

A young woman with blonde hair, wearing a white bonnet and a blue dress with a white apron, stands in a field of tall grass at sunset. She is smiling and looking off to the side. The background shows a bright orange and yellow sunset sky over a body of water.

✦ A SEASON IN PINECRAFT ✦

# Her Secret Hope

SHELLEY  
SHEPARD GRAY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## Praise for *Her Heart's Desire*

“Gray skillfully sketches a sympathetic cast of characters who will endear themselves to readers.”

*Publishers Weekly*

“Focused on the values of friendship and forgiveness, it is a lighthearted read that takes on real-world challenges such as loneliness, sacrificing dreams, and knowing one’s worth.”

*Booklist*

“This series is off to a great start! Five stars, hands down!”

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“Shelley Shepard Gray’s stories are always so refreshing, and *Her Heart’s Desire* is no exception! The warm writing voice, the engaging characters, and two sweet romances will leave readers light of heart and smiling too.”

*Reading Is My Superpower*

“What a fun story! While an enjoyable read, it also featured some valuable lessons concerning forgiveness, especially when it is difficult to do so after you’ve been hurt.”

*Write-Read-Life*

## Books by Shelley Shepard Gray

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A SEASON IN PINECRAFT

*Her Heart's Desire*

*Her Only Wish*

*Her Secret Hope*

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SHEPARD GRAY



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
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Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.

Hebrews 10:24



Never look down on someone unless you're helping them up.

Amish proverb

# 1



OCTOBER

PINECRAFT, FLORIDA

Even though Lilly Kurtz had stayed at the Marigold Inn before, she'd never realized that there was a small shed marked "office" nestled in between two blooming flower beds in the backyard. Oh, she'd noticed the cute little building before. Painted a light green with matching trim, it almost blended in with the grass and the many trees and shrubs that surrounded it. The window boxes were a lovely touch too and were currently filled with geraniums and pansies.

The structure looked friendly and welcoming. Honestly, the place was all so perfect, it looked like something out of a children's storybook. Her mother would've called it charming.

Lilly frowned and gave her head a stern little shake. This was not the time to think about her parents, the home she recently left, or her past. She needed to focus on the present.

She had an important interview to get through.

Which meant, of course, that she had to leave the main part of the inn, walk through the backyard, and knock on the door

of that cute little building. It was only a few steps away, but she felt as if it was going to change everything about her life.

Lilly ran her sweaty palms down the skirt of her pale blue dress. She hoped she didn't get flustered and forget all the talking points she'd practiced.

What was she going to do if she messed up?

"Lilly, are you okay?" Esther asked.

Though she inwardly jumped, Lilly smiled at her friend. She'd first met Esther Hershberger two years ago. Esther, along with Mary Margaret and Betsy, had been planning to stay at the Marigold at the same time Lilly had taken a leap of faith and traveled to Pinecraft by herself. The Lord must have known that the four of them needed each other because they'd all become thick as thieves.

It was still something of a shock, especially since none of them had been all that popular in their respective hometowns.

Boy, she sure didn't want to go back home.

"Lilly?" Esther sounded worried now.

Turning to her friend, she pasted a smile on her face. "I'm sorry. Yes. I'm fine. Just overthinking a bit."

Esther's expression eased. "I know you're nervous, but try not to be. I'm rooting for you, and I feel like the Lord brought you here too."

"Thank you for that. I'm sure everything will happen the way it's meant to, right? All I can do is my best."

"There you go!"

Lilly smiled weakly as she turned back to stare at the building yet again. Everything Esther had said made a lot of sense . . . but honestly, how could she not be nervous? She needed this job. If Nancy White turned her down, Lilly was going to have to find not only a place to work but a place to live too.



She doubted that any other inn or hotel was going to allow her to live on the property.

Looking even more sympathetic, Esther said, "I came to tell you that Nancy is ready for you."

"Now?"

"I'm afraid so." She gestured to the little cottage. "Just go on out, take the path, and then walk right inside. There's no need to knock or anything. That's what everyone does."

Lilly ran her hands down the front of her dress yet again. "Danke. Do you have any advice on what to say?"

Esther chuckled, then seemed to realize Lilly was serious. "You know you have nothing to worry about, jah? Nancy is the nicest woman. Plus, you know her and she knows you! You even have experience cleaning hotel rooms. Everything will be fine."

But what if it wasn't? "Sometimes I don't do too well in interviews."

"She hired me and promoted me, and I didn't have near the experience you do." Esther reached for Lilly's hand and squeezed it gently. "Please don't worry so much."

"You're right. I better go on out there before Nancy starts to wonder where I am."

Esther opened the door and motioned her through. "I'll say a prayer, Lilly. You've got this!"

Lilly wasn't so sure about that, but it was time to at least appear confident. She shot Esther a smile before heading down the stone walkway toward the small building. When she got to the door, Lilly hesitated. What to do? Esther had told her to go on in.

Too nervous to rely on Esther's word, she knocked.

"Come in!"

Opening the door, she was treated to a view of the most darling space. It looked like a combination dollhouse and high-class, modern hotel. A plush, inviting sofa took center stage. Two embroidered pillows rested on top. One of them said “Marigold Inn” in gold block letters while the other said “Stay Awhile” in green cursive. A white Lucite coffee table rested in front of it. In the back of the room was a little desk, computer, and chair. All of it was arranged on a gleaming hardwood floor.

“Hi. I heard you were ready for me?”

“I sure am.” Nancy strode forward. “Welcome back to Pinecraft, Lilly.”

“Danke.” She held out her hand.

“Don’t be silly. Of course I’m going to hug you. We’re friends now.”

Lilly barely had time to agree before she was engulfed in the woman’s cushy body. Nancy was likely in her fifties, at least six inches taller and likely sixty or seventy pounds heavier than herself. She was English, bright and cheerful and pretty. She also gave great hugs.

Lilly hadn’t realized how much she’d needed a hug until she’d received it.

“Have a seat and tell me all about your trip down. Did you take the Pioneer Trails bus again?”

She shook her head and sat down. “Not this time. I had too much to bring down. My parents looked into the prices and determined that it would be less for me to purchase a train ticket than for me to take the bus and ship the rest of my belongings down.” Of course, now that she’d just shared all of that, she second-guessed herself. Maybe she sounded presumptuous?

But Nancy didn’t look put off by her words. She clasped her hands together like she was imagining taking the journey

herself. "I've heard the train is great fun. Did you enjoy your journey south?"

Lilly nodded. "I did. I got a little roomette so I was able to get some sleep. And everyone on the train was very friendly. Some of the passengers were even Amish like me."

Looking wistful, Nancy sighed. "One day I want to hop on a train. I want to sit and read books and knit while someone else takes me places."

"I hope you'll be able to do that one day."

"Me too." Nancy snapped her fingers. "It just takes the right time and a little bit of determination, right?"

"Right." It took those things, and enough money to pay for the train ticket too. But she supposed that was obvious.

It had also taken a lot of prayer. It was a bit of a miracle that she'd made the move at all, because nothing about the preparations had been easy. It had been difficult to convince her parents that it was time for her to leave the nest. Her mother had been hurt, saying that Lilly was abandoning them, while her father had asked her dozens of questions.

Returning to the present, Lilly sat a little straighter. "I'm very happy that I made my decision to move to Pinecraft and thankful for the Lord's help."

"Indeed." After staring at her another moment, Nancy stood up. "I suppose we'd better get to the reason you're here." She picked up a floral file folder and placed it on the table in front of Lilly. "This is your employment contract. Read it over tonight. If you don't have any questions, sign and date it and then we'll get you on the schedule."

Realizing that Nancy wasn't about to ask her a dozen hard questions, Lilly stared at the folder. "That's it?"

Nancy sat back down. "I'm sorry, did you want to talk about

the job some more? I'm afraid the pay will still be the same that I quoted you when we talked on the phone. And the hours. Forty hours a week and two days off, usually not together. Breakfast is included."

"The terms are fine. I just expected you to have a lot of questions." Plus, there were all those talking points she'd been ready to share!

"Lilly, we already know each other. Plus, you mailed me the nicest references. When I called your former boss, Teresa, she couldn't sing your praises loud enough."

"Oh." A thousand things seemed to be racing through her head, but she was still too nervous to put any of it into words.

As Nancy stared at her intently, a line formed between her brows. "You poor thing. I'm sure you're exhausted. When you go in, ask Esther to take you to her old room. We tried to get it all set up for you. Unpack, rest, and go find yourself something to eat. I'm sure you'll feel better after all that."

Glad that she was going to be able to take some time for herself, she nodded. "What time should I start tomorrow?"

Nancy looked aghast. "Of course you're not going to start on Saturday! Take the weekend off and rest and see your friends. Enjoy Pinecraft! You may start at seven on Monday morning."

"Are you sure about me staying here without working? I don't—"

"I'm sure," Nancy interrupted in a firm tone. "I know you're going to want to see Mary Margaret and Betsy. And spend time with Esther and Michael too." She clasped her hands together. "Sometimes I can hardly believe all that has happened to you girls. Why, three of you are married already."

"You're right. There have been a great many changes. I'm really excited to see them."

“Of course you are. You’re going to have a lovely time catching up.” She walked to the door and opened it. “Go enjoy the day, Lilly. It’s a good one.”

Holding the folder in her hands, Lilly turned to Nancy. “Thank you again. I was so hoping I could work here.”

“You’re welcome. See you tomorrow at breakfast. We’ll be having pancakes, so come hungry.”

Walking back down the stone path, Lilly shook her head. Why had she gotten so nervous? Esther had been right. Everything was going to be just fine.

Maybe even better than fine.