



# UNFORGIVEN

**SHELLEY  
SHEPARD GRAY**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**Books by Shelley Shepard Gray**

**A SEASON IN PINECRAFT**

*Her Heart's Desire*

*Her Only Wish*

*Her Secret Hope*

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For everyone who still believes  
in second chances.

Though your sins are like scarlet,  
I will make them as white as snow.

Isaiah 1:18 NLT

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

Amish proverb

# 1

## OCTOBER, CRITTENDEN COUNTY, KY

**H**e'd come back. Taking care to hide behind the curtain partially covering her living room window, Tabitha watched Seth Zimmerman walk down her front porch steps after knocking on the door. He'd waited for her to answer, of course. Maybe thirty seconds? Maybe longer?

The amount of time he waited didn't really matter anyway. Tabitha didn't open her door for anyone. Well, no one except for her sister Mary once a month. She hadn't greeted anyone else for a long time.

After another couple of minutes passed, Seth walked to his truck, peeled off his tan canvas jacket, and set it on the hood. Then he fished out an ax from his truck's bed and walked to the woodpile and started chopping.

It wasn't the first time he'd done any of this. Almost two years earlier, Seth had dropped off a pile of logs. He'd knocked on the door, no doubt to tell her about it. When she hadn't answered, he'd written a short note explaining why he was there.

When she'd read his note, Tabitha had felt so guilty. Common courtesy said that she should thank him for his kindness. Open the door and face him.

At the very least.

But the knot of tension in her chest—and the mess of nerves zipping through her body—had prevented her from doing even that much. She'd learned a lot about fear in the last ten years. Enough to realize that being cautious wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Sometimes it even saved one's life.

Even though she knew Seth was no Leon and she likely had nothing to fear, Tabitha still hadn't budged. Instead, she continued to stand behind the heavy curtain and watch Seth chop wood. Like some kind of twisted stalker.

Or maybe because she was a lonely woman and the sight of Seth Zimmerman chopping wood was surely something to see. All brawn and muscle, his body moved in perfect synchronicity as he chopped those logs. Three months ago, the weather had been hot and his cotton T-shirt had become damp, clinging to his chest and arms like a second skin.

After chopping several of the logs into small, manageable pieces, he'd placed them in a stack near the front porch. And then drove off.

Now, here he was again. This time, the October day was cool. And though he'd taken off his jacket, his body still moved in an easy, fluid motion. Every time he lifted that heavy ax and then brought it down with a satisfying *thunk*, her insides jumped a bit.

Her former student had grown into a fine-looking man.

Boy, she hoped he'd found himself a sweet girl to court. Seth deserved that. Even back when she'd been his teacher, she'd known there was an innate goodness to him. He'd

proved it to her in a dozen ways the year she'd taught him. He'd assisted other students, helped her clean up the classroom from time to time. Once, he'd intervened when one of the oldest boys had gotten mad and knocked over a chair. And here he was again, doing her yet another favor that she couldn't repay.

Tabitha knew she should somehow find a way to tell him that it wasn't necessary for him to come out to her house and do chores. Her mother would've chided her for taking advantage of his kindness. But even after all this time, Tabitha hadn't. All she seemed to be able to do was stare at him from the shadows of her home.

What a sight he was too. His face, carefully shaven, was lightly tanned. The muscles in his arms, now uncovered, clenched with every swing. Again and again he swung. He handled the ax like it weighed next to nothing. He hadn't even broken a sweat.

She was embarrassed she noticed.

But maybe not surprised. Seth had been visiting her once a week for months and months now. The first time he'd appeared, he'd knocked on her door. She'd peeked out, saw his six-foot form, short blond hair, and chiseled features, and knew exactly who he was. Her former Amish community's only ex-con.

She'd been so frightened of him, she'd hurried to the back of her house and hidden in the bedroom's closet. There she'd sat, practically hyperventilating. Reminding herself over and over that her door was locked and he was nothing like her ex-husband. She couldn't imagine him raising a hand to her for some imagined slight.

An hour later, after working hard to get her breathing under control, she'd ventured back out. When she confirmed

he was gone, she'd opened the door. And found a paper sack with some apples, fruit, cheese, and fresh bread along with a note.

*Tabitha, I don't blame you for not wanting to answer the door. All I wanted to do was chop some of your wood and drop this food off. A lady out in Marion gave me too much. You take care now. Seth.*

That had been the first of many visits. Sometimes he'd chopped wood. Sometimes he only stopped over to drop off a carton of food. Once, he'd trimmed her hedges. Maybe about every fifth time, he knocked on the door, waited for a response that never came, then wrote a note.

She'd saved them all.

Seth Zimmerman might have gone to prison for killing Peter Miller, but he wasn't a bad man. The rumors were that Peter had attacked Bethanne Hostetler and Seth had stopped it. No one but Seth and God knew for sure what happened next. All that had been proven was that the two men had fought, Peter had fallen and hit his head on a rock.

Since she knew just how much could happen when no one was watching, Tabitha reckoned almost anything could've transpired. Truth had a way of getting twisted and turned when it touched the bright light of day.

Returning to the present, she rested her head against the window's frame and watched Seth some more. After yet another thwack of the ax, he put it down and stretched his arms. Then he turned and looked her way. Stark, steel-blue eyes met hers.

And took her breath away.

Tabitha gulped.

There was no kidding herself now. Seth knew that she'd been watching him. Probably felt her eyes on him every time he'd come out. He knew she watched him but didn't have the nerve to even say hello.

He probably thought she was the same woman he used to know. His teacher who had been barely three years older than him. The woman he used to tease about mice and bugs while she pretended to be too mature to tease him back.

Thinking of all the kindnesses he'd done, all the gifts and food he'd given her, Tabitha went to the kitchen and filled one of her baskets with homemade bread and a jar of the strawberry jam she'd put up at the beginning of summer.

She braced herself, then walked to the door. It was time to go outside and thank him in person. At last.

Yes, she knew a lot about fear now, and her heart and head weren't in as good a shape as they used to be. But that didn't mean she didn't know right from wrong. Besides, even if something bad did happen between her and Seth Zimmerman, Tabitha knew she could take it.

She'd learned that there was an awful lot that she could take.