

— THE INN at EAGLE HILL • 1 —

The
Letters



A Novel

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WOODS
FISHER



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Dedicated to my dear dad,
as well as his brothers and sister,
who were raised on the real Inn at Eagle Hill
in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts

1



The air had the sweet burn of frost. Long out of habit, even in the winter months, Rose Schrock woke before dawn to carve out a little time for herself before the day began. She liked the bitter cold, a cold that seemed to sharpen the stars in the wide Pennsylvania sky. Dawn was her favorite hour, a time when she felt most keenly aware of how fragile life truly was. Between one breath and the next, your whole world could change. Hers had.

On this morning, wrapped in her husband's huge coat, she walked along the creek bordering the farm and climbed the hill. The thin February moon, low in the horizon, lit the sky but not the ground. Her golden retriever, Chase, trotted behind her, saluting trees along the path, baptizing each one as he went. When Rose reached the top of the hill, she sat with her back against a tree. In its awakening hour, the farm below seemed peaceful, lovely, calm. The birdsong symphony had just begun—something that always seemed like a miracle to Rose. How did that saying go? “Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.” And wasn't that the truth?

Rose Schrock had been raised not to complain, so she didn't, but the truth of the matter was, the last seven months had been the hardest stretch of her life: so many things had gone wrong that it was hard to know which trouble to pay attention to at any given time.

Her mother-in-law, Vera, assured her cheerfully that increase in trouble was something she had better get used to. "You can't expect mercy."

"I don't expect it," Rose had told Vera. "I just wish things would go wrong one at a time. That way I could handle them."

Soon, she would need to head back down the hill and wake her boys. Her girls would already be stirring. They were unusually helpful and did whatever chores there were to do without being asked, whereas her two young sons were so sluggish in the morning that it took them half an hour just to get themselves dressed and downstairs. Before Rose left this quiet spot, she had something to do. To say. No, no. She had something to pray.

Lord, I beg your pardon, but I am in a fix. I'm about wrung out from all this, and it's getting so I can barely tell which way is up. I've got four fatherless children—five, if I knew where that oldest boy had run off to—an addle-minded mother-in-law, and barely thirty-six dollars left in my pocket. I'm fresh out of backbone, Lord. And near out of fight. Near out. Lord, if you'd be so kind, look down here and let me know what to do. I need a Plan B.

Rose waited quietly, hoping for a word from above, or maybe just an inkling. Reflecting, she decided it was funny how life could change so fast. She used to have so many plans. Now, her plans for the future were foggy at best. Years ago, money had been the last thing on her mind. Now it was all

she thought about. Scarcely seven months ago, she had a husband. Now Dean was gone. A few years earlier, she hadn't minded so much being with her mother-in-law. Not so much. Now she couldn't think of anything worse.

Anything you want to say, Lord? Any advice? A word of wisdom? Rose heard the gentle hoot of a screech owl, once, then twice. A rooster began to crow. That would be Harold, the loudest rooster in the county. The day would soon begin.

A moving bright light in the sky caught her eye. She watched for a moment, intrigued. Then, fascinated. It was a shooting star, darting over little Stoney Ridge in all its glory and majesty. Her jumbled thoughts gave way to a feeling of peace.

What a thing to see at a time when she needed it so badly!



Whenever Miriam had visited her grandmother's farm, it had seemed like an adventure to adapt to the lifestyle of the Old Order Amish. But living someplace was different than visiting and Mim felt she came from a different world. She was raised in a Mennonite church in a large town in Pennsylvania—where her family had used electricity and drove a car. Here, it was quiet. No electricity, no car, not even normal lights. In the kitchen there was the kerosene lantern hanging from the ceiling, which hissed and gave off a flat white light.

It was all different, all new to her. For a girl who didn't like change, it was too much change, all at once. She wished life could just go back to the way it was. She felt sad at all she'd had and what was no longer.

Her eyes blew open. *Just like my grandmother*, she thought, shocked. *I am sounding just like my grandmother*. Whatever Mammi Vera had, it was catching!

Right then, she decided to start a list of things she liked about moving to Stoney Ridge. She scrambled off her bed and took out a clean sheet of paper from her desk drawer.

Number One: Danny Riehl, the boy who sat next to her at school and wore glasses that were hinged together with a paper clip.

Number Two: School.

Mim had mistakenly assumed it would be as easy here as it was back in their old town. After all, here it was a one-room schoolhouse. But this teacher believed in pushing students. It wasn't all bad to be challenged, she had discovered. She loved math. She loved language. The teacher, Mary Kate Lapp, called Teacher M.K., had noticed Mim. She gave her extra math problems. She loaned her a used Latin textbook and told her to study root words. Each week, she assigned Mim new vocabulary words. Words like *modicum*, *interim*, *aplomb*, *insipid*, *pseudo*. She was told to use the words in one sentence. She spent hours constructing descriptive sentences.

Mim looked out her bedroom window and thought about how someone might describe her in one sentence. Where to begin? She was thirteen years old, with dark hair like her father and gray eyes like her mother. She was average height, average weight. Entirely average. Entirely unremarkable. In her mind, she erased those boring descriptions and started all over again.

What else? Mim liked her brothers and her sister and her mother and, some of the time, her grandmother. Mostly, she liked school and loved book learning and was fond of the month of March because no one much liked March. Her favorite color was bright red for the same reason: her new church frowned upon the color red. She didn't understand

what made red so offensive, but that was an Amish tradition and so that was that.

But what Mim loved more than anything else was to collect facts. She was excellent at collecting facts. Excellent. She liked to find facts in ordinary things. Her grandmother was always spouting proverbs and Mim would find the fact in them. She shortened her name to Mim from Miriam because she had read that one-syllable names were easier to remember. That was a fact.

Still, so far she hadn't come up with a very scintillating way to describe herself. Scratch all that. So far, her sentence was entirely unremarkable. She wiped down the chalkboard that she had imagined in her mind and started again: "Say what you will about thirteen-year-old Mim Schrock, but don't leave out that she was organized. Very organized. Exceedingly organized." She smiled. Everyone knew that fact about her.

"And she is a champion problem solver," she added to her imaginary description.

That was the main reason she loved to read so much. In books, she learned to find answers to questions. Clean and simple. It was a pity that her grandmother was so against book learning. She only allowed a handful of books in the house. Too much book learning, her grandmother insisted, would make your brain go soft. Mim pointed out that there was no research to support that thinking, and her grandmother shut that conversation down with a Penn Dutch proverb: "De meh gelehrt, de meh verkehrt." *The more learning, the less wisdom.*

Happily, Mim's mother disagreed. With a quiet blessing from her mother, Mim kept her library books hidden in the barn. Most of the barn was crammed with useless junk,

especially in the hayloft, but she had found a little corner by a dusty window to claim as her own. Ideal for quiet moments to read, hidden from overly nosy brothers, like the one who was peering in around the doorjamb at her right this very moment.

Eight-year-old Sammy came in and sat on her bed, humming, tossing a softball up a foot or two in the air, then catching it in his mitt. Mostly missing it. She looked over at him and smiled as he scrambled to find the ball under the bed. Sammy was small and stocky and compact like a suitcase. He always told the truth, even when he shouldn't. She would never admit it to anyone, but Sammy was her favorite brother. He was a kind person and enjoyed discussing unusual facts with Mim. And he lent her money from the coffee can he kept beneath his mattress. Her ten-year-old brother Luke had his good points: he was funny and smart and was a bottomless pit of good ideas to do on a Sunday afternoon, but he had a sneaky side to him, like Tobe, the oldest in the family. A person needed to be careful about business transactions with Luke.

Sammy took a very black banana out of his pocket and peeled it.

“That is disgusting,” Mim said.

Sammy didn't seem to mind. He finished off that bruised banana in just a few bites. “Did you know that the Great Wall of China can be seen from the moon?”

Now that was a fine fact. Mim scribbled it down in her school notebook, color coded under “Yellow” for Fine Facts. Teacher M.K. would like it. The class would like it. Danny Riehl, he would like it.



Delia Stoltz was running late to her doctor's appointment. Her day had been so busy that she hadn't even stopped for lunch. A boring meeting for the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Society, followed by another tedious fundraising meeting for the Children's Hospital, a mind-numbing Daughters of the American Republic tea, and then a complete waste-of-time board meeting for the local bank, where she listened to a heated debate about whether to provide free coffee for their customers. Delia wasn't sure anyone really wanted her opinion about how to run businesses or charities, but she was in great demand as a benefactress. It was one of the responsibilities of being married to Dr. Charles Stoltz.

Charles Stoltz was the most prominent neurosurgeon on the eastern seaboard. Quite possibly, in the entire country. Delia and Will, their only child—who was now in his last year of vet school at Cornell—wanted for nothing. Charles kept track of all of their investments and financial dealings. She wasn't interested in the actual figures or details of her portfolio, but Charles said she had plenty of money to live well and be a generous benefactor to the community, so she did and she was.

Delia glanced at her watch. She thought about skipping the doctor's appointment altogether, but she was driving right by the office to get home. She would allow fifteen minutes, but if the doctor kept her waiting, she would leave.

She took her Lancome Mulled Wine lipstick from her purse and pulled out a compact mirror. She would be sixty years old next summer. Just this morning, someone had asked her a blunt question: "Delia, have you had a little touch-up surgery? You look *so* good for a woman your age!"

Delia withered that someone with a glance.

She supposed asking such a personal question about whether she ever had cosmetic surgery might seem perfectly normal, but as far as she was concerned, it was perfectly rude.

If that person had a clue about what made Delia Stoltz tick, she would have known that Delia would scoff at the thought of cosmetic surgery. Everyone aged. She never understood why people spent so much time and money trying to avoid it or pretend it wasn't happening. She worked hard at keeping herself up—she had a personal trainer at the gym and swam laps twice a week. When it came to makeup and fashion, she felt simplicity was best. A little mascara, a little blush, a good lipstick. Her closet was filled with classic clothing of excellent quality—well-cut lined wool slacks, silk blouses, an array of cashmere sweaters, and for more formal occasions, an assortment of black cocktail dresses. A good purse was a must. Her preference was Prada. In the purse was a creamy pashmina scarf, at the ready. Add a nice pair of shoes and a few pieces of well-chosen jewelry: pearls, matching earrings, and perhaps, one simply spectacular ring, like the enormous diamond her husband had given to her on their twentieth wedding anniversary.

Now, a woman's hair was a different story. Delia had a standing monthly appointment with Alessandro at the salon for a root touch-up. She accepted most of the signs of aging, but not when it came to hair. Going gray was simply unacceptable.

If that rude someone truly knew Delia, she would know all of that. But while everyone in Philadelphia knew who Delia Stoltz was or knew of her, no one really knew her. She preferred it that way. Utterly private.

When she stepped through the door from the waiting room,

Dr. Zimmerman was there to greet her. “Hello, Delia, how are you today?” he said.

“I’m fine. Shouldn’t I be?” she said offhandedly, smiling, but she felt the tiniest little pinch in her stomach. A few days ago, she’d had a needle biopsy of a cyst in her left breast. No big deal, even Dr. Zimmerman had said so. It was so routine that she hadn’t even bothered to mention it to Charles. He would have gotten overinvolved, would want to speak to Dr. Zimmerman himself, would order extra tests. Not necessary. She had harmless fibroids in her breasts—lumpy breasts, the doctor had told her—and she was vigilant about yearly mammograms. To the day. Delia was precise about everything.

Every few years, she faced some annoying round of post-mammogram testing. After ultrasounds and biopsies, it never amounted to anything more than a nuisance. This year, Dr. Zimmerman called and said he wanted a tissue biopsy, but because her test results had always come back negative before, she was sure it would be the same this time. Busy as she was, as she always was, it hadn’t crossed her mind to be worried. Until now.

Something in Dr. Zimmerman’s avuncular tone as he asked about her day, something about the weight of his arm across her shoulders as he escorted her into his private office, made a shiver travel up her spine. But it wasn’t until she was sitting in his office and Dr. Zimmerman steepled his fingers together on his desk and said, “I’m so sorry, Delia. The biopsy was positive. You have cancer,” that she understood what was happening.

Three little words. *You have cancer.* And for a moment, everything stopped. Her heart. Her mind. Her breath. Everything.

Delia couldn't remember how she got home. She must have been driving on autopilot. She pulled into the garage and noticed the trunk was lifted on Charles's BMW. His suitcases were in the back. She hadn't realized he had business travel planned, but he was often called away for consultations on difficult cases. She hoped he could change his plans after she told him her news. She walked into the kitchen and put her purse on the countertop. Charles was waiting for her at the kitchen table. Strange. Charles never waited for her. She was always waiting for him. She looked at him and knew something terrible was about to happen, like the quiet right before a storm was due to hit. But a storm had already hit at the doctor's office. Surely, there couldn't be two storms in one day. In a moment of clarity, she realized she was in the eye of the hurricane, about to face the dirty side of the storm. The worst part.

Her son.

Her heart missed a beat. "Did something happen to Will?"

"Will is fine. Studying, I hope, with midterms coming up."

Charles licked his lips. It was a habit when he was nervous. Why was he nervous? Had Dr. Zimmerman called him? Did he already know? His face was so pale. Charles was never pale, always tan. He was in his early sixties, close to six feet tall; his looks reminded Delia of Gregory Peck playing Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She had a tendency to do that—liken people to movie stars. It was something her son Will forever teased her about.

Dee saw a trickle of sweat on Charles's forehead. "Delia, there's something I need to tell you." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "I've fallen in love with someone else. I'm sorry, honey. I'm moving out."

She saw his lips move, but she couldn't understand what he was saying. She just stared at him.

He tried to get her to talk, but she felt nothing, said nothing.

Finally, Charles rose to his feet and said that his attorney's office would be contacting her, and not to worry, he would take care of everything. She would never have to worry about money. And one more thing—he would like to wait to tell Will since he would be going through midterm exams soon.

Then he left.

When Delia heard the garage door close, she took the first breath she had taken in what felt like an hour, since she had left the doctor's office. One deep breath and everything had changed. She had reached her breaking point. It was an indescribable feeling of pain, sheer pain.

How was it possible for a few words to have such power? "I'm in love with someone else." "You have cancer."

Delia felt all the strength leave her body. The body she cared for so thoroughly had betrayed her. There was an enemy within her that, left unchecked, would end her life.

The husband whom she adored and who loved her had failed her. Life as she knew it was over.

Alone and lonely, she covered her face with her hands and gave herself up to despair, weeping until she was dry.



Rose Schrock turned the horse and buggy into the Bent N' Dent's parking lot and tied the reins to the hitching post. The late February sky was filling with lead-colored clouds, threatening to snow. Grabbing a basket by the door, she hurried down the aisle with her list in hand. She had run out of ground cinnamon and needed it for a cake for Sunday church,

so she stopped by the spices. She felt distracted, preoccupied with the ongoing worry of trying to find a way to support her family. She'd been on the lookout for Plan B for days now, but nothing had happened; not even the tiniest glimmer of an idea or opportunity had appeared on the horizon.

An English lady with Sharpie pen eyebrows, a tuft of woodpecker red hair, and frosty orange lipstick ringing her big white teeth stood planted in front of the spices, oohing and aahing over the low prices. "Look at this, Tony," the lady called out. "Only fifty cents for a half pint of freshly ground pepper."

Rose watched the lady load up her cart with spices and felt a spike of panic. *Please don't take all the cinnamon. Please, please, please . . .*

An English man came down the aisle to join the lady. "I asked the clerk at the counter about places to stay in Stoney Ridge," he told her. "She said there was nothing around here. No inn. No bed-and-breakfast. Said we'd need to head closer to Lancaster." He was every bit as flamboyant looking as his wife, with a white walrus mustache under his substantial nose and pointed cowboy boots on his feet.

"That's a shame," the lady said, standing on her tiptoes to reach the top shelf of spices. "I wouldn't mind spending more time in this town and mosey through the shops. It doesn't feel as tourist-y as the other towns."

Something started ticking in Rose's head, a sound as real as a clock.

The man watched his wife fill up the cart with spices. "Do we really need all those spices? You don't bake."

"I can give them as gifts," the lady answered. She pushed the cart up the aisle and the husband trotted behind.

Rose looked through what spices remained on the shelves:

cardamom, cloves, curry. No cinnamon. Cleaned out. She sighed.

The man and the lady stood in line to pay for their groceries. Rose wheeled her cart behind them, debating if she should ask the lady if she would mind giving up one of the containers of cinnamon. Just one. “The weather’s turning real sour, Lois,” the man said, peering out the storefront window. “We should get on the road. Might take us awhile to find a place to stay and it’s getting late.”

Tick, tick, tick. The sound in Rose’s head got louder.

“What are we going to do, Tony?” The lady’s voice took an anxious tone. “You know you can’t drive at night. And I’ve got a dreadful headache.”

Rose’s head jerked up. The ticking sound stopped in her head and a bell went off.

There *was* no place for visitors to stay in Stoney Ridge. Her mind started to spin. What if she started an inn at the farm? The basement of the farmhouse was finished off with drywall and had an exterior entrance. It was filled with her mother-in-law’s junk-that-Vera-called-heirlooms but it could be emptied out. And she could cook breakfast for the guests. Rose was a good cook. Even Vera had said so, and she wasn’t a woman given to handing out compliments.

But would the bishop let tourists stay at the farm? Maybe there was a rule about this kind of thing. Maybe that’s why there weren’t any bed-and-breakfasts in Stoney Ridge. But then, she thought, maybe it’s better not to ask. It was always easier to apologize later. Besides, Bishop Elmo seemed like a kind man. Surely, he would understand a mother’s plight. The church had been good to them, generous and gracious, but she needed to find a way to take care of her family.

Would an inn bring in enough cash to solve her ongoing cash shortfall? She doubted it. But it would certainly help.

She paid for the groceries with the wad of bills wrapped in a rubber band that she kept in her dress pocket. As she picked up the bags, her heart felt lighter than it had in months. The best cure for sadness was doing something. Her eyes searched the skies, finding a small opening where the clouds parted and blue sky showed through. “Thank you,” she said, grinning ear to ear. “Thank you for Plan B.”

She ran over to the car where the man and the lady were loading groceries and invited them to stay at the farm.