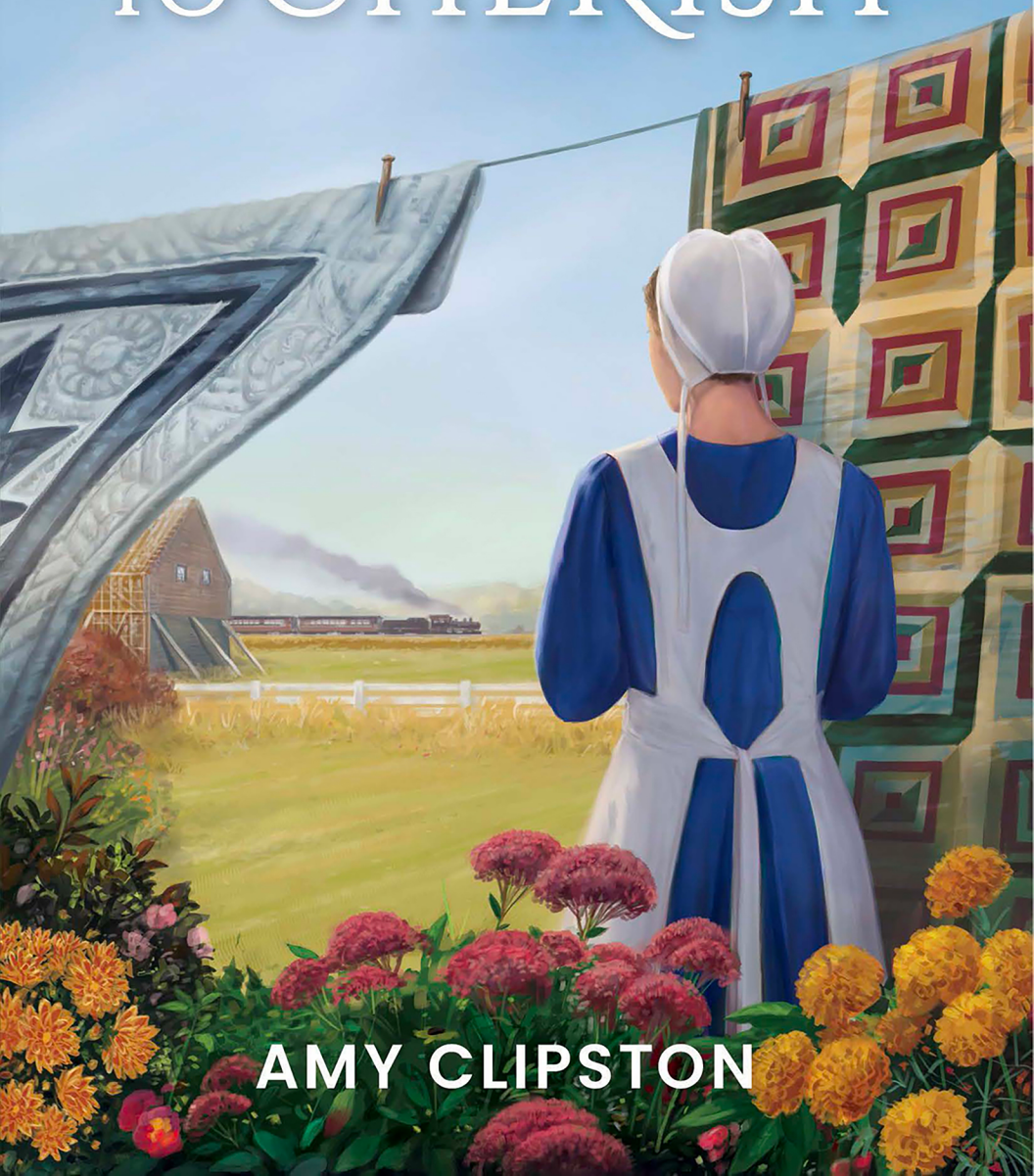


A HEART TO CHERISH



AMY CLIPSTON

Chapter One



Welcome to Graber Fabrics,” Jeannie Graber called as the bell above the door jingled and two middle-aged *Englisher* women entered the store. The fall air swept over her, bringing with it the scent of cut grass, leaves, and cinnamon spice from a bowl of potpourri displayed near the front door.

The women nodded in her direction before making their way down one of the aisles.

“Let me know if you need help finding anything,” she called after them. After grabbing a feather duster, she slipped around the counter and began dusting the displays of patterns while humming to herself.

She gazed out of the large storefront windows across a few parking spaces occupied with cars, and past the hitching post. Beyond was the two-story, white farmhouse where she had been born and raised. The barn where they kept their animals stood beside the store.

Her parents had built and opened their fabric store soon after they were married, nearly thirty years ago, and Jeannie not only enjoyed working there but she also loved sewing and quilting. Her twin brother, Jerome, had never been interested in the family business. Instead, a few years ago, he’d taken a job at a dairy farm a few miles away, which had also become his home.

She smiled while pondering Jerome and his fiancée, Renee. Their wedding was coming up in a few weeks. She was so honored that Renee had chosen her to be her attendant. Jeannie had been staying over at Renee's farm as their unofficial chaperone, and after the wedding, she would move back to her parents' house. Although she was happy for Jerome and Renee, she would miss living at the farm with them. There was a part of her that craved the independence living there had given her, but she would soon be back in her old bedroom and moving through the same routine she'd had since she finished school at fourteen.

The buzz of conversations sounded from the aisles behind her, where customers perused the sewing notions, material, and quilts.

Her mother emerged from a nearby aisle and led an *Englisher* woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties toward the counter. The younger woman held a pale green sewing basket with a floral print on the lid. She pulled out her wallet.

"I think your grandmother will love this sewing basket," *Mamm* said while ringing her up. "It's one of our biggest sellers."

The young woman beamed. "It's just what I wanted. Thank you for your help."

"Excuse me."

Jeannie spun as one of the middle-aged shoppers emerged from the end of the fabric aisle. "Yes?"

"We have some questions about the quilts."

"I'll be right there." Jeannie set the feather duster on the counter and then sped toward the quilt aisle, where the two women stood in front of a display of quilts. "How can I help?"

The taller woman, who had graying brown hair and bright green glasses, pointed to a purple and blue Lonestar quilt. "This is lovely. Do you know who made it?"

"Ya. I did." Jeannie leaned against a nearby shelf.

The two women shared a look of surprise.

"Impressive." The second woman smiled, and her unnaturally red hair reminded Jeannie of a cloth doll she'd seen a little girl carrying in the store a few weeks ago. "Does your mom quilt too?"

Jeannie nodded. "She taught me."

"Wow." The first woman ran her hands over the stitching. "I've always wanted to learn."

The second woman shook her head. "I tried, but I just didn't have the talent."

"I think it takes more patience than talent," Jeannie told them. "If you put the time in, you could do it."

The second woman faced her again. "Have you ever thought about teaching?"

"Teaching?" Jeannie asked.

The first woman's expression lit up. "What a great idea, Rhonda." She pointed to Jeannie. "You should have classes here."

"Absolutely, Trish," the other woman said. "We'd take your classes."

Jeannie studied them. "You'd come for sewing classes here?"

They both nodded.

"Think about it, sweetie," Rhonda told her. "In the meantime, I'll have to buy one of your quilts. How much are they?"

Jeannie spent the next several minutes helping the two women pick out quilts before she rang them up at the register. After

waving goodbye, she leaned on the counter and considered their suggestion.

“Did you just sell two quilts?” *Dat* asked on his way up the center aisle from his office at the back of the store.

Jeannie stood up straight and moved her fingers over the edge of the counter. “Ya, a Lonestar and a wedding ring.”

“*Gut* job.” *Dat* began changing out the tape in the battery-operated register.

Mamm pointed to the back of the store. “You’ll have to pick out a couple more from the storeroom to add to the display.”

Jeannie nodded. “*Gut* idea.” She moved down the nearest aisles, passing displays of buttons and a rainbow of thread on her way to the back. She spotted an elderly Amish woman inspecting a bolt of hunter green material before opening the door to the storeroom.

Scanning the shelves of supplies, she considered what the Englisher, Rhonda, had said about Jeannie teaching sewing classes. Sewing and quilting had always been her favorite pastimes, as well as a way to help her community. She donated quilts to fundraisers, and she also sold them to help her parents earn a living. But teaching sewing classes had never occurred to her until the woman in the store had suggested it.

She chose a red, orange, and yellow log cabin quilt and a yellow, brown, and orange block quilt from the shelf and then scanned the large, open room, which held everything from cleaning supplies to stock. The doorway to her parents’ office was off to the right and beyond it was a small bathroom and a small break room.

For a moment, she imagined what it would look like if a wall cut the stockroom in half. On one side of the wall, she could line up

sewing tables with machines, along with shelves. She would teach her students how to create their own beautiful quilts, and the money she could make on the class would help her parents, and—

“Jeannie?”

She spun to find her mother in the doorway. “Ya, Mamm?” She hugged the two quilts against her chest.

Her mother’s blue eyes sharpened on her. “Are you lost in your dream world again?”

“Nee.” Jeannie shook her head and tried to hide how her mother’s accusation stung. “I was just—”

“We have customers, which means I need you out on the floor. Would you please add those quilts to the display and then see how you can help them?” Mamm disappeared through the doorway before Jeannie could respond.

Pinning a bright smile on her face, Jeannie fluttered out to the floor and hung the quilts on the stands before weaving through the aisles in search of customers. When she found Esther Lapp leaning on her cane while examining a bolt of material, her happy mood expanded. The elderly woman lived down the street from her parents, and Jeannie had enjoyed visiting her since she was a little girl. Jeannie had lost her grandparents several years ago, and she’d always considered Esther to be her surrogate grandmother. She’d spent hours at Esther’s little house drinking tea, sewing, and listening to the older woman’s stories about her childhood.

“Esther!” Jeannie hurried over to her. “*Wie geht’s?*”

The elderly woman’s deep brown eyes lit up behind her wire-rimmed glasses. “Oh, Jeannie. How are you, *mei lieve?*”

“Gut. What brings you out here today?”

“Well, I was thinking about making myself a new dress, but I realized I finally used all of the fabric I have. What do you think of hunter green?”

“I think it’s the perfect fall color, and it will look lovely on you.”

Esther snorted and waved her wrinkly hand. “Oh dear. My days of looking lovely are long gone.” She tilted her head. “Now, you, Jeannie, are the picture of lovely.” She leaned in closer. “Have you found yourself a special fella yet?” she asked, her voice taking a conspiratorial tone.

“Nee, nee.” Jeannie’s cheeks heated.

“But your *bruder* is getting married later this month. Aren’t you about twenty-six now?” Esther asked, and Jeannie nodded. “I was married at twenty-six. Surely your turn is coming soon.”

Jeannie cleared her throat. Although her friends had been dating for quite some time, Jeannie had never seemed to garner the attention of the young men in her community. She often wondered if she’d ever find a man who would love her the way her brother loved Renee. “I’m in no hurry. Everything happens in *Gott’s* time.”

“Ya, that’s true.”

“Now, let’s find you some fabric.” Jeannie helped Esther choose three different fabrics and cut the amount needed before finding thread, a new pair of scissors, and a few other items. She rang up Esther’s purchases and secured them in a shopping bag.

The store had grown quiet, and Jeannie spotted her parents straightening up a display of floral fabrics.

“Mamm, Dat,” Jeannie called, “I’m going to walk Esther home.”

Dat nodded. “Ya.”

“Nee, Jeannie.” Esther waved her off. “Don’t be *gegisch*. I can walk myself home. I’m not *that* old.” Her deep brown eyes sparkled, and although she had to be at least eighty, her mind was as sharp as a tack.

Jeannie chuckled at the elderly woman’s joke. She didn’t mind when Esther called her “silly,” but the word stung when others used it to describe her. “I don’t mind. You know I enjoy spending time with you.” She scooted out from behind the counter.

They pushed through the front doors of the store, and the cool Friday afternoon air filled Jeannie’s senses with the delicious scents of fall. They followed the rock pathway past her house to the sidewalk and started down the street.

Esther hobbled beside her with the help of her cane.

Jeannie looked toward the road just as a dark blue pickup came by, its diesel engine chattering. She peeked into the back of the passenger side and caught a glimpse of Matthew Fisher, who had been a year ahead of her in school and still attended her youth group. He nodded as the truck motored past, and she returned the greeting. He worked for his older brother’s construction company and must have been on a supply run or on his way home after a long day at work building houses.

Turning her attention back to Esther, Jeannie glanced over at her. “Have you done any quilting lately?”

“Nee, have you?”

“Nee. It’s been a while since we’ve sewn together. We should do that soon.”

“I agree.”

They reached Esther’s small, one-story house and traipsed around to the back. A small barn and several sheds dotted the few

acres of brown grass. Esther's husband had passed away a few years ago, and they never had any children of their own. Her nieces and nephews repeatedly invited her to live with them, but she insisted on continuing to live alone. Members of her extended family and the community frequently checked on her. Although she needed a cane to help her get around, she was still a spry woman who enjoyed sewing and cooking.

They entered through the back door leading to the kitchen, and Jeannie set the bag on the table.

"Would your folks mind if we shared a cup of a tea before you go back to the store?" Esther asked.

"I don't think so. I'll put on the kettle." Jeannie filled the kettle before retrieving the tea bags and mugs. Soon they were sitting at the table together and enjoying their tea.

"So, your bruder is getting married soon. Are you still staying with Renee on their farm?"

"Ya. I'll be their chaperone until the wedding." Jeannie moved her fingers over her warm mug. Jerome had come a long way since he'd had his heart broken when his former fiancée had been killed in a buggy accident. He had blamed himself for the accident for years, and she was grateful Gott saw fit to lead him to Renee. Not only had Renee helped Jerome forgive himself, she'd also become one of Jeannie's closest friends.

"How are things at the store?" Esther asked.

"Gut." Jeannie sat up straighter. "Earlier, two Englisher women were looking at the quilts, and when I told them I had made them, they said I should consider giving sewing lessons."

Esther smiled. "What do you think about that?"

“I’m intrigued.” Jeannie rested her arm on the table. “It would be fun, but it would also bring more income into the store. Mei mamm wants more time at the *haus*, but we haven’t had the money to hire another employee. If I taught sewing lessons, I could help my parents pay a new employee and free up mei mamm.”

“It sounds like it would be a gut idea, but where would you hold the lessons?”

Jeannie stared down at her mug of tea. “The storeroom runs almost the length of the back of the building, and we don’t use all of the space. I was in there earlier trying to imagine what it would look like if we sectioned off part of it and made it a sewing room.”

“What a brilliant idea!”

“Ya, but...” Jeannie’s voice trailed off. Her entire life she’d heard people say that she was flighty, impulsive, and unreliable. It began when she was twelve and decided to start a dog rescue, but after taking in two puppies, she’d lost interest and quickly found homes for them. Her parents rarely took her seriously, so how was she going to convince them that this was a good idea?

“What’s troubling you, mei lieue?”

Too embarrassed to share her past failures, Jeannie forced her lips into a smile. “I was just making a mental list of everything I’d need for the sewing classroom. I’d have to find a good deal on some used sewing machines, along with tables and chairs. I suppose I should start a list and draw a diagram of what the room might look like.”

“That’s a very gut idea. You should do it. You’d be a gut teacher.”

Jeannie studied the octogenarian. “Would you consider helping me teach the class?”

“Oh, no, dear. I’m too old for that.”

“Nee, you’re not.” Jeannie tapped the tabletop. “You’re the best quilter I know, and it would be so fun if we taught the classes together.”

Esther smiled. “Get the classroom together, and then we’ll talk.”

“Deal,” Jeannie exclaimed with a grin. She was certain she might burst with excitement. She would start working on a sketch of the classroom and then find a way to convince her parents to let her give it a try.



Matthew Fisher was convinced every muscle in his body ached. Hopping out of the back seat of the pickup truck, he cupped his hand to his mouth to cover a yawn and dragged himself around to the bed of the truck. The sky above was a kaleidoscope of colors as the sun began to set. He lowered the tailgate and climbed up to reach his supplies.

Daniel, his twenty-two-year-old nephew, appeared behind him and took the supplies from his hands. “Do you think we’ll ever finish this haus?” his nephew muttered. He picked up their empty lunch coolers and set them on the ground beside them. Although Daniel was five years younger than Matthew, they were close friends.

“You want me to answer honestly?” Matthew smirked, and Daniel chuckled.

As the youngest of ten, Matthew was grateful his eldest sibling, Dennis, had taken him in after their parents had perished in a house fire. Matthew was eight and had been at school when the fire broke out, and he could still recall the sound of the sirens and the scent of the burning wood and hay. His life had been turned upside down,

and as the only remaining Fisher child who still lived at home, he was lost. But Dennis, and his wife, Eva, had swooped in and somehow made it better by adopting him as their eldest child.

Daniel pointed to the toolbox. "You wanna push that to me?"

"Nee. Tomorrow's Saturday. If we unload it tonight, we'll just have to reload it tomorrow morning."

Daniel leaned on the tailgate. "You know what I'd like?" he asked, and Matthew shrugged. "A Saturday off. Working six days a week is the pits."

"Don't let your dat hear you," Matthew said.

"Supper's ready!" Eva called from the porch.

Matthew nodded toward the two-story brick house. "We'd better go."

After collecting their coolers, they waved good night to their driver and hastened into the house, where they shucked their jackets and work boots and scrubbed their hands at the kitchen sink. The spicy scent of chili and corn bread washed over them.

Dennis kissed his wife's cheek and then took his usual seat at the head of the table. At forty-four, he was seventeen years older than Matthew, and he'd been a father figure to him even before he officially became his father.

"How was work?" Eva set a plate of corn bread in the center of the table beside the pot of chili.

Dennis pursed his lips and shook his head. "We're still behind schedule," he grumbled, prompting Matthew and Daniel to share a look.

"I could skip school and help you with the haus," Aaron offered. Although he was only ten and still had four more years of school, he

repeatedly offered to forget about school and join the family construction business.

Matthew admired his younger nephew's determination as he bit back a laugh.

Dennis shook his head at his son. "*Danki*, but no. You need to go to school, *sohn*."

Matthew had always thought his nephews were mirror images of their father. And he'd often been mistaken for Dennis's eldest son since he, too, shared their tall stature, along with their dark, curly hair and deep brown eyes.

"Nancy made the chili, and it smells delicious," Eva said. "Let's eat."

Nancy smiled at her mother as she placed a container of butter next to the corn bread. At sixteen, Nancy looked just like her mother had in her younger years, with bright hazel eyes and light brown hair peeking out from under her prayer covering.

Molly gasped. "We forgot the water!" She scuttled to the refrigerator and grabbed the pitcher.

Nancy rushed after her. "Let me help you." She took the pitcher and pointed to a chair. "You sit, and I'll fill the glasses."

"Okay!" Molly sat beside her mother and beamed at her. "I remembered the water."

Eva touched her seven-year-old's light brown braids. "You sure did. You're a gut helper."

After the glasses were filled and they were all gathered around the table, they bowed their heads in silent prayer before filling their bowls with chili.

Matthew scooped a spoonful into his mouth while Molly and Aaron talked on about their busy day at school. Their stories about

their fun on the playground became background noise to his thoughts. He'd been pondering their issues on the worksite all day, and he had some ideas for how to get ahead. But would his older brother listen to him?

After supper and a slice of apple pie for dessert, Eva, Nancy, and Molly cleaned up the kitchen while Daniel and Aaron headed out to the barn to take care of the animals.

"Dennis?" Matthew followed his older brother through the mudroom and out to the porch. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Dennis stopped on the steps and faced him. "What's up?"

"You're worried about the schedule, but I have some ideas about how we can get back on track."

Dennis lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "How?"

"Let me run the crew, and you can hire another crew and get started on the next house. I have the experience and—"

Dennis shook his head. "Nee."

"Why not?" Matthew asked, and his voice shook.

"You're not ready to run a crew."

"I am." Matthew pointed to his chest. "I'm twenty-seven, and I've been working for you since I was fourteen. You taught me everything you know."

"Just do your job, and we'll get the haus done soon." Dennis loped down the steps and stalked toward the barn.

Matthew leaned on the porch railing and scrubbed a hand over his tense jaw. His older brother still saw him as a kid, but he was determined to prove to him that he was ready to take on more responsibility with the construction company. He just had to figure out how.