

THE *D*EACON'S *F*AMILY

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*T*WO STEPS  
*F*ORWARD

SUZANNE  
WOODS  
FISHER



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To Reagan, Madeline, and Bryce Fisher,  
for all the love and joy you have brought to our family.

I can't imagine life without you!



WE CAN'T FIX THE WHOLE WORLD, BUT WE CAN DO  
WHAT WE CAN. ONE BY ONE.

DEACON LUKE SCHROCK

## Cast of Characters

Sylvie Schrock King—cousin to Luke Schrock, widow of Jake King

Joey Schrock—Sylvie’s four-and-a-half-year-old boy

Jimmy Fisher—second son of Edith Fisher Lapp; recently returned to Stoney Ridge after a four-year absence. Originally introduced in *The Keeper*, book 1 of the Stoney Ridge Seasons series

Luke Schrock—deacon for the church of Stoney Ridge; originally introduced in The Inn at Eagle Hill series, his story continued in The Bishop’s Family series; main character in *Mending Fences*

Isabella “Izzy” Miller Schrock—wife to Luke Schrock; introduced in *Mending Fences*

Fern Lapp—owner of Windmill Farm; surrogate mother and grandmother to all; 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

Grace Mitchell Miller—mother of Izzy and Jenny; a woman with a very messy past; introduced in *The Lesson*, book 3 of the Stoney Ridge Seasons series

Juan Miranda—newly appointed fire chief at the Stoney Ridge Fire Station

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

Teddy Zook—carpenter, jack of all trades, church Vorsinger (music leader), husband to Alice Smucker Zook

Sam Schrock—younger brother to Luke Schrock; trains young horses from the racetrack for buggy

Mollie Graber Schrock—niece to Fern Lapp; married to Sam, Luke's brother; originally introduced in The Inn at Eagle Hill series

# ONE

Growing up is hard on a man. If he'd done well for himself, coming home again should be one of his finest days. The kind of a day that kept him buoyed up with hopeful visions to survive his lowest moments: A mother peering out the kitchen window, eager for the first sign of her returning son. A sweet aromatic cinnamon cake baking in the oven. A loyal dog, muzzle now gray, sitting by the mailbox.

Unfortunately for Jimmy Fisher, he hadn't done terribly well for himself since he'd left Stoney Ridge. Years ago, he'd left home to chase some big dreams, but those had fizzled out like smoke up a chimney. As for a mother waiting anxiously for her son's return—Edith Fisher Lapp wasn't the type to hover or to wait. And she never did let Jimmy have a dog.

Jimmy stopped at the bottom step of the Bent N' Dent store, stalling. He recognized the beat-up buggy and tired old horse in the parking lot as belonging to Hank Lapp. That meant that Hank would be inside and, to be honest, he was not the person Jimmy wanted to see first upon returning to town. Closer to the last. He was still baffled that his mother

had married Hank. Of all the men on earth, she chose wild-haired, wild-eyed Hank Lapp.

Jimmy pivoted on his heels, wondering if he should just turn tail and flee. If he had a dollar to spare in his pocket, he would do just that. Sadly, he didn't. And he was hungry too. He hadn't eaten since yesterday morning, when he came across an orchard filled with withered, wormy apples. He rubbed his stomach, still regretting that indulgence.

A buggy driven by a stunning white horse pulled into the parking lot. Intrigued by the horse's unique facial features, he felt himself drawn to it. Horses had always captivated Jimmy. They were the theme of his life, the very reason he had left Stoney Ridge in the first place. He'd been lured to Colorado to work on a ranch with the promise that he'd receive a few colts or fillies to start his own stable. So sure was he that he had landed on a gold mine that he'd even put a temporary long-term hold on his romance with girlfriend Bethany Schrock.

But Bethany got tired of waiting. She up and married a fellow who she said could actually make up his mind. Jimmy was disappointed but not completely heartbroken. That came later, when the ranch went belly-up, the horses were sold off, and his only option to receive back pay was to sue the rancher, but he couldn't do that. He had plenty of character flaws, more than most men, but he was true to his church's teachings. The rancher knew it too. Alas. So here he was, back and broke.

He ran a hand down the slightly concaved nose of the buggy horse and the horse jerked its head away. Jumpy. This was not a horse typical of the Thoroughbreds or Standard-breds that pulled Amish buggies.



“Prince don’t like you.”

Jimmy looked around the horse’s head to find a solemn boy peering up at him. He was just a small boy, with a mop of curly hair under his black hat, but he stood with spread legs, his fists stuck on his hips and his chin jutting out. You’d have thought he was David the Shepherd Boy facing down Goliath the Giant.

“Joey, honey, it’s all right. He’s just saying hello to our fine horse.”

Jimmy turned. A young woman stood by the buggy door. Under the brim of her black bonnet were violet eyes—not just blue but truly violet. Pansy purple. The woman wasn’t smiling at Jimmy but at the horse, with genuine admiration. For the briefest of seconds, Jimmy felt a spark of interest in a female, something he hadn’t felt for a long time. But then he realized she was the boy’s mother. *Lord-a-mercy!* The spark fizzled like someone had doused him with a bucket of water.

He swallowed down a gulp and lifted his eyebrows in a greeting. “If I’m not mistaken, this horse is Arabian.”

Her face registered surprise. “You’re not mistaken. How’d you know that?”

“I’ve been out in Colorado, working on a ranch. Mustangs, Arabians. Hardworking horses.” He cocked his head. “So you use an Arabian”—he glanced underneath the horse’s girth—“*stallion* as a buggy horse?” This little gal had guts.

Dark brows flared over indignant violet eyes. “Whoever wrote the rule that there’s only one kind of horse to use for buggies?” She ran a hand down the horse’s neck, straightening his mane. Calmer now, she added, “If there’s a job for a horse, there’s a horse for a job. And I happen to think that nearly every job can be done by an Arabian.”

Jimmy was more than a little flabbergasted. It wasn't every day you found someone who understood horses, especially not a female someone. "Interesting notion, to expand what's used for the buggy. The Arabian and the Thoroughbred are both efficient movers. They share that daisy-cutter action, keeping their feet low to the ground." He could keep going on, as he considered himself something of an expert on horses, but he didn't want to show off.

She tipped her head up to study him for a long moment. "Any chance you're looking for work?"

He felt a little dizzy from those twinkling eyes of hers. Positively bedazzled. Or maybe he was just hungry.

*Lord-a-mercy. Jimmy Fisher, what is wrong with you?!* He was getting all jelly-kneed over somebody else's woman, and a stranger to boot. She waited for him to respond, but before he could gather thoughts into words, the door opened to the Bent N' Dent and out walked Hank Lapp.

"SYLVIE SCHROCK KING! THAT BOY IS NOT AVAILABLE!" Hank roared at them from the top of the Bent N' Dent stairs.

Jimmy sighed. "That's Hank Lapp."

"Everybody knows Hank," the little boy said.

The woman, Sylvie, gave the little boy's hand a tug. "Let's get our shopping done." She gave Jimmy a courteous nod and turned to head into the store.

Hank held the door open for her, then came down the steps, arms flung wide to embrace Jimmy in a bear hug. Hank squeezed him so tight that he practically jolted some of Jimmy's molars loose.

"Hank, let me go," Jimmy gasped.

Hank released him but slapped him on the back. "YOUR

MOTHER IS GOING TO BE TICKLED PINK THAT YOU CAME HOME FOR HER BIRTHDAY.”

Oh boy. Jimmy had completely forgotten his mother’s birthday.

“SON, YOU OWE ME A THANK YOU. I JUST SAVED YOU FROM THE CLUTCHES OF A WIDOW LADY. YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT WIDOW LADIES. ALWAYS ON THE HUNT FOR A NEW HUSBAND.” Hank tried to lower his voice to a whisper and it came out at normal volume. “Jake King. Remember him?”

“Jake the Junkman?”

“THAT’S HIM. Always trying to COBBLE things together to make a living.”

“So Jake finally got married.” Jimmy shook his head. He remembered Jake, a neighbor, as a strange guy. He would head off to tag sales or auctions, lugging home odds and ends. And old. Why, Jake must’ve been forty or fifty years old. Or older. Everyone considered him on the shelf and there to stay, a lifelong bachelor. It was hard to see a match with Jake the Junkman and the twinkly violet-eyed beauty.

“She’s the one who got him tangled up in that horse-breeding business. NO ONE WANTS THOSE FUNNY-NOSED HORSES.”

“They’re Arabians, and they’re probably the best horse anyone could ever have.”

“WHAT?” Hank stroked his wiry beard, if you could call it a beard. More like stubby whiskers. “YOU DON’T SAY.”

“Maybe she’s got some good reasons for the decisions she’s making.”

Hank looked all around, before leaning close to Jimmy to shout, “SOME SAY SHE MIGHT BE THE REASON

JAKE DIDN'T LAST LONG." He wagged a bony finger in Jimmy's face and tempered his voice to a low roar. "Some say she brings BAD LUCK wherever she goes."

"You've got to be kidding. Hank, even you don't believe nonsense like that."

"OF COURSE NOT. BUT . . . SHE'S A SCHROCK, YOU KNOW."

"Why would that matter?"

"DON'T YOU KNOW ABOUT THOSE SCHROCKS?" He slapped his knees. "OF COURSE NOT! You've been off playing cowboys and Indians."

Jimmy frowned at him. Ranch work could hardly be described as playing cowboys. It was backbreaking work; long, hard days in the saddle. There were times he thought he'd always walk like he was holding a barrel between his knees.

"I'll fill you in later on the SCHROCK SAGA. Sylvie is a cousin to LUKE SCHROCK. AND YOU KNOW ALL ABOUT LUKE SCHROCK."

"Hank, is it possible for you to stop yelling?"

"I'M NOT YELLING. I'M JUST TALKING." But then he did drop it a tidge. "And then there are some that say Sylvie might be a LITTLE BIT . . ." He whistled a note up and down, while whirling his finger around his ear like a clock. "As for me, I just figure some folks are down on their luck. Permanent-like."

"No such thing as luck, good or bad." To be honest, Jimmy had wondered now and then if he might be prone to bad luck. Things never seemed to end up the way he'd planned. "Besides, that's no way to talk about old Jake. Or his widow."

"I'm only repeating what folks are KNOWN TO WHIS-

PER.” Hank shrugged his thin shoulders. “MOSTLY YOUR MOTHER. She’s had some run-ins with Sylvie.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. His mother was legendary for her disapproval. “How did Jake die?”

“ROPING A DEER.”

“He did *what*?”

“Jake figured it would be easier to just CATCH IT that-aways.”

“So what happened?”

“A sharp HOOF to the head.” Hank thumped his forehead. “Deer reared up and KICKED him. A trapped deer can be a SAVAGE BEAST. Did you know that?”

“The deer attacked him?”

“Yup. A severe blow to the head, Dok said.”

“Huh. That’s sad.”

“MAYBE YOU SHOULD MARRY HER.” He gave Jimmy a sharp jab with his bony elbow. “Nice piece of property she’s got from Jake. You like those funny-nosed horses. And that boy o’ hers needs a daddy.”

No way. No way! *Change the subject, quick.* Jimmy squeezed his eyes shut. Why had it ever seemed like a good idea to return to Stoney Ridge? His stomach rumbled and he remembered why. Hungry and broke, in that order.

The door to the store opened and out came Sylvie Schrock King, now with a bulky package added under an arm. Jimmy walked over to help her, but she shook her head and said crisply, “I can manage just fine, thank you.”

She swept right on past the two men, which only proved to Jimmy that Hank was dead wrong about women—widow or single or anything in between. She wasn’t husband hunting; she paid him no mind.

After getting her boy settled into the buggy, she untied the horse's reins and turned to face Hank. Her voice became sharper. "Neighbors shouldn't go telling tall tales on each other. That's written in the Good Book." She shifted her gaze to Jimmy. "And just so you know, I am not on the hunt for a new husband. Consider the job offer withdrawn." Just before hopping into the buggy, she winked at him, then shut the door.

Jimmy's eyebrows shot up. "Did you see *that*?"

"SEE WHAT?"

"Uh, nothing." He must've imagined it.

"IS it really in the GOOD BOOK for neighbors to not tell tales? I never heard it."

"I don't know. Probably. Sounds like it."

Sylvie's horse stepped backward gingerly, as if on tiptoe, then gracefully shifted forward into a smooth trot. Lord-a-mercy, that stallion was a fine specimen. Jimmy watched the horse, enchanted. "You know, I wouldn't mind being around that."

"Son, if you want to marry her, then go right ahead. BUT DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU."

Jimmy felt a stitch in his stomach—those bad apples were catching up with him. So was Hank's foolish waffling. Warning him about widow ladies in one breath, suggesting he marry her in another. "I was talking about the horse, Hank. I wouldn't mind working with horses like that." He rubbed his sore stomach. "And I sure do need a job. Why'd you have to go and ruin it for me?"

"RUIN IT? Not hardly." He untied his old weary-looking horse's reins. "Hop into my chariot and I'll take you home."

The bad apples poked at Jimmy again, higher up, and he winced.

Hank was already backing up the buggy and waving for Jimmy to jump in. As he climbed in the passenger side of Hank's beat-up buggy, Jimmy thought he might know how that roped deer felt. The noose felt tight around his throat, and he could feel a panic rise up. The closer the buggy got to home, to his mother, the tighter it felt.

Naturally, Hank didn't notice Jimmy's discomfort. All the way home, he nattered nonstop, catching Jimmy up on news and gossip, as if he'd been gone weeks and not years. As they passed the property that belonged to Jake the Junkman, Jimmy spotted Sylvie Schrock King at the mailbox. The buggy rolled past, and Sylvie looked over at the last minute. Her violet eyes caught Jimmy's and she winked at him, as if they shared a private joke. This time, there was no mistaking it. Jimmy knew all about winks and what they meant.

Hank, who generally noticed nothing, noticed *that*. "HA! I TOLD YOU SO! Boy, she's already SET HER SIGHTS on you. She's got the FISH ON THE LINE. Now she just has to REEL HIM IN."

Jimmy's stomach did a slow, sickening turn.



Sylvie Schrock King was a pretty good judge of people. She knew who to offer a job to and who to send packing, and that was why she spent the rest of the afternoon regretting how she'd snapped at that poor pathetic homeless man who was patting her sweet Prince at the Bent N' Dent. It shocked her that he recognized an Arabian horse, shocked and intrigued her. It seemed like he knew a lot about horses. When she pushed a little more, he sounded both supremely confident and totally vague. That she understood as a way to keep

people at arm's length. She wished she hadn't been so quick to withdraw her job offer from the homeless man. She might not see him again and she sure needed help around this place.

It was all because of that loudmouthed Hank Lapp. Whenever Hank or Edith Lapp were involved, mostly Edith, Sylvie's hackles rose, and she felt like she had to ready herself for battle. Sharing a creek as a boundary line with Edith Lapp had created all kinds of headaches, especially after the heavy storms they'd had this last year, and Hank didn't help. He made a mess of everything.

She checked on her napping boy and went outside to fill Prince's water bucket. As she made her way down the grass path to the paddock, that familiar swirl of anxiety began, and she tried to push it down. She thought of all the endless chores that needed to be done around Rising Star Farm, and she still hadn't had any success with Prince as a stud for buggy horses—and then she remembered it was the horse's name that rankled Edith Lapp most of all. She had accused Sylvie of being prideful, despite how many times she explained it was the name the stallion came with, and you just didn't change a horse's name. That was how things were done in the horse world, Sylvie had told Edith.

"This isn't a horse world," Edith had crisply replied in her stone-faced way. "This is an Amish world."

Well, to Sylvie's way of thinking, the two didn't have to cancel each other out. Besides, Bishop David Stoltzfus didn't mind the name of her horse. Sylvie's cousin, Luke, was a deacon. If the bishop and the deacon didn't object, why did Edith Lapp think she was judge and jury of Stoney Ridge? Who wrote that rule for her?

Sylvie had pointed out to Edith some might consider the



name of the property to be a smidgen prideful: Rising Star Farm. She was well acquainted with the history of the farm, and that Edith's grandfather, the original owner, had been the one to name it.

Edith huffed. "That's entirely different."

"How so?"

Edith's sparse brows came together in a V. "It just is." She had pivoted and stormed home.

Up from his nap, Joey called out to her from the porch, and she waved to him, then turned off the water spigot and pushed the bucket under the bottom rail. By the time she finished, Joey had joined her. "Mem, the crabby lady from across the creek is waiting for you on the porch."

Sylvie dried her hands on her apron and went out to greet Edith Lapp, feeling cornered. What now? Edith's visits were never social calls. She had yet to have a conversation with Edith that ended well.

As they walked up the path to the house, Edith looked Joey over from head to toe as if seeing him for the first time. She clicked her tongue in mocking reproof. "He must take after his daddy, because he sure doesn't look like you."

Stung, Sylvie smoothed Joey's flame of hair where it tufted on top. "He takes after himself, that's who." She bent down to talk to him. "Go on down to the barn. Prince told me he's been wanting a carrot for his afternoon snack."

Edith sniffed. "Horses don't talk. You shouldn't fill the boy's mind with silly tales."

"Prince talks," Joey said, his chin jutting out. "But he just talks to Mem."

Sylvie gave Joey a gentle push toward the barn before he could say anything more to annoy Edith.

“I’ve come to make you an offer on Rising Star Farm.”

“It’s my farm now and it’s where we plan to stay. Me and Joey. Jake left it to us.”

“Oh?” Her sparse eyebrows lifted. “Is that in Jake’s last will and testament? I’d like to see it.”

Sylvie hesitated just a moment too long. She had no idea about Jake’s will, if there even was one, and Edith read her thoughts in her hesitation.

“You certainly can’t run this place all by yourself,” Edith continued, sweeping the yard with a disapproving glance. “I’ll pay you this amount for it. Cash.” She handed Sylvie a piece of paper. “It’s more than fair.” She grinned and it was so unnatural-looking on her dour face that it gave Sylvie the shivers.

Sylvie’s eyes flickered to the amount on the paper, then she took a second look. “Fair? Edith, this property must be worth a lot more than that.”

“No, it isn’t. Not in the condition it’s in.” The odd grin slipped off Edith’s face and the frown returned. “Besides, I’ve had to look at this junkyard for years now. Seems like I should be getting a discount. Plus it’s my birthday today. That should count for an extra discount.” She crossed her arms over her ample chest. “This property belonged to my grandfather. Used to be the prettiest farm in Stoney Ridge. Now look at it. Years of neglect have taken a toll. And then in you come with your silly idea of breeding horses.” With a grimace, she added, “You’ll only ruin this land.”

“Ruin it?”

“You heard me. It’s high time that piece of property returns to family instead of going to an outsider.”

“Outsider?!” Sylvie slapped her palm against her chest.

“Outsider? You make me sound . . . like I’m English. Hardly that!”

“That church you came from is just about as far from Old Order Amish as the English.” Edith clapped her palms together. “I’m making you a very fair offer. Very fair.” She wagged a finger at Sylvie. “If you’re smart, you’ll take it. A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.”

Sylvie was so angry her knees shook. She tried to keep her voice as calm as she could. “Edith, thank you for your offer. I’ll give it some serious consideration.” *Just long enough to toss it in the trash.*

Edith didn’t look at all happy to be dismissed, but she did take her leave. Sylvie felt her eye twitch wildly as she watched her make her way home. That woman! She’d been a thorn in Sylvie’s side since the day she married Jake. Sometimes, she could almost feel Edith Lapp’s disapproving eyes on her from wherever she happened to be on the farm. She quickly learned to take care to avoid her, even to the point of standing at the doorway and watching, waiting until she saw Edith’s buggy’s dust trail disappear before she went out to the garden. The fewer interactions with Edith Lapp, the better.

*Calm down, Sylvie*, she told herself. *God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.* She didn’t know exactly where that phrase was in the Bible, but she’d heard it repeated so often that she was sure it was true. It didn’t always feel true, though. She squeezed her eyes closed, to shut out the sight of all the work to be done around the farm—stalls to muck out, horses to exercise, animals to feed—and she felt a weariness clear to her bones. She hated the feeling of helplessness that was always lurking nearby, a feeling that had been with her long, long before Jake died. Overwhelmed by all that needed

to be done, she opened her eyes, blew out a puff of air, and rubbed her forehead.

Just thinking about Edith's request to take a look at Jake's last will and testament made her chew on her fingernails, already bitten down to the quick. His last will and testament? Where in the world would Jake have kept something like that? She had no idea. He was the most disorganized man in the world.

She saw Joey wander from the barn, up the path, and over to the creek to pick up sticks and throw them in. She sat on the porch steps, watching him. The sticks landed in the water with a satisfying *plunk*, only to have the rushing current bring the sticks back. He couldn't understand why the same stick kept returning to him.

That was exactly how Sylvie felt. As hard as she tried for a fresh start, the same thing kept coming back to her.

Must everyone think the worst of her, of Joey?