

SHADES *of* GRAY

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Summary: At the end of the Civil War, twelve-year-old Will, having lost all his immediate family, reluctantly leaves his city home to live in the Virginia countryside with his aunt and the uncle he considers a "traitor" because he refused to take part in the war.

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The Civil War is over, but to twelve-year-old Will Page the Yankees are still enemies. How can it be otherwise, when the war has claimed his entire immediate family? Now Will must live with relatives in the Virginia Piedmont. This would be bearable if Will's uncle had participated in the war—but Jed Jones refused to fight the Yankees.

Although bitterly resentful, Will has to accept his uncle's hospitality and share his rural life, working beside him in a way no city boy has ever worked. As Will learns during the long, hot summer to trap rabbits, hoe the garden, mend the fence, and more, he comes to admire his uncle's ability to do just about anything. Still, in Will's eyes the man's skill and generosity are not enough to win respect, much less love. How will he ever manage to stay in this place?

Then the opportunity comes for Will to go home and live with a family friend. To his surprise, Will feels torn—until Uncle Jed allows a traveling Yankee to rest on his farm and re-ignites all of Will's rancor.

In this thoughtful first novel, Carolyn Reeder has created a hero who is all too human in his blind anger, but whose humanity finally prevails, helping him to realize that good people may hold opposite views—and that all people suffer needlessly from war.

CAROLYN REEDER is a teacher and self-avowed history buff. With her husband, she has co-authored three books about the area that is now Shenandoah National Park: *Shenandoah Heritage*, *Shenandoah Vestiges*, and *Shenandoah Secrets*.

The author's interest in the Civil War was piqued by a vacation spent visiting the battlefields at Antietam, Gettysburg, and New Market, and local museums in the Shenandoah Valley and the Virginia Piedmont—followed by her reading of firsthand accounts of the war's effect on local citizens. *Shades of Gray* grew out of these experiences.

Carolyn Reeder lives with her husband in Washington, D.C.

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in memory of my father,
Raymond B. Owens

ONE

Will sighed and tipped his hat so the brim shaded his eyes from the late afternoon sun. Now, if only he could block out the monotonous creaking of the buggy wheels.

Doc Martin pointed to a small cluster of buildings on the right and said, "Shouldn't be much farther now. They live just a couple of miles beyond the store and the mill."

Will looked at the motionless waterwheel and frowned. The mill wasn't grinding, so food must be as scarce in the Virginia Piedmont as it was in the Shenandoah Valley. Another reason his aunt's family would probably be as sorry to see him as he would be to see them. He scrunched lower in his seat.

The doctor took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his florid face. "I know how you feel about coming here, Will," he said, "but it's what your mother wanted. Her instructions were quite clear—if anything happened to her and your father, you children were to go to her sister."

At the mention of his family, Will felt the familiar burning behind his eyes. He clenched his jaw and waited until he could speak without his voice trembling. Then he said stiffly, "She wrote out those instructions a long time ago. That letter you showed me was dated before the war. She'd never have wanted us—wanted me—to live with traitors."

Doc Martin sighed heavily. "We've been through all this before, Will. You know this is the way it has to be, so you might as well make the best of it."

Will gritted his teeth. He hated to be preached at. And there was more to come.

"I don't want to hear any more about traitors, either. Your uncle wasn't a traitor. He didn't help the Yankees, he just didn't fight them. I don't approve of that any more than you do, Will, but the war's over. It's time to forget the bitterness."

Forget? Will swallowed hard. It was fine for Doc Martin to talk. The war hadn't ruined *his* life. *His* father and brother hadn't been killed by the Yankees. *His* little sisters hadn't died in one of the epidemics that had spread from the encampments into the city. And *his* mother hadn't turned her face to the wall and slowly died of her grief.

Will pushed back his hat and glared at Doc Martin. "You don't have as much to feel bitter about as I do," he said.

Doc Martin's gray eyes looked sad behind his spectacles. "You don't think four years of seeing young men die is enough to make a doctor bitter?"

Will's anger drained away. "I—I'm sorry, Doc. I guess I wasn't thinking," he muttered. They rode on in silence, and Will felt an empty sadness. This might be the last time he'd ever see Doc Martin. Why had he spoiled their time together?

Finally he asked, "Shouldn't we be there by now? It seems like we've gone at least two miles since the mill."

"We should be getting there," agreed Doc Martin. Reining in the horse, he brought the buggy to a stop beside a girl who was walking along the edge of the road, gathering something into a basket. "Could you tell me if Jed and Ella Jones live near here, miss?"

The girl looked up, her blue eyes wide. Brushing a loose strand of light brown hair off her face with one hand, she

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nodded, staring from Doc Martin to Will and then letting her eyes linger on Chauncy, the stout Morgan that pulled the buggy. "It's on the left a little way beyond the creek," she said finally, pointing down the road.

Will glanced down at the girl. She looked about ten, two years younger than he. He caught his breath and took a closer look, thinking how much she resembled his sister Betsy. Their eyes met, and Will looked away, embarrassed that the barefoot country girl with a smudge of dirt on her cheek had caught him staring.

"Thank you, miss," said Doc Martin, clucking to his horse.

At the shallow creek, the horse stopped to drink, and Will looked back. The girl was standing in the road, watching them.

They forded the stream easily and turned in at the grassy lane that left the road by a large chestnut tree. Will looked ahead at the house that would be his new home. It was a small house built of squared logs, with a porch across the front and a stone chimney at one end. Nearby stood a still smaller building—he guessed it was the summer kitchen. There was a hen-house with an empty yard, a small barn that obviously had been unoccupied for some time, and several other small, weathered buildings. Beyond the house he could see a garden patch enclosed by a stone fence, but the fields on both sides of the lane lay fallow. As they neared the house, a woman came out onto the porch.

Will had never met his Aunt Ella, but he knew her at once. Her clothes were worn and faded and her hair was graying, but the way she stood and the proud way she held her head reminded him so much of his mother that his chest ached.

Doc Martin stopped the buggy, lowered his bulky frame to the ground, and tied the reins to the pasture fence. Will scrambled down and stood uncertainly for a moment, then followed Doc toward the house.

Doc Martin stopped at the foot of the porch steps and doffed his hat. "Mrs. Jones?" he said. "I'm Dr. George Martin. I tended your sister in her last illness and I've brought you her boy, Will."

Aunt Ella drew a quick breath and then hurried down the steps to welcome Will. Suddenly he was confused. Part of him wanted to run to her and be held close, but part of him wanted to back away. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward and grasped her outstretched hands in his. "Hello, Aunt Ella," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she squeezed his hands and said, "I never even knew she was ill. . . . But what about Betsy and Eleanor? Didn't they come, too?"

"I'll unhitch Chauncy and put him in the pasture," Will said, pulling away and leaving Doc Martin to explain how the little girls had died of typhoid last summer. And to tell what had happened to Charlie. The pulse began to pound in his temples the way it always did when Will thought of his brother's senseless death at the hands of the Yankees.

Methodically, Will led Chauncy into the pasture. He knew it was foolish to unhitch the horse when Doc Martin would be leaving soon, but he'd needed to escape. He was replacing the rails in the pasture gate when a voice at his elbow said, "I'll get him a bucket of water."

He turned and saw the girl they'd met on the road, with her basketful of some kind of wild greens. In a flash he realized

why she had reminded him of his sister Betsy—she was his cousin Meg!

“He had a drink at the creek,” Will said.

“He might want more,” the girl said, eyeing the horse wistfully. “The army got our Nell,” she added.

Will looked up in surprise. “Did the Yankees come through here?” he asked.

“The Yankees came through, all right. But it was the rebels that got Nell. They took everybody’s horses for the cavalry.”

Farm horses like Nell probably ended up pulling artillery guns, Will thought as he watched the girl hurry to the barn and come back carrying a wooden bucket. He waited for her to notice that it was full of spiderwebs and shriek and drop it, but she simply wiped it out with a handful of tall grass and headed off toward the spring.

On the porch, Doc Martin and Aunt Ella were still deep in conversation. Will guessed they must be talking about his mother’s long illness. He leaned against the fence and watched Chauncy flicking the flies with his tail as he grazed. Will scowled, wishing his cousin hadn’t called the Confederates “rebels.” How that word grated on his ears! Then he heard soft footsteps behind him and turned to see Meg struggling with the heavy water bucket.

“Here, I’ll carry that,” he said, hurrying toward her.

“No, I’ll take it to him.”

Will shrugged and watched her gently pat the horse’s flank.

“I really miss our Nell,” she said.

“At least the Yankees didn’t get her, Meg.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed and she asked, “How did you know my name?”

He looked away. "I figured it out," he said stiffly. "I'm your cousin Will, from Winchester."

"When I saw you and your pa on the road I wondered who you were!"

"That's not my father," Will said flatly. "My father was killed in the war."

Meg's hands flew to her face. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she said. And then, curiosity getting the better of her, she asked, "But then who is that man you're with?"

"That's Doc Martin. He brought me here." Will kicked at a rock buried in the grass.

Meg stared at him for a moment. "Then your ma must be dead, too," she said slowly, "and he's brought you here to stay."

Still kicking at the rock, Will nodded.

"But what about your sisters? Are they—"

Quickly, he nodded again. "And so's Charlie, my brother. Killed by the Yankees two years ago."

"So you're all that's left of your family."

Will turned away. "Doc's about ready to leave," he said, reaching for Chauncy's halter. He led the horse out of the pasture and hitched him to the buggy. Just as he finished unloading his belongings, Doc Martin came and stood beside him.

"I wish things could be different," Doc said, resting his hand on Will's shoulder. "There's nothing I'd like better than to have you with me in Winchester. But even if your mother hadn't left that letter, it wouldn't have worked out. A bachelor doctor who's out on calls at all hours and away half the night

on confinements can't provide the kind of home a boy needs."

Will gave a jerky nod. "I understand, sir."

"These are good people, Will," Doc Martin went on. "Poor, but good. And they're kin. You'll do fine here—it's a lot different from what you're used to, but you'll do fine."

"I know I will, sir," Will said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Doc Martin climbed awkwardly into the buggy and then looked down at the thin, dark-haired boy. "Good-bye, Will," he said. His left eye began to twitch, just as it had the night he'd come into Will's room to tell him of his mother's death, and without waiting for a reply he urged Chauncy forward.

As the buggy began to roll down the lane, a feeling of desolation almost overcame Will. Aunt Ella laid her hand on his arm, and her touch calmed him a little.

"Let's move your things inside," she said, turning him away from the sight of the disappearing buggy. "You'll have the room where Sam and Enos used to sleep," she continued. "The twins have gone to Ohio to find work—they'll be sending us their pay to help out."

Will barely listened. He was concentrating on regaining his self-control. But when his aunt stooped to lift a small box tied with ribbon, he mumbled, "That's for you. It's some of Mama's things."

Then he picked up the two carpetbags that contained his clothes, his collection of brass uniform buttons, what little was left of last year's school supplies, some photographs taken before the war, and the family Bible—the Bible with his parents' marriage date and all the children's birth dates entered

in his mother's beautiful script. And all the dates of death, too. He himself had carefully printed in the date of his mother's death just a week ago.

"What's in here?" asked Meg as she reached for a long package wrapped in brown paper.

"That's my father's saber," Will answered, a note of pride creeping into his voice. "One of his friends brought it when he came to tell us that Papa'd been killed."

Aunt Ella led the way up the porch steps and into the house. After the bright afternoon sun, Will's eyes were slow to adjust to the dark interior, but he could see the big fireplace on one wall, the rocking chairs and trunklike chest arranged around it, and the large oak dining table near the front window. Through an open door on the other side of the room he saw a quilt-covered bed. He shut out the rising memories of the Winchester house and its large, bright, carpeted rooms filled with upholstered furniture. All that would be sold to pay Mama's debts. This was his home now.

Aunt Ella set her box on the table. Then she crossed the room, opened a narrow door, and started up the steep stairs to the attic. The low-ceilinged space had been partitioned into two sleeping rooms. She opened the door on the left and motioned Will to follow her inside.

In the dim light from the window at the gable end of the room, he saw the neatly made bed with its sunburst patterned quilt, a chest, one chair, and a small table. A kerosene lantern stood on the table.

When Aunt Ella saw his glance come to rest on the table, she explained, "Before the war, Sam did his studying there."

"I'll do my studying there, too," Will said, setting down

his carpetbags and taking the package from Meg.

Aunt Ella sighed. "There's been no school around here since the schoolmaster volunteered early in the war. The building's been boarded up ever since—you probably saw it there by the store when you drove in—and with times so hard I doubt there'll be money to hire a teacher this year."

No school in the fall? Will could hardly imagine not having school! After the academy he'd attended had closed because of the war, he'd gone to the classes one of the pastors had held in his home.

The sound of a door opening broke the silence. "It's Pa!" cried Meg, running down the narrow stairway.

Aunt Ella rested her hand on Will's arm. "Come meet your Uncle Jed."

His mouth went dry. In the flurry of meeting his cousin and aunt, he'd momentarily forgotten his dread of living in the same house with a traitor—or with a coward, rather, since his uncle hadn't actually helped the enemy.

What would a coward look like? Will wondered as he followed his aunt downstairs. Expecting to see a frail, stoop-shouldered excuse for a man, he was surprised to find a sturdy man with a broad chest and muscular arms listening to Meg's excited chatter.

"So this is our city cousin," the man said, striding across the room. His high forehead and the dark, appraising eyes below his bushy brows were the only part of his face not covered by a luxuriant brown beard.

Will stared at his uncle's outstretched hand. He couldn't shake hands with a man who had refused to fight for the Southern cause! But he couldn't offend the head of the family

that was taking him in, either. Slowly, he raised his right hand and felt it engulfed in the man's strong grasp.

Then his uncle said, "There's two squirrels for you out in the kitchen, Ella."

"I'll make a stew to go with the poke greens Meg cut along the road this afternoon," Aunt Ella said, turning toward the door. "You can bring me some wood for the fire, Will."

Glad to leave the house and his uncle, Will started for the woodshed. He gathered up an armload of split logs, choosing oak and locust to make the fire last.

His aunt smiled her thanks as he stacked the wood beside the stone fireplace that covered the north wall of the summer kitchen. "Now you can get me a potato from the cellar," she said, fanning the small flame she had coaxed from the embers.

Lifting the trap door in the far corner, Will could barely make out a ladder that led into the pitch blackness below.

"The lantern's on the shelf behind you," Aunt Ella said.

He raised the glass chimney, and his aunt touched the wick with a burning broom straw she'd lit at the fire. Then, carefully holding the lantern, he felt his way down the ladder. Will breathed in the earthy smell and savored the sudden coolness as his eyes passed over the shelves of empty canning jars and came to rest on the vegetable bins. He chose the largest of the wrinkled potatoes that covered the bottom of one bin and took it to his aunt.

"I'll split you some kindling now," Will said.

He found a hatchet, chose a piece of pine wood, and seated himself on a stump outside the woodshed. As he began to splinter off strips of wood, Meg joined him.

"Didn't you have slaves to do that sort of work?" she asked.

Will couldn't tell whether she was being sarcastic or not, but he decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. "We had three slaves," he said. "Callie was our cook, and Lizzy looked after the house. Fred did the outside work. He took care of our horses and split the wood and made the garden."

"Did the army get your horses, too?" asked Meg.

"My father was in the cavalry, so he and Fred took the horses."

Meg's eyes widened. "Did Fred go in the cavalry?"

"Fred went with my father, to look after him and the horses."

"But I thought—"

Will interrupted her. "You thought all slaves wanted to run away from their cruel masters, didn't you?" he challenged.

She nodded, her eyes not leaving his face.

"Well, that was true on a lot of big plantations farther south, but some slaves were well treated and cared about their families." Will shaved off more pine splinters. "Our Lizzy looked after Betsy and Eleanor when they were sick. She cried as hard as Mama did when they died."

Tracing a curve in the dust with her bare toe, Meg said simply, "My little sister died, too."

"You mean Beth?" Will said, looking up in surprise.

"She died during the war. After your mother started sending back Ma's letters without even opening them." Meg's voice was cold, and her eyes narrowed.

Will frowned. He hadn't known about that! He got up and went to the woodshed for another log.

"How did Beth die?" he asked when he came back. "Did she catch diphtheria?"

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