

# A HEART SET FREE



AMY CLIPSTON

# Chapter One



*Holmes County, Ohio*  
*Saturday, April 5*

A knock sounded on the front door. “I’ll get it!” Renee Mast called to her mother as she dashed down the steps from the upstairs to where the postal carrier, a middle-aged man with brushy gray eyebrows, peered in the screen door. She pushed the door open. “Hi.”

“Good afternoon. Are you Renee Mast?”

“Ya.”

The man held out an envelope. “I need you to sign for this letter.”

Renee signed a clipboard and then took the letter, along with the rest of the mail. “Thank you.”

The man nodded before heading down their long, dirt lane toward the road.

Renee opened the mysterious envelope, which was addressed to her and listed a return address of Becker & Associates in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She unfolded the letter and read.

*Dear Ms. Mast,*

*I am writing to inform you that your paternal grandmother, Martha Mast, has named you in her last will and testament. As per her will, you will inherit her personal possessions, including her farm.*

*Please call my office to schedule a time to visit Pennsylvania to file the proper paperwork.*

*Yours truly,*

*Robert M. Becker, Esquire*

Renee examined the letter, reading it over and over again and trying to make heads or tails of it. Her grandmother in Pennsylvania, whom she hadn't seen in twenty years, had passed away and left her...*everything*?

How could this be?

Renee's head started to spin.

"Who was that?" Mamm's question broke through her confusion.

Turning, Renee found her mother standing in the doorway leading to the kitchen. "I had to sign for this letter." She held it up. "It's from a lawyer, and it says *mei mammi* died and left me her farm in Pennsylvania."

"Martha passed away?" Mamm's words were barely audible as her dark brows drew together. She took the letter, and after skimming it, her brown eyes met Renee's. Then she frowned. "You need to give the land up." She pointed toward the door. "Take the horse and buggy to town and call the lawyer's office now to tell them that you don't want it. They can send you paperwork so that you can surrender. Maybe donate it to the nearest Amish community."

Renee's mouth worked, but no words came out for a moment. "Why?"

"Because we need to leave the past in the past." Mamm set the letter on the table next to the front door and traipsed toward the kitchen.

Renee trailed her. "Wait. I never understood why we don't talk about Mammi." She entered the kitchen, where Mamm stood at the counter beside their wood-burning stove.

"Let it go, Renee." Mamm's dark eyes focused on a cookbook, but her hand quivered while she turned the page.

"Mamm, please look at me." Renee paused to gather her words. She was never disrespectful to her parents, and she didn't plan to start behaving badly today. Still, she had questions about her grandmother that gnawed at her heart. When Mamm finally turned toward her, Renee moved her fingers along the hem of her apron. "Why did *Dat* leave Pennsylvania and turn his back on his parents?"

Mamm shook her head. "Your *daed* didn't want you to go into the past." She hesitated and took a deep breath. "I made a promise to your daed that I would keep what happened a secret. I can't break that promise. I need you to tell the lawyer that you don't want the land."

"But Mamm—"

"The discussion is over," Mamm said, interrupting her. "Ike will be in from the barn soon. I have to start supper, and you need to finish cleaning upstairs."

Renee's spirits sank. "*Ya*, Mamm." She would do what she was told, like she always did. It was their custom.

She scooted up the stairs, where she continued sweeping and dusting the bedrooms. While she worked, her mind twirled with questions about her father and his past, which had always been a mystery to her. No one would discuss why he had whisked Renee and her mother away from Pennsylvania twenty years ago when Renee was five. When they settled in Ohio, they built a new life in a new and more conservative community and never looked back. Her father had taken the secret of why they'd left Pennsylvania to his grave when he passed away eight years ago, and her mother never discussed it.

But the curiosity had always haunted Renee, and receiving the news that her grandmother, whom she barely remembered, had passed away tugged at her heart and also brought those questions back to the surface.

She stopped dusting and bowed her head in prayer. "Help me be a dutiful and respectful *dochter, Gott*, but also lead me to the truth about my family's past," she whispered while she worked.

Later, Renee sat in her usual spot at the table between her mother and stepfather. After a silent prayer, they began eating the stew and bread that she had helped Mamm prepare.

Renee lost herself in more curiosity about her late grandmother while she ate the filling meal. When she heard someone say her name, she peeked up from her supper and found her stepfather watching her.

"I'm sorry." Renee sat up straight. "Did you say something?"

Ike's kind hazel eyes showed loving concern. Renee had been so thankful that God had brought Ike into her and Mamm's life soon after Dat passed away. At sixty-four, Ike had salt-and-pepper hair

and a matching beard. He was eleven years older than Mamm, and his six children were grown and had families of their own. He and Mamm were kindred spirits since both lost their spouses to cancer. He was a patient and loving man who rarely raised his voice and was always ready to listen, and he and Mamm had been married for seven years now.

“You look like something’s troubling you,” Ike said. “*Was iss letz?*”

Renee forced her lips to curl up in a smile. “Nothing’s wrong.” She moved her spoon around on her plate. “I received an unexpected letter today.” She glanced over at her mother, who gave her a hesitant expression and then nodded as if giving Renee permission to share the news. “It was from a lawyer in Pennsylvania.”

“What did it say?” Ike wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Mei mammi passed away, and she left me her farm in Bird-in-Hand.”

Ike turned to Mamm. “Your parents are gone, Lovina, so it was Emmanuel’s mammi who died?”

“Ya. Martha would’ve been close to eighty now, I suppose.” Mamm pinned Renee with a look. “And it’s best that Renee does not go to Pennsylvania and dredge up the past. I told her that she should call the lawyer, tell him that she surrenders the land, and donate it to the Amish community.” She hesitated. “Or she can sell the farm and use the money for her future.”

Renee let that thought roll around in her head. If she sold the farm, she could help her parents. They depended on the baskets she and her mother made, along with her stepfather’s small farm, to provide a living for them. Selling the farm would relieve some of their worries. Depending upon how much money the sale would

bring, she might be able to help other families in her community as well.

She turned toward Ike. She wanted her stepfather to weigh in on the decision to give up her inheritance, but she couldn't bring herself to speak against her mother. Instead, she gripped the table and waited for Ike to speak his mind.

Ike took a bite of bread, and his eyes focused on his stew, looking as if he were deep in thought.

While her mother peppered Ike with questions about his day, Renee ate her supper and tried to dismiss her questions about her grandmother from her mind.

Later that night, Renee removed her prayer covering and changed into her nightgown. She sat on the edge of her bed and brushed her waist-length, dark brown hair while she studied the candle flickering on her nightstand.

As she moved the brush through her hair, she considered her life on the small farm with her mother and her stepfather. She had always imagined that she'd be married and starting a family of her own by the age of twenty-five, but although she'd been out on a few dates with young men in her community, none of them had seemed to warm her heart the way she'd hoped her future husband would. She supposed that Gott hadn't sent her the husband He'd chosen for her yet, and she hadn't given up hope that she'd meet that man someday soon.

Once again she contemplated her grandmother, and suddenly memories unlocked from the deep recesses of her mind. She stopped brushing her hair as the vision came into clear focus. She was around five years old, and she stood on a porch, holding her mother's hand as

an elderly man and woman swiped away tears while her father spoke to them. She couldn't remember what her father said, but he was angry. His voice was so loud that she'd hid behind her mother's gray skirt.

Renee gasped. Had that been the day that she and her parents left Bird-in-Hand?

Then another memory overtook her mind's eye. She played on a swing set with a boy and girl. They were laughing.

"Jeannie and Jerome Graber," she whispered, and then she grinned. How had she remembered their names after all this time?

They were twins and her frequent playmates since Mamm was good friends with their mother. Her heart warmed as more memories of time spent with them passed through her mind—going to the park, eating grilled cheese sandwiches in a bright kitchen, digging in a sandbox.

Renee set her brush on her dresser and picked up the letter from the lawyer. She studied it as she felt a mixture of sadness and confusion. She wouldn't dream of disobeying her mother or Ike, who was a good and kind stepfather to her. Her parents loved her, and she loved them as well, but she still wondered what life would've been like if she'd grown up in Pennsylvania.

Would she have been close to her grandmother—spending time cooking and baking with her, sharing secrets, and getting to know her? And after all this time, why had her grandmother left everything to the granddaughter she'd never had a chance to know? And what had caused her father to turn his back on his parents and his community?

Aside from that, what had become of Jeannie and Jerome?

Renee padded over to her hope chest, where she stowed the letter. She would have to somehow put her curiosity about Pennsylvania behind her.

But as she climbed into bed, she wondered if she could convince her mother and Ike to allow her to go to Pennsylvania to see the farm before she signed it over to the lawyer.

Closing her eyes, she sent another prayer up to God.

*Lord, if it's Your will, then please help me find a way to visit Pennsylvania and find out the truth about my family.*

Then she rolled over onto her side and tried to silence her racing thoughts.



*Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania*

*Sunday, April 6*

Jerome Graber awoke with a gasp, and a cold sweat clung to his clammy skin.

Rubbing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, he tried to shake off the frequent nightmares that had plagued him for the past two years. They haunted him at least three nights every week.

A banging sounded from somewhere beyond his bedroom. He turned toward the battery-operated clock on his nightstand and read the time. It was after eight.

He'd overslept! Had he forgotten to set his alarm last night? Today was a Sunday morning without a church service, but he still had to take care of the animals.

Banging echoed through his small house again.

“Just a minute!” he growled as he pushed himself out of bed and pulled on a pair of trousers, gray shirt, socks, and shoes. Then he tunneled his hand through his hair before limping toward the front door.

The limp and the nightmares were God’s constant reminder of his mistakes, and he deserved them both.

Jerome pushed the front door open and found his twin, Jeannie, grinning at him while holding a casserole dish. Their parents stood behind Jeannie, and the delectable scents of bacon, eggs, and cheese whipped over him, causing his empty stomach to growl.

“*Gude mariye!*” Jeannie beamed. “It’s a *schee* day that the Lord has made! We’re bringing you your favorite breakfast.” She indicated the casserole dish in her hands.

His twin always reminded him of sunshine, and it wasn’t only due to her blond hair and bright blue eyes. It was her constant positive outlook, which had become the opposite of his after the accident.

Jerome grunted and opened the door wide.

She set the casserole dish on the table. “Let’s enjoy this beautiful day together, Jerome.”

He remained silent while Mamm and Dat filed into the house. Jeannie flipped on the propane oven, and Mamm began setting the table for breakfast.

Dat came to stand beside Jerome.

“I told Jeannie it was too early, but she insisted you’d be up tending to the animals,” Dat said.

Jerome scratched the stubble on his neck. He wasn’t going to share that he’d tossed and turned most of the night due to those recurring nightmares, or that he’d overslept. No one knew about the

nightmares, and he planned to keep it that way. But he was certain his family could tell by his disheveled appearance that he hadn't been up before they arrived. "I was going to get up...soon."

Jeannie laughed while Mamm shook her head, causing the ties on her prayer covering to swish over her slight shoulders.

"We need to warm the casserole up a bit, so why don't you take care of the animals now?" Mamm suggested.

Dat patted Jerome's shoulder. "Ya. Let's go. We can feed them now. We can't linger too long over breakfast, but the cows will be okay waiting an extra hour to be milked."

Jerome grabbed his straw hat before he and his father trudged out into the bright, early April morning. A cool breeze moved over Jerome on his way to the barn. He scanned the farm—the home where Martha Mast had lived until she'd passed away a couple of weeks ago, along with the large barn, pasture, garden in desperate need of attention, and the small house where Jerome had come to live when he'd accepted the job as Martha's farmhand.

They entered the barn, and the smell of animals mixed with wet hay greeted Jerome. While Dat fed the horses, Jerome took care of the cows.

After they were finished, they returned to the house, where the small table was set and the casserole sat at its center. The delicious scent of the casserole and hot coffee filled the kitchen. Jerome and Dat washed their hands at the sink before sitting at the table and bowing their heads in silent prayer.

Jerome took a long drink of coffee before forking up some of his sister's hearty breakfast.

“It’s difficult to believe Martha’s been gone almost two weeks now,” Mamm said.

“Ya,” Jeannie chimed in. “What’s going to happen to the farm now that she’s gone?”

Jerome swallowed another bite of casserole. “I’m not sure. From what Martha told me, her granddaughter Renee is her only living relative. Her *sohn* died several years ago.”

“Renee.” Jeannie’s already bright face somehow became more radiant with a big smile. “We used to play with her when we were *kinner*. Do you remember her, Jerome?”

Fuzzy memories flashed through his mind—giggling in a sand-box with a small brunette and his sister and then chasing them around the yard while playing tag. He shrugged. “Vaguely.”

Jeannie turned her attention back to Mamm. “You were friends with her mamm, right?”

Mamm nodded. “Ya, Lovina and I grew up together and went to school together.” She shook her head. “I was devastated when Emmanuel insisted that they move to Ohio.”

“It was sudden, wasn’t it, Delilah?” Dat asked.

Mamm’s expression became grave. “Ya, it was, Harvey. Lovina was upset, but she insisted that she had to do what Emmanuel said. She told me that it broke her heart to leave her *schweschder* here in Pennsylvania, who was her only family left. Lovina’s parents had passed away years earlier.”

“That’s sad,” Jeannie said before turning her attention to Jerome. “Since Martha’s gone, will you have to leave the farm and find another job?”

Jerome's stomach clenched. He'd become comfortable here on Martha's farm, and he was thankful God gave him the opportunity after the accident had destroyed his plans for the future. He'd once hoped to become an apprentice in his uncle's plumbing business, but working as Martha's farmhand made sense after all he'd been through. He was grateful that Martha had been looking for a new farmhand since her previous helper at the time was moving to Indiana with his new wife. Jerome appreciated working alone, along with Martha's easy friendship. They had eaten meals together and talked about their days, but Martha never pressured him to share about the accident or everything that Jerome had lost that night. Here on Martha's farm he had the ability to simply go through the motions of life, working, attending church, and living on his own in the *daadihaus* on Martha's farm. If he lost this job, he had no idea what he'd do.

"Martha left me a few months' pay, and the lawyer said I can stay here until Martha's survivors make a decision about the farm. As far as I know, the lawyer was trying to track down Renee."

"Well, that's *gut*," Jeannie said. "So, Mamm, I've been working on a new quilt for the mud sale. I'll need to get more fabric from the store."

Jerome lost himself in thoughts of his uncertain future and focused his eyes on his meal while Jeannie droned on about the quilts she was creating for an upcoming mud sale, and Dat talked about the fabric store they owned.

Soon their plates were empty, and the women were cleaning up the table.

"*Danki* for breakfast." Jerome started for the door. "I need to get to milking."

Jeannie spun from the sink to face him. “Wait,” she said. “Are you coming out to youth group?” His twin’s face glowed with hope.

“*Nee*,” he said, repeating the same answer he gave when she asked him every single week since the day that changed everything nearly two years ago. He had to give it to his twin—she was relentless and never gave up hope in him, even when he didn’t deserve it.

When his twin’s smile wobbled, guilt tangled up his insides. Although he hated disappointing his sister, dating was the furthest thing from his mind. What Amish woman in her right mind would want a damaged man like him?

“You should come, Jerome,” Jeannie insisted.

Mamm’s expression nearly mirrored his twin’s. “Your *schweschder* is right, Jerome. You have to start living again. Gott wants that for you.”

Jerome swallowed his sigh. He knew his mother and sister meant well, but he was tired of their repetitive lectures. He nodded and headed for the door.

“Oh, Jerome,” Jeannie said. “I meant to tell you that there’s a new driver in the community. She just started offering rides.” She pulled a piece of paper from her apron and set it on the table. “When you need a ride, you can give her a call.”

“I will.” He continued toward the door.

Dat was close behind him. “Let’s go do the milking,” he said before they headed out the door to the barn.