . well, it meant quite a lot of attention was focused on him. Happily, he loved being the center of attention.

Most of the time. He thought back to the stricken look

on Katrina's face last night when he told her the news that her ex-boyfriend, John, was getting married. His dad had been right about John, all along. He wasn't a keeper, his dad had said.

"Is that really true?" Katrina's voice was thin and wobbly, but she kept her gaze fixed on him. "You're not just making that up so I'll stop pining for him?"

"It's true," Jesse had said. It pained him to be the bearer of that news, dreaded his sister's reaction, but he was impressed with how stoically she was handling the shock. Maybe she wasn't as head over heels in love with John as she had seemed for the last year.

Later that night, Jesse stopped by Katrina's door and heard her sobbing as if her heart had shattered. It actually hurt to hear her cry.

Unrequited love. It was a predicament he hoped he would never face.

This morning, as soon as Jesse heard the kitchen door slam shut behind his twin sisters, and he knew his father had left to take the girls to school, he jumped out of bed to take a shower. He borrowed Katrina's best lavender soap and hoped she wouldn't mind. He had never smelled better, never looked more handsome, as he sauntered across the street to pay a call on a special someone at the Inn at Eagle Hill.

He knocked tentatively on the door to the farmhouse, hoping that the bad-tempered grandmother of Eagle Hill wasn't hovering nearby.

The kitchen door opened and there she was, Miriam Schrock, his special someone, almost as if she were expecting him. He looked, and looked again. Why, she had changed over the summer, filled out in certain places, gone from girl

to woman. Her dress, snugly fitting her compact form, was rose-colored with a hint of blush. Even her complexion had a new glow. Her gray eyes met his in mutual appraisal. She pushed a rather fetching raven wisp of hair off her forehead and studied him as if he was an oddity.

“Miriam,” he began with a lift of his hat, “I have returned, as promised.”

“You also promised to write to me,” she said, cool as custard. “And you never did. Not once.” The door began to shut in his face.

“Let me start again,” he amended rapidly. “I was kept extraordinarily busy by my hardworking relatives. You know there’s always more than enough work to do on a farm.”

She kept the door open a crack and peeped around the doorframe to consider his words.

“There wasn’t time in the day to even pick up a pen and share with you all that was in my heart.”

“You could have called.”

“Ah, yes. That, too, would have required a surfeit of spare time, of which I had none.”

“I heard you had plenty of free time on Sunday nights to drive Sicily Bender home from singings.”

*Sicily Bender?* How in the world had she ever heard that he had been going out with Sicily Bender? Who would have told her? Unless . . . news had trickled to Ruthie from one of those Ohio cousins. The traitors.

He felt the collar around his neck tighten up. “It’s a long story,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“Then it will have to wait until I have time to hear it.” And with that, the door shut tight.

So much for a storybook *Welcome back!* to Stoney Ridge.



Wide awake at four thirty in the morning, David Stoltzfus gave up on sleep and decided to go downstairs to work on Sunday's sermon before the household started to stir. He paused at each bedroom door in the hallway, as he did every morning, to thank God for the gift of his children. All six, each one his favorite.

He went through the motions of scooping tablespoons of coffee grounds into the filter, filling the coffeepot with water, waiting for the pleasant percolating sound to begin, but his mind was far away.

Jesse was home—a wonderful surprise. But . . . why? And so suddenly. When he asked his son, Jesse answered with a shrug, as if . . . why not? David would have to call his sister for the real story.

Also troubling was Jesse's news about Katrina's boyfriend. Truth be told, David was relieved to hear that John was engaged to someone else, but he ached for his daughter's pain. His heart felt pierced as he watched her absorb the information: First, complete shock. Then she flinched, as if she'd been struck.

But as distracted as David felt by his children, it was the condition of the church that weighed most heavily on him. He poured a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table, books spread out, right under the light of the hissing kerosene lamp, and bowed his head, asking God for guidance and wisdom as he prepared for Sunday.

"Sunday," he said again, this time aloud.

His thoughts immediately traveled to the Sunday before last, when he had told the young people in the baptism class,

“If you’re going to choose to be Amish, be Amish with your whole heart. Don’t be half-Amish. Don’t live your life with one foot out the door.” Bishop Freeman Glick glared at him and cornered him right afterward to give him an earful of criticism.

That week, six young men dropped out of baptism class. Parents were frantic, Freeman was livid. He was first at David’s door to tell him *I told you so*.

But David stood by his words. He believed them, believed them with his whole heart.

Freeman said David didn’t understand young people. “That kind of talk is going to make being Amish obsolete. The youth will leave in droves. They can’t think for themselves. We need to do the thinking for them. Coax them in and lead them down the path.”

If a young person didn’t know what he was bending at the knee for, what was the point of being Amish? What was the point of all those who had gone before to ensure that baptism was an adult decision? And what would the church look like if it were filled with confused, lukewarm, halfhearted members? *That*, David felt, would make the church obsolete.

He rubbed his forehead, tense with the image of a scowling Freeman Glick. His private opinion of the bishop, inconstant in the best of times, varied almost hourly. Every single discussion ended up in a stalemate. Sometimes David thought Freeman exercised certain neck veins just for discussions with him.

These were the moments when David most sorely missed his wife, Anna. She was such a good sounding board. She listened at all the right times, gave him advice when he asked. She would know what to do, where to turn. Leave it in God’s hands, she would say.

David looked up to the ceiling and lifted his palms. *Leave it in God's hands.*

A tapping sound on the window made him jerk in his chair. Birdy Glick, the only sister to the Glick brothers, stood at the kitchen window in the cold and murky light of dawn, waving timidly. He jumped up from the kitchen table to open the back door for her.

“David!” she exclaimed. Her face was bright, as if with happiness. “I hope you don’t mind such an early visit. I’m on my way to Windmill Farm to watch the peregrine falcon hunt for breakfast and happened to notice your light was on.”

She took a step and tripped over the door’s threshold, sailing straight into David. He braced himself to catch her and ended up knocking bonnets and hats and coats to the floor.

“I’m terribly sorry! I’ll get them.”

But David was already picking them up, fearing the worst. A visit from Birdy was like inviting a kind and gentle bull into a china shop. David was tall but not as tall as Birdy: she was six foot two inches, taller than most men.

As her gaze settled fully on him, her eyebrows drew together in a slight frown. “What’s the matter?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“I stood knocking at the door for five minutes before I finally yoo-hooed at the window.”

David felt his cheeks grow warm. “Sorry, Birdy. I didn’t hear the knock. My thoughts were elsewhere.” He lifted his palm in the direction of the kitchen table. Books and notes were piled helter-skelter.

“Miles away, I’d say.”

Not quite that far. More like down the road at the Glick

farm. Intentionally redirecting his thoughts, he smiled at Birdy. “Are you looking for Katrina? She’s still asleep.”

“Actually, no. I stopped by to let you know that Thelma Beiler hired a farmhand. She said it was your idea.”

“What?” David’s smile faded. “I told her I’d help her interview a few possibilities, to narrow it down. I even gave her some suggestions.”

“She thought you were too busy to be bothered, so she posted an ad on the bulletin board down at the Hay & Grain and hired the first fellow who called. She liked the sound of his voice on the phone. He started a few days ago.” Birdy stepped up to the window, then turned back to face David. “I also learned that Thelma has taken a fall and hurt her shoulder. Nothing broken,” she hastened to add at the look of alarm on David’s face. “Her arm is in a sling while it heals. I thought, perhaps, it might be wise if someone were to stay with her for a while. After all, Thelma’s alone up on that hilltop.”

Thelma Beiler, Elmo’s widow, was in her late seventies but acted like she was in her twenties, insisting she didn’t need anyone fussing over her.

“Though, of course, it would be best if it were presented in a different light to Thelma. Perhaps, as someone who wants to apprentice the moss business.”

David nodded. “This farmhand, he’s Amish, isn’t he?”

“Of course!” Then her brows gathered into a frown. “He spoke to Thelma and me in Penn Dutch. I think . . . he’s one of us.”

Something didn’t sound quite right. “Birdy, would you be willing to stay with her?”

Birdy frowned. “Oh, I would if I could. I really would. I’m very fond of Thelma.” She lifted her head with a deep

breath. “But apparently I’m going to be teaching school this term.”

David tried to hide his surprise. Surprise and annoyance. Yet *another* decision made by Freeman and Levi that excluded him. Big decisions, starting with allowing cell phones for business use. Then Freeman added computers.

David couldn’t ignore the fact that quite a few church members welcomed Freeman’s soft attitude toward modernizing. The farmers of Stoney Ridge were struggling to make ends meet; many were abandoning farming altogether to try their hand at business ventures. Computers, they believed, could help aid a small business’s success. Cell phones would help a business owner be readily available to their customers. All true.

But these decisions weren’t without repercussions. They were choices about principles. Yes, a computer might make keeping accounts more efficient, but its access to the internet ushered in a host of new complexities. Discovering Jimmy Fisher had a Facebook account, for one thing.

And a cell phone might make life more convenient than an answering machine in a cold shanty in the middle of winter, but it also brought in all kinds of options. His mind trailed off to last week’s wedding, when he spotted Luke Schrock slyly taking cell phone pictures of the bride and groom.

More to the point, since when was ease or convenience the goal of the Plain life? He believed the purpose of the Amish was to love God and others well.

Birdy cleared her throat and David snapped back to the present, to the news that she was now going to teach at the new school. He had nothing against Birdy. He didn’t know much about her other than a few obvious facts: she lived in a

small cottage on her brothers' property, she led bird-watching tours for tourists. And she was quite tall.

"I think there's one person Thelma wouldn't object to," Birdy said. "Your Katrina. It's a perfect solution, you see, in that it was Katrina's idea in the first place for Thelma to start selling all that moss she's got up there."

"I suppose you're right about that." It came from a casual comment Katrina had made at last June's school program. A few of the eighth-grade boys had doubled back for another year or two, easy to spot by the rim of fuzz on their upper lips. Katrina had said it looked as if they were starting to grow moss from all their years in the schoolroom. Thelma had laughed so hard at her remark that she had tears running down her cheeks.

A few weeks after her husband Elmo's passing, Thelma called David to her home and said one word: "Moss!" She'd been searching for some kind of business venture, but her property was a shady, steep, rocky hillside. Moss was the only thing that grew in abundance. David researched the topic and discovered that several states and national forests had banned harvesting wild moss; there was, indeed, a need for a commercial moss market.

"It seemed, well, I thought, perhaps Katrina might benefit from spending time with Thelma . . ." Birdy paused and regrouped, searching for the right words. "Sometimes, people never get over losing somebody."

David's eyes strayed to his wife Anna's knitting basket, gathering dust in a corner of the room, but he didn't let his gaze linger there. An all-too-familiar stirring of worry started to swirl in his chest. He hated to admit it, considering the source came from a Glick, but there was a lot of sense in

that suggestion. Katrina seemed so wounded and bruised. The poor girl looked tired. Worse than tired—exhausted. She was too slim and too pale, with dark circles under her eyes.

Birdy took David's brief silence to mean he was thinking it over. "It's a bit like hitting two birds with one stone, don't you think?"

It couldn't hurt. "I'll suggest it to Katrina this morning."

"Excellent. Wonderful. I think it's a splendid solution," Birdy said cheerfully.

The conversation grew suddenly silent. The distant clip-clopping sound of a buggy horse sifted through the awkward silence.

Then Birdy spun around to leave and, in doing so, swept two books off the table with her elbow. They both bent down to pick up the books at the same time and knocked heads. A sharp pain creased David's forehead and he put his hand over it.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Terribly sorry," she said, scrambling to collect the books.

David stepped back to avoid another collision. Katrina said Birdy's clumsiness was David's fault, that Birdy said he made her "frightfully nervous." But what could he do about that? He didn't know any cure for just being himself.

The early morning sun started to stream into the kitchen windows. The day had begun. "I'll walk you down the driveway. I forgot to pick up yesterday's mail." About halfway down the path, his attention was caught by the Glick buggy turning into the Inn at Eagle Hill. He saw Freeman and Levi climb out of the buggy and walk toward the house.

"The brothers are making the rounds to speak to each family."

“About . . . ?”

Birdy lowered her eyes and said in a hushed voice, “Finances. They plan to review each family’s finances.”

David’s fists clenched. It was a fairly common practice for a church to nominate trustees to make an assessment of each family’s finances, every five years or so, to support the teacher’s salary and maintain the schoolhouse. But the trustees were chosen, not self-appointed, and the church leaders were never nominated as trustees. Elmo would’ve never done such a thing.

“I’d better go.” She took a few steps, then turned around to face him, a face that was kind and open and sincere. “Don’t let my brothers wear you down. The church, Stoney Ridge . . . ,” Birdy dropped her eyes, “we need . . .” She kept her eyes locked on her shoes.

They were rather substantial shoes, David noted. As large as her brothers’. But unlike her brothers, she had the nature of a gentle, artless young woman, surprisingly diffident and shy. Well, it was a good thing she had such stature—she would need everything she could muster to manage the boys in that schoolhouse.

The next came out as if she were talking to herself, “David, just don’t give up.”