



SHADES OF  
GRAY

SUSANNE JACOBY HALE

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Susanne Jacoby Hale

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# **Shades of Gray**

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# Chapter 1

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The sirens blared, but all I heard was the sound of my heart thumping as I ran down the unruly hallways of Malcolm High School. Other teachers were urging straggling students into their classrooms and out of danger. I was on a mission. I'd left my co-teachers with our class and rushed through the halls. I had to know that Benz was safe. I wanted to believe—and so I did—that he had nothing to do with the riot that was tearing through the halls of this New York City high school. I would not rest until I knew that he was not one of the injured students. The thought of Benz being one of the instigators of the uprising, the third that year, ruefully crossed my mind. *Please be in your Spanish class today, Benz.*

Even though not all fights involved the use of weapons, students received routine pat downs when entering the school, and there was constant talk about the need for metal detectors at the main entrance. Most fights were not premeditated either. They started over the typical he-said/she-said banter or yo-mama trash talk. Next thing you knew, a punch would be thrown, or a student whipped a blade out of his sock or a gun from under his jacket. It was never apparent until well after that first punch was thrown which fight would escalate to a dangerous level. One never knew if it would remain a two-person slug fest or if their friends would jump in and turn it into an out-and-out brawl.

The only certainty was that once a fight broke out, security would get immediate notification, then the school went on lockdown. All students would be ushered out of the hallways, and the classrooms' doors and windows locked. As well trained as security personnel were to

deal with these brawls, I often wondered if they too weren't frightened that the next one would be the deadly one. To my knowledge, no one had ever died in a school fight at Malcolm—there had been injuries that required stitches, a few black eyes, and broken bones, but no deaths had occurred. Those were saved for the streets.

This was the first serious uprising I had experienced, and it was all happening so swiftly that I didn't realize what a true insurrection it was until the dust had settled. We, as staff, had been instructed on how to handle these situations at our teacher orientation, but I guess I never believed that such a mutiny could truly ensue. Not once during the chaos did I think about the rules the administration had carefully spelled out for us during the long lectures that preceded the beginning of school early in September. Teenagers were rushing through the halls screaming uncontrollably. Sirens roared and announcements demanded that the hallways be cleared. Security guards with walkie-talkies ran up and down the halls marshaling students into classrooms. Through the windows that flanked the corridors, one could clearly see down all eight floors to the street where a pool of police cars enclosed the school like a perilous moat.

As I hurried down the Foreign Language hallway, I heard some students screaming to me, but their words rushed around me like flurrying snowflakes melting before they ever contacted my skin. Wrangling my way through the sea of madness, I managed to find Benz's fourth-period class and banged my tightened fist on the classroom door. A panic-stricken teacher immediately peered through the glass window, saw it was me, and cracked open the door just enough to attempt to pull me in by my elbow, grabbing the fabric of my sleeve

"No, no," I exhaled in a breathless voice, "just tell me if Benson Douglass is in your class." I scanned the room. From the corner, with a consortium of girls encircling him like a school of fish, Benz waved. His half grin eased my quivering anxiousness. Once I saw with my own eyes that Benz was safe, I could check on my other students. Amazingly enough, the students sat unharmed and seemingly unaffected by the chaos swirling around their peaceful classroom.

I then resumed my race down the hall and up the side stairwell. As I pushed through the heavy metal doors, back into another riotous hallway, hysterical teenagers came charging toward me. Immersed in

ear-piercing shrills, one name kept coming at me, buzzing in my ears like a thousand bees. *Omar. Omar.*

I could hear only the terror in their voices at the repetition of his name. As I rounded the corner to my classroom and office, corralling in as many followers to safety as I could, I came to a halt. At my feet, Omar laid somewhat propped up against the tiled wall, a circle of faces staring down in awe. There was a pool of blood surrounding him. I chucked the key to my classroom to an unidentified face and ordered the student to call 911 from my telephone. In a weak gesture, Omar looked up at me and said hello as though we were meeting for lunch at a neighborhood café. He held his hand to his bleeding head and kindly asked me to help him into the classroom so he could clean up. Always the gentleman.

“Omar,” I whispered through my terror, “I think you have to go to the hospital.” He looked up hesitantly and tried to muster a smile. “I’ll be fine,” he replied as he attempted to get up from the cold floor. “It just look bad.”

“Stay down, man!” yelled one of two boys rushing down the hallway. I felt a shudder of fear at their words and threw my body to the ground beside Omar. Until that second, I hadn’t had time to think about what was going on around us. From the cold floor, I ordered the students around me to go back into the classroom. “We have to clear the hallways. Please go inside,” I insisted in the best teacher voice I could muster for the moment.

Two enormous boys, students I didn’t know but who seemed to know me, began to help Omar up and in hard, howling voices told me that we all had to go in right then. “Clear the hallway!” someone yelled.

Something told me that they knew better how to handle this situation than I, and I followed Omar and his bodyguards into the classroom. Strangely, they settled Omar in my desk chair and left before I could say a word. I yelled after them telling them that they too should stay in my classroom until things settled down, but they looked back at me sheepishly, like two angels returning to their clouds in heaven.

I ran to my office, a sort of primitively built, tiny room in the back of my classroom, to grab a beige sweater that I kept there for late-afternoon grading sessions. I put it around Omar’s big shoulders with

the hopes it would ease his shivering. A sweet girl I had never seen in my classroom before brought a load of paper towels from the sink in the back of the connecting classroom, and I began to apply them to Omar's bleeding head.

Things seemed calmer for those few seconds as we sat and absorbed the situation. Two dozen frightened high school students stood at the door watching me take care of Omar. I tried finally, while mopping up Omar's hemorrhaging head, to conjure up the proper procedures for a riot that were carefully mapped out by the administration only months before. I wanted to do this the proper way—the way the school deemed appropriate—but somehow, instinct took over instead.

Ironically, the month before, I had been called down to the principal's office and given what they called a warning. When I arrived in Mr. Escandell's office, there sat Mrs. Marion, the assistant principal who was generally all about rules and impossible to warm to. She was the stereotypical city employee, counting her days until retirement and making sure that nothing marred her reputation as hard-ass along the way. On the couch sat Mr. McMann, math teacher and head of security. The students all thought he was cool as he roamed the halls in his washed out Levis and leather basketball sneakers. I just loved his auburn hair and the light freckles that crossed the bridge of his nose. He was adorable.

Mr. Escandell, a tall lanky man with a head of thick, dark hair and just enough gray in the temples to establish an aura of experience and prestige, thanked me for coming, while Mrs. Marion nodded her head in agreement, as though any new teacher might casually decline when asked to meet with the principal. They commended me for having retrieved a weapon from LaBron Howards the day before. I was elated that the school administration should take notice of what I thought was just part of my job as teacher in a dropout-prevention program in one of the city's toughest schools.

Grateful for their thanks and prepared to leave our short meeting feeling quite satisfied by their kudos, I stood up, gathering my bags. Mr. Escandell stopped me and asked me to show him how I retrieved the knife from LaBron. It seemed a simple question. "I just asked him for it. It was obvious that he was carrying it, and so many kids had already told me he had it hidden in his pants," I answered coyly.

“But how did you get it from him?” he repeated accentuating the word *get*.

“Show us,” chimed in Mrs. Marion.

Obviously, I wasn't following their game plan. It didn't seem that difficult to grasp, but I went through the motions and put out my manicured, still somewhat tan from the last weeks of summer hand, palm up, as I did for LaBron the day before during fourth period.

All eyes on me. I glanced around the room expecting sincere adulation and found the praise I had seen in their faces now misconstrued on my part. They each looked from my outstretched arm to each other's faces in search of a leader. That is when I realized I had gone about it all wrong. At once, they began to make clear that what I did was both wonderful and terrible. Who knew? Why should it matter how I got the damn knife from him? Isn't it most important that it be out of my student's hands?

“You never ask for a weapon like that. Always have the student put it on the desk, and then you pick it up and remove it from their reach immediately,” Mrs. Marion told me forcefully.

I retracted my arm, laying my fist in my lap, feeling the coolness that moments before had me pumped and gloating, evaporate from my rather petite body. I apologized softly all the while thinking that this seemed a ridiculous rule.

Mrs. Marion repeated the rule, like a mantra, three or four more times before the meeting ended. “It is imperative that a weapon be retrieved in the fashion described in the book, Mrs. Dalton. These rules were purposely written for your safety. We must remain strict about this sort of thing for the safety of our staff. Certainly you can understand that, can't you, dear?”

Mr. Escandell's face read discomfort as I shuffled past him, back to my classroom. I imagine that he knew right then that my apologies weren't necessarily sincere, but my love for my job and the students was. He was simply doing his job—running one of New York City's toughest high schools—and in my mind, so was I.

Mr. McMann said very little during that meeting. Later though, in the teacher's lounge, he came up behind me, placed his hand on my shoulder and told me not to be too bothered by the meeting earlier. “It

happens,” he claimed. “Just be glad you got the friggin’ knife from the bastard.”

I cringed at his calling one of my students such a name, but by then, I should have been accustomed to it. I looked at him and said, “Who knew?”

Mr. McMann laughed, and I shrugged as I was reminded of the time at least twenty years prior, when my little brother came home from school looking forlorn. When our mother asked him what happened in school that made him so upset, he started to yell, “Who knew? Who knew?”

“Who knew what?” Mom asked artlessly.

“Who knew that if you talked during a fire drill you get in trouble?” my brother cried.

“Did you talk during a fire drill, Michael?” Mom questioned, handing him a tissue.

“I just told the boy next to me leave his backpack and follow me. “Who knew? Who knew?” He continued. All night he sulked about being reprimanded by his kindergarten teacher, and for years, my sister and I plagued him about being such a goody-two shoes. “Who knew?” we would tease. “Who knew?”

So many of the teachers at Malcolm alleged to want to help these kids, but when it came down to it, the population, according to the staff, was overflowing with bastards and street trash. I didn’t have the heart to tell my dear colleague that I wasn’t completely perturbed. He also assured me that he would always be watching out for me. *How sweet*, I thought, feeling my inner strength begin to rev. The thought of being perceived as needy or frail, no matter how adorable this coworker was, made my innards cringe a bit. I tried to remain reasonable and remember that I was ultimately out of my element—a little backing couldn’t do any harm.

“They have to cover their asses is all it was. Just be safe. You have a tough bunch up there,” Mr. McMann reiterated.

Although I appreciated the shoulder squeeze and his kind words, I duly concluded, right then and there, that he was no more than a handsome facade with burly hands. It seemed a waste. He was right, though, about the fact that I did teach a tough bunch. I thought I could tackle it all, convinced there were few parameters or hurdles to

cross that I could not handle on my own. I was sheltered and naïve, and thriving on it.

I held a wad of paper towel to Omar's head as I dialed the telephone number his trembling voice recited for me. "No answer," I told Omar. "Is there someplace else we can call?"

Now, Omar looked up at me as his deep, chocolaty eyes fluttered.

"Please don't pass out on me, son!" I said nervously and loudly, as though my strident voice would keep him from fainting.

Omar's breathing deepened, then halted for what seemed an eternity. His eyes widened as fear and apprehension strangled his thoughts. In a gentle whisper, he asked me if I would text his brother. It wasn't until much later that I thought of the stack of half-completed emergency cards that sat in my bottom desk drawer. If Omar's brother was whom he needed, then that was whom I would contact.

Feeling somewhat weak at the sight of my trembling fingers, I tried to turn my back a bit so no one else should see me shaking as I texted. I had to maintain the image of the stalwart and primed teacher. Any sign of weakness could be deadly. They never taught us about this sort of stuff in Columbia's graduate school.

His brother, Darrel, called back in a matter of seconds, initiating the conversation by resolutely grunting, "Who dis?"

In a deep, succinct pitch, before I could finish sharing the details, he told me that he was on his way. He was no stranger to calls like this apparently.

The buzz of a silenced line drummed in my ear like an alarm clock, reminding me of the situation behind me. I reached into the bottom drawer of my desk and tugged at my purse. I felt a twinge of guilt skim over me—even in the midst of an intense trauma, I wondered if any the students had noticed that I kept my desk drawer unlocked. Turning back to Omar, patient and still bleeding, I suggested we go. "Your brother will meet you at the hospital." I threw my purse over my shoulder and vowed to myself to keep the desk locked from then on.

The halls had started to quiet like the winding down of a storm. The rest of the school remained on lockdown, but the school nurse and two police officers banged at my door, a wheelchair in tow, to take Omar down to the ambulance. "I'll call your mom, Omar, and I will check

on you later.” I wanted to assure the lanky, black boy that sat quietly at the corner table for English class every day.

He reached for my hand, pouting like a mournful child. Omar was genuinely afraid. Was he scared to be alone? Scared of the ambulance? Fearful of where his mother might be? Terrified of what may await him down the hallway? Was it all of this and more? He reached for me to come with him, to hold his hand; and save him from the horrors that lurked in the hallways of this nebulous world where he was growing up.

I felt a blossoming need to be there for him. I would support him, hold tightly to his outstretched hand and comfort him—*save* him. It was time for me to give something to my student that I couldn’t teach him in any classroom through countless standardized lessons. I was going to show him that love has no boundaries and that I cared and would surely hold his hand as we went to the hospital to stitch up his cracked head. Therefore, I did.

I climbed into the ambulance parked in front of the school after Omar’s stretcher was loaded and received an unexpected greeting from another boy lying on his side in the stretcher to the right. He groaned a sort of hello, and I immediately noticed that he was one of the young men who had helped to usher us into the safety of my classroom. He had an ice pack on his lower left cheek.

This was my first trip in an ambulance. I suspected it wasn’t Omar’s. I bounced around between the two stretchers in the back of the ambulance, holding tightly to Omar and occasionally reaching over to the other boy’s free hand to give it a squeeze. The driver zipped between cars like a seasoned New York taxi driver, while his counterpart sat calmly in the passenger seat, looking back at us every few minutes. Each time, he asked how the boys were or announced how many more blocks until we arrived at the hospital, I couldn’t help but wonder how many times he had done this and at what point he’d lost the ability to look alarmed.

Tubes and machines were carefully tucked into every nook and cranny of the small space behind the front seats, with just enough room down the middle, between the two stretchers, for someone to teeter around. Each city pothole seemed exaggerated as the equipment shook on the ambulance walls and I tried to regain my station beside Omar,

who remained still and fairly composed, given the circumstances. I hoped I was creating a mirror image but doubted it. The whole scenario was too unfamiliar, and although the smell of bleach hit my nose as I'd jumped into the back of the ambulance, all I could smell after a few short blocks was the dank scent of wet paper towels soaked in blood. Counting every intersection as we passed, I kept peering out the back window, wondering if the doors could actually propel open from the thumping beat of the van on the city streets.

Omar; always the charmer, unperturbedly attempted to introduce me to the young man on my right. "That's Carl," he mumbled. "You know him, Ms. D?"

"I am afraid we never met before today. Thanks Omar." I jokingly answered, turning toward my new friend. "It's a pleasure to meet you, but there must have been an easier way." Both boys smiled as best they could, and the moment seemed to lighten temporarily, like a slight clearing on an overcast day.

Omar continued, his voice weakening with each word, "This Ms. D. I told you to get into her class, brother. See what I mean?"

What he meant I would never know. We pulled up at Roosevelt Hospital, and the boys' stretchers were immediately cleaved from the ambulance and wheeled into the emergency wing.

I followed, staying close to Omar for as long as they would allow me. Finally, both boys were taken through large silver doors that swooped shut with a sort of thud that startled me back to the reality of the situation. Having read the black-and-white signs scattered throughout banning cell phone usage, I asked the triage nurse where I could go to call my husband. She callously raised her arm and pointed down a hallway without uttering a word.

I always feel the need to be exceptionally polite and courteous to rude people like that, as though the unfamiliar shock of good manners might cause them to do the same. I overthanked her and went off to call Tom. Before I pulled out my telephone, I thought carefully about how I would tell him that I was going to be slightly detained that evening and why. He had grown used to my being home before him most days. I knew I had to downplay the entire incident.

With no intention of lying, I carefully worded my excuse for why I might be tardy. We had no plans that evening. It should have been a

regular evening: Tom would watch the news; we would prepare some sort of dinner together or go out to a local place; and then we would cuddle up in bed and read side-by-side until Tom removed the book from my face. I would scoff that I wasn't asleep, and he would place it on the nightstand, forgetting to replace my bookmark.

Tom answered his office telephone on the first ring, somewhat hurried. I made sure to keep my voice sounding natural as I told him I might be a bit late.

"I'll fill you in on what is happening in the world, Liv. Should we order in dinner then when you get home?" Tom asked.

Remembering his obsession with the evening news, as well as my mother's, it suddenly dawned on me that school riots often make the news. This could leave the two of them in quite a tizzy, and then they might feel I'd been camouflaging the truth.

"There was a little problem at school this afternoon, but everything is just fine. I will hurry and try to get home by—"

"Are you okay, Liv? What kind of problem?" Tom's nervous, protective side triggered like a sensitive car alarm.

"Just a little fight. I am sure the news will make it into far more than it was," I jeered.

"How little?"

"Sweetie, don't worry. Would I be talking to you right now if something were wrong? Just finish up at the office and don't rush home. I may even beat you there." I began to hurry him off the phone.

"Olivia Dalton, are you sure—"

"I love you," I called into the phone and hung up before he could finish. I pressed three on speed dial to call my mother, the other evening news enthusiast. I wondered if I could be as elusive with my explanation with her and get away with it.

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## Chapter 2

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Left in the hospital emergency waiting area with a stack of forms to fill out, I dug for a pen in my purse and tried not to inhale the hospital aroma. Omar's brother, Darrel, a shorter, stockier version of Omar, with an unshaven face and tattoo around his neck that looked like a dog chain, arrived. He walked through the emergency room doors surrounded by an entourage of rugged looking men, one with short dread locks, and the others with shaven heads. They stood silently flanking Darrel on either side. I tentatively introduced myself, tried to hand the clipboard and pen to Darrel, as he began shooting orders at his flunkies, not lifting a finger to take the clipboard. He nodded in my direction, which by any other standards meant ignored me.

"Go pick up my moms and bring back eats. Don't scare the woman—you hear?"

Two of his counterparts, following direction like soldiers, slinked out. One remained. He stood by silently, his arms crossed in his black-and-white leather jacket.

I worked diligently on the paperwork, looking up every so often to watch Omar's brother pace in front of the vicious triage nurse. She wasn't nice to him either. In fact, she ignored him. I got the feeling that Darrel wasn't use to being disregarded and he wasn't enjoying it. He grunted loudly and fidgeted with whatever was in his pocket, getting louder with each round. After a few minutes, Miss Nasty Triage Nurse told him to go sit down.

"Darrel," I gently called, "Come sit with me for a few minutes."

His eyes rolled in my direction, although his head never seemed to

move. I shifted my pocketbook from the seat beside me and put it on the floor between my feet. Darrel walked over hesitantly and sat down hard. His friend stood by, arms still crossed, feet a foot apart, brain in a holding pattern, like a bodyguard.

“Omar is going to be fine, you know,” I offered.

“Yeah. I know,” he replied, looking me up and down as though he were unsure what to make of me.

“I’m sure they will let you back there in just a few minutes,” I tried again.

“Yeah,” Darrel responded, obviously not much of a conversationalist. I wondered how two brothers could be so different in that respect. Omar was always so amiable. I thought of my older sister. We were always so different. Even as adults, we had little in common, and yet we still spoke five times a week.

I shuffled through my paperwork to be sure I completed all I could and walked up to the desk. I handed the clipboard to the nurse, and without a sound, she took it and never so much as looked my way. I walked back toward Darrel and figured I would give it one last try. “I guess she just doesn’t talk,” I said, motioning toward our unfriendly nurse. “May I get you a drink?”

Darrell stood up and simply sauntered past the triage desk right through the big, silver doors. He didn’t glance back, and Nasty Nurse didn’t even look up. It was all so simple, and yet I never would have thought of it.

“Would you like a drink?” I asked one of his *soldier-like guardians* who still stood nearby.

He actually cracked a half-smile—enough that I could see his gold front tooth glitter at me—and grunted some unintelligible words. Feeling triumphant, I took his response as a yes and headed to the soda machine. I handed him a can of 7-UP and he uncrossed his arms long enough to take it. I continued to look at him waiting for a thank-you, but it never came. Silly me. Instead, he simply asked, “Why you still here, ma’ams?”

I gave him the same surly look, chuckled under my breath, and headed back to my chair. This, I thought he would understand better than a bunch of emotional garble about kindness and devotion. That was the end of our discussion. I never found out his name.

I paged through some magazines, thinking mostly about all the ghastly germs that were probably melded into its pages, wishing I had papers with me to grade. Always the multitasker. Finally, the churlish woman in scrubs and a cardigan from the triage desk summoned me to her desk with the sweep of two fingers. I anxiously obliged.

“You Carl’s mother?” she asked, reminding me that no one had yet shown up for the other boy from the ambulance.

I smiled at the thought of this gigantic, African American boy being my son. Miss Nasty Nurse, sitting within earshot, wasn’t laughing though. I sobered up quickly and told her I was just a teacher from his school. She sent me back to my seat. Wrong answer, I guess. Discharged to time out, I felt somewhat defeated.

I sat for almost an hour until her fingers started doing their little swooshing thing. I rushed back up wanting to get home at this point. I had been waiting for someone to come out and give me an update on Omar’s condition. Omar’s mother had arrived a half-hour before and was already behind the scary, silver doors with Darrell, while Darrel’s friend and I sat uselessly in the waiting area. I never got to say hello to her, as the other boys that had escorted her guided her directly into the back.

Miss Nasty Nurse was holding a telephone receiver in her lap. She looked up at me, finally making eye contact. “Carl’s mother said she can’t come. She wants to know if you can get him home.”

“She can’t *come*?” I repeated with concern.

“Can you get him home?” She repeated.

“I don’t even know where his home is.” I hesitated, and then added. “Is he even okay? What kind of injury does he have?”

“He’s got a broken jaw,” she answered and then held up a beefy hand to me to tell me in her own charming way to wait a moment while she figured some things out. She picked up the phone and conveyed to his mother that I don’t know where they live and asked what she wanted them to do with him. He would be able to leave in a little while.

I thought about interjecting and offering to get him home, but began instead to feel angry with this mother for not coming to get her son. For not doing everything she could to get to him at his time of need. For trusting me, a stranger, to care for her child. I was incensed.

This woman didn't even know who I was. The first time I had met her son was in the ambulance.

The nurse continued talking to Carl's mother as though I wasn't even there. Finally, she told me to just see that Carl gets on the D train toward Brooklyn. He knows how to get home from there.

She covered the receiver with her palm and asked, "Can you do that, ma'am?"

I tried to submerge my anger. "That's it then. I can just walk Carl to the train, and he can go home? He is okay?"

"Yes, he will be fine," she retorted, sensing the annoyance in my tone. "He got a broken jaw. *They* gonna fix it up, give him something for the pain, and *you* send him home to his mother." She offered no more.

I felt stumped and somewhat teamed up against. I wandered back to another chair to wait for Carl to come out so I could walk him to the subway, which he would then ride home, holding his broken jaw in his heavy hands. I couldn't foresee a frightened, but unable mother waiting at the other end of the subway for him. Nor did I imagine that she would be icing his pained cheeks all night long. I tormented myself with what I could say to this boy as to why his mother didn't come to the hospital. I hoped that someone in the back already explained something and came up with some grandiose reason. Perhaps she was disabled or out of the country. Perhaps she had eleven other children at home to care for and couldn't bring them all along. None of that reasoning sat well with me. I had no children of my own, but something told me there was nothing that would stand in my way if my child was hurt and needed me at his side. Images swarmed through my mind, none positive. I pictured Carl bent over in pain as he rode home, the clatter of the shaky subway irrigating the image.

The nurse was giving Carl's mother instructions over the phone about caring for his broken jaw.

I watched as she shook her head up and down as though she were *taking* directions; she finished their conversation and told me she would call me when Carl was ready to leave.

"Excuse me, could you please tell me what happened with Omar? He has been back there for a while as well?" I asked.

"He's the boy that came in with Carl? He had a whole bunch of

people back there with him. I think they already stitched him up, and they all left," she guessed.

I don't know why I expected anything more than that, but something tugged at me over the fact that no one from his family even came out to tell me all was well. "Well, I'm glad that he is okay then. I'll just wait for Carl, and we can put this whole afternoon behind us."

Nasty Nurse flipped through some papers. She was finished with me.

A few minutes later, Carl walked through the big doors toward me, cupping his jaw. I was anxious to get him to the subway and out of my care, but mostly I felt sad and wanted to go home myself.

Dusk had overtaken the city and the subway tracks were crowded with commuters. Carl insisted repeatedly that I could leave him. He'd been riding the trains alone since he was seven he swore.

"I don't mind waiting," I lied and stood beside him feeling useless, like a gun without bullets.

Carl continually touched his face, wincing from the pain in his cheeks, but said very little. I tried not to make conversation, understanding that it hurt for him to talk. Finally, the train rattled into the station and Carl walked closer to the edge. I stood behind him, masked in a crowd of suits and briefcases, musicians with giant instrument cases, and the ever-present mother with a stroller. He turned to me and muttered, "Thank you." The doors opened, and Carl shimmied into the train with all the others, and somehow I found myself following along with the crowd. There were few seats to be had, but Carl took one against a window, leaned his head against the cool glass and closed his eyes. I stood nearby and hung onto the top rail all the way to Brooklyn before he noticed I was there. Something within wouldn't allow me to simply send him on his way.

The conductor announced his stop, and Carl's eyes opened automatically. "You live in Brooklyn?" he asked.

"No, but you do. I just wanted to be sure you got home all right," I answered.

"This is my stop," he mumbled.

"I'll just get off here and then head back. You're okay from here, I think. Yes?"

Carl barely nodded his head. I followed him off the train and

toward the steps. He turned to me, his expression questioning why I was still with him. We trudged to the top of the steps. "How far are you from here?" I asked, looking out on a part of Brooklyn I had never been to before, or after for that matter.

"Just down the street," he grumbled, "but there my moms." He pointed to a woman across the street, standing under the awning of a dilapidated, brownstone apartment building. She stood as wide as her son and possibly as tall, holding a baby in her arms and two young children at her feet. Her hair was wrapped in an orange and blue kerchief to match the belt on her denim skirt. The lighting was scant, but as I walked closer, it was more apparent that she had a soft, kind face.

"Carl, you okay, my baby? I so glad you home!" she called to her son as he walked five feet ahead of me toward his building. His mother turned to the little ones standing beside her, "Go inside. You don't even have no shoes."

Carl stopped in front of his mother, bent his head down, and I watched his mother kiss the top of his head. He continued past her into the building, followed by his younger siblings like ducklings. "You the teacher?" she asked me.

"I am. I am going to head back now. I just wanted to—"

"You didn't have to bring him all the way home. I told the hospital lady on the phone that," she said. Her voice was more tender than I expected. Sort of velvety.

"I know. You have a good night," I turned to walk back to the subway station, feeling as though I'd somehow overstepped some sort of boundary.

"Thank you. Thank you for taking care my son. I couldn't get there in time with all these little ones ... and they said he would be fine."

"He will. Good night, ma'am." I took another few steps and heard her kind voice call after me once more.

"Bless you, ma'am. Bless you and your family too."

On the subway ride back into the city, I lay my head against the window and closed my eyes until the conductor announced my stop. My mind remained focused on Carl and his mother as we trudged through the dark tunnels underneath New York. I thought of how I had questioned her parenting, even ridiculed her love for her son while back

at the hospital, having never met her and how, in a matter of seconds, on the front stoop of a rickety old building, my opinion had changed so drastically. Carl's mother loved her son like any other devoted mother. Her devotion deserved no probing. I didn't even think about what I was going to tell my husband when I got home and he began his inquisition about the riot, reciting warnings about my involvement and safety like hail coming down from the sky.

*Go home and write  
A page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you—  
Then, it will be true.*

—Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B”

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## Chapter 3

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Each day my classes started with the same sort of writing exercises. The day after the riot, my intentions were to go on as planned, but my students had other ideas. They started asking what happened to Omar before the first bell rang, and within minutes, it was clear that until I addressed the topic at hand no work would be done. I felt as though I were being interviewed by a corps of persistent journalists, with an interrogation that was very different from Tom's.

Tom only wanted to know about safety procedures, why it started, and that I was not hurt. My students' focus was more on their boys and the truth versus the stories they heard. "Omar okay? He home? What happened to him, Miss? I hear he passed out in the ambulance. Did you really ride in the ambulance with him? Was Carl there too? Did he almost die, Miss D.?"

It was apparent that I needed to clear things up before the rumors got out of hand. We talked for a little while about both boys' injuries and how they would both be returning to school shortly. I attempted to steer the conversation so *I* could understand more about why and how the riot started. Of course, the students' theories were as varied as the buzz about Omar and Carl's conditions. They also differed vastly from the report that the administration gave prior to first period that day, in which they explained that it could possibly be gang-related and that they would be investigating further. All agreed that it started as something small, between just a few boys, and escalated. We agreed that I would share any updates on the boys' conditions as I received them; then we could get back to work with a little more than half the period

left. Having redirected their attention to the smart board, with a sigh of relief, I pointed to question number thirty-six.

Most days I begin class by putting a quotation or question on the board, often about a controversial topic or a quote from a great book or movie. I kept a little paperback on hand called *The Kid's Book of Questions*. The students would come in and write about the question of the day, or they could continue to expand on something else they were writing from a previous day. The key was to get them writing. A sort of stream of consciousness. I allowed them to share their journals with me or not. I just wanted to see that they were writing. Some of them rarely put a pen to paper, and this way, I knew they were actually creating something every day. Some great writing pieces stemmed from simple questions like #124: "When were you last in a fight? What things would you be willing to fight about even though they don't directly threaten you?" Or #181: "What things scare you even though you know there is no reason to be afraid?" These led to great discussions. The best parts were that they were writing and I was getting a peek into their minds, their world, their humanity.

I read from the smart board. "There are so many ways to say *peace*. And probably more ways to define it. What is your definition?" This rather fitting prompt became the topic for writing that day. "Finish this sentence: 'To me, peace would look like or mean ...'" I silently instructed my class by opening up my own journal and starting to write. After ten minutes of free writing, I asked the students to share their responses.

Stolid teenage faces sheepishly grew graver, and an icy chill dusted the air in our nonwindowed classroom. No takers at first. I encouraged the less shy. "Come on, Evangeline; have you ever felt or seen peace?"

Intimidated, she giggled.

"Rashaad, what does peace feel like to you?" I queried our class clown, hoping that for the moment, he could remain serious and help stir the subject. Rashaad looked up, solemn at first, then raised his long, bony fingers and began to trace out the shape of a woman's curves with his hands. His flippant remark to match his sarcastic gesture went by the wayside as I pushed the play button on the CD player I kept in the classroom. A Chopin violin concerto began to boom over Rashaad's cackling joke. Classical music streamed through the room as I nodded

for the class to continue writing. I told the class, “This is what peace sounds like to me.”

I closed my eyes as though I were drinking in each high-pitched note. I am sure the kids thought that I was wacky at that moment, but when I opened my eyes, a sea of raised hands communicated they were prepared to share their renditions of peace.

Evangeline claimed that peace began in one’s home. “If you can’t be happy at you own crib, then you can’t be happy nowhere.”

“I see peace on my son’s face when he sleep,” Shikayla declared softly.

“We ain’t gonna see no peace nowhere until there ain’t no more drugs on this planet, and that ain’t never gonna happen,” Evangeline added boisterously.

Beguiling dialogue progressed from there. The discussion grew heated and absorbing. It made dips and turns like a rickety, old rollercoaster, and when the bell rang at the end of the period, no one moved for fear of breaking the moment. I assured them we would reconvene the following day and that their words would stay inside these walls. To speak of our in-class discussion would be a violation of family. It was a silent rule. As they filed out, many imploringly reminded me of my promise to continue the discussion the next day.

I wished that I could offer them peace, especially their own interpretation of it, as a parting gift that day. Dole it out like cookies or popcorn in big cardboard buckets. Instead, I promised to continue to make their voices heard, make their opinions count. If you can’t offer them peace, then at least offer them hope.

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When they returned for class the following day, instead of a writing prompt with a question, I simply had written on the board: *peace, pax, paz, sidi, shalom, malu, amani*. Beethoven played in the background. I waited for someone to inquire as to what the strange words following *peace* were. No one uttered a word. The same deafening silence that prefaced our discussion the day before reared its ugly head. I began to write in my journal, and they did the same. Their pens and pencils danced across their writing logs like refined ballerinas. As I stopped writing and took my usual place perched on the front table in the classroom, their writing also dissipated, and they began to look up.

We all anticipated the resurrection of yesterdays' conversation, courteously, but with unease. I could see they needed prodding. "Does anyone know what these words on the board are?" I pointed, doing my best Vanna White imitation.

Silence raked a classroom that felt larger and more vacant than usual. The classroom was an old shop room with oversized, thick wooden tables and metal stools. A few desks were scattered about. The back wall had a bright mural of a bridge leading to a green pasture, with a bright blue sky and white, puffy clouds. Some of the kids had painted it on the weekends we'd come in to build the office in the back. The room was big, but usually comfortable.

"Guess," I encouraged.

Benz, looking as though he were stretching, messed with the cornrowed braids on his head, making their dangling beads jangle, and raised his hand. "Do they have something to do with what we were talking about yesterday?"

"Actually, they have everything to do with what we were talking about yesterday. Keep going." Sometimes I felt like a cheerleader.

With trepidation, Benz went on, "Do they means peace? Like those synonym things you teach us about?"

I loved that he recalled my lessons on synonyms. I would bet that he mentioned it for my benefit, being the perpetual pleaser, but I liked that about him too. Just the fact that he recognized the term alone gave me a positive jolt.

"They are all words that mean peace. Pax is the Latin word for peace. Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace."

"Yeah, I heard that one," Jerome called out. I was thrilled at his input. It was rare that Jerome said much at all. "Sometimes I work with my uncle at this temple where he cleans up after weddings and stuff? The people there always say that shalom thing instead of hello and good-bye."

"That's right, Jerome. The term *shalom* is used to greet people, say good-bye, and to say peace. It is nice to wish people peace each time you say hello and good-bye. Don't you think?"

A chorus of "Yea!" and "Peace out!" echoed like a disharmonious choir.

"Amani," I continued to explain, "Apparently means peace as well. I

looked up these words last night. Amani is the Swahili word for peace. Swahili is African. Pretty cool, huh?”

I never got to the language derivatives of any of the other words. The conversation took off like wildfire. They began to share their readings, and vocabulary terms like *harmonious*, *contentment*, *serenity*, and *absence of hostility* covered the smart board. Blanketed in a few of the many revelations I choked down as the years went by, the definition of peace took on several diverse images—as various as the sundry yearning faces that looked up at me from their seats in my classroom that day.

When class ended, my students closed up their writing journals in an almost subdued fashion. The days’ cathartic lesson had drained us all, leaving us longing for a taste of the peace we all coveted. I stood at the doorway of my classroom, and as each child slinked through, back into the pandemonium of the hallways of Malcolm High School. I tenderly wished them all peace in the variety of languages I had displayed on the board. Most responded by wishing me amani in return. Amani became the theme, our mantra, our bond for many discussions—right through graduation.

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## Acknowledgments

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It all started ... back in the eighties when I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. I was freshly out of college, young, energetic, and naïve. Although this book is in fact fiction, much of it came from truths that I saw in the sometimes unkind, but real world I was privileged to be a part of for the few years I taught in New York City. Therefore, it would be unfair if I did not express my gratitude to those children (who are now true adults) and their families for letting me into their world and showing me there are other ways of living outside of how I grew up. I did not always like what I saw, but it does certainly exist and, in my case, needed to be embraced in order to be understood. It was a great time in my life.

Right now is another great time in my life, and I must thank my loving husband, Tim, for making it possible for me to have the time in our busy lives while raising three amazing children to write the book I always said I would. May I always have the confidence in myself that he has in me.

Thanks are in order for my daughter Chelsea for gently asking for another page each day. Her temperate prodding kept me writing and accomplishing something I wanted to do since I was younger than she is today. It makes me proud to make her proud. Now it is her turn; I know there is a book in her too.

Then there is sweet Matthew, my son, who I knew was reading bits and pieces along the way. I hope I can always make him as happy as he makes me. Thanks also go to him for being my own personal I.T. man.

Thanks to Sarah for always making me laugh. She brightens so many people's worlds, I've no doubt there is something creative in her future. I can hardly wait to see what it is.

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Finally, this book and the basis for many of its stories are courtesy of some of the greatest kids I have ever met. Considered the toughest kids, the ones in danger of dropping out of school, they proved to be the most loving and, sometimes, the most in need of love. Most of them proved the system could work ... if we just changed things up a bit. They confirmed for me that the part of their educations that was deficient had little to do with the classroom conditions or lack of teaching material, but rather a need for a delicate mix of love and faith. I did my best to merge that into my teaching, and in return, they provided me with an opening to a diverse world that existed just blocks from my own and friendships and accolades like those that I'd never had before. They

taught me more about life than I could ever have taught them about English, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

This is for the real ACE kids, who may think they see bits of themselves in my characters, but they are just a conglomeration of jumbled memories and imaginary tales. The real story is how many of them became remarkable adults.

Keep believing.

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## About the Author

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Susanne Jacoby Hale, a former drop-out prevention teacher in a New York City high school, earned a master's degree from New York University in education and creative writing. She currently lives in South Florida with her husband and their three children. This is her debut novel.

In inner-city New York, horrors lurk in the unruly hallways of Malcolm High School. As in-school riots and gang violence consistently envelop the classroom, Olivia Dalton attempts to teach her students while simultaneously directing a drop-out prevention program that embraces an ever-increasing group of at-risk students. Left with little hope she will ever have children of her own, Olivia becomes entrenched in her students' lives, partly out of love, but also out of an unconscious desire to avoid her own internal anguish.

Meanwhile, Olivia's devoted husband, Tom, is having trouble facing his own disappointments in not being able to create a family. In an effort to protect Olivia, he attempts to hold her back from the one place she feels useful and fulfilled—her career. But despite her husband's efforts to quell her desire to help the troubled and confused, Olivia presses on and believes in change, even in the face of her students' continual mistakes and poor choices. Neither Tom nor Olivia have any idea that everything is about to change when an unassuming gift is left at their door.

*Shades of Gray* is the profound story of one woman's unpredictable journey to the truth, new beginnings, and a kind of love she never knew before.



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Cover art by Emily Miller

