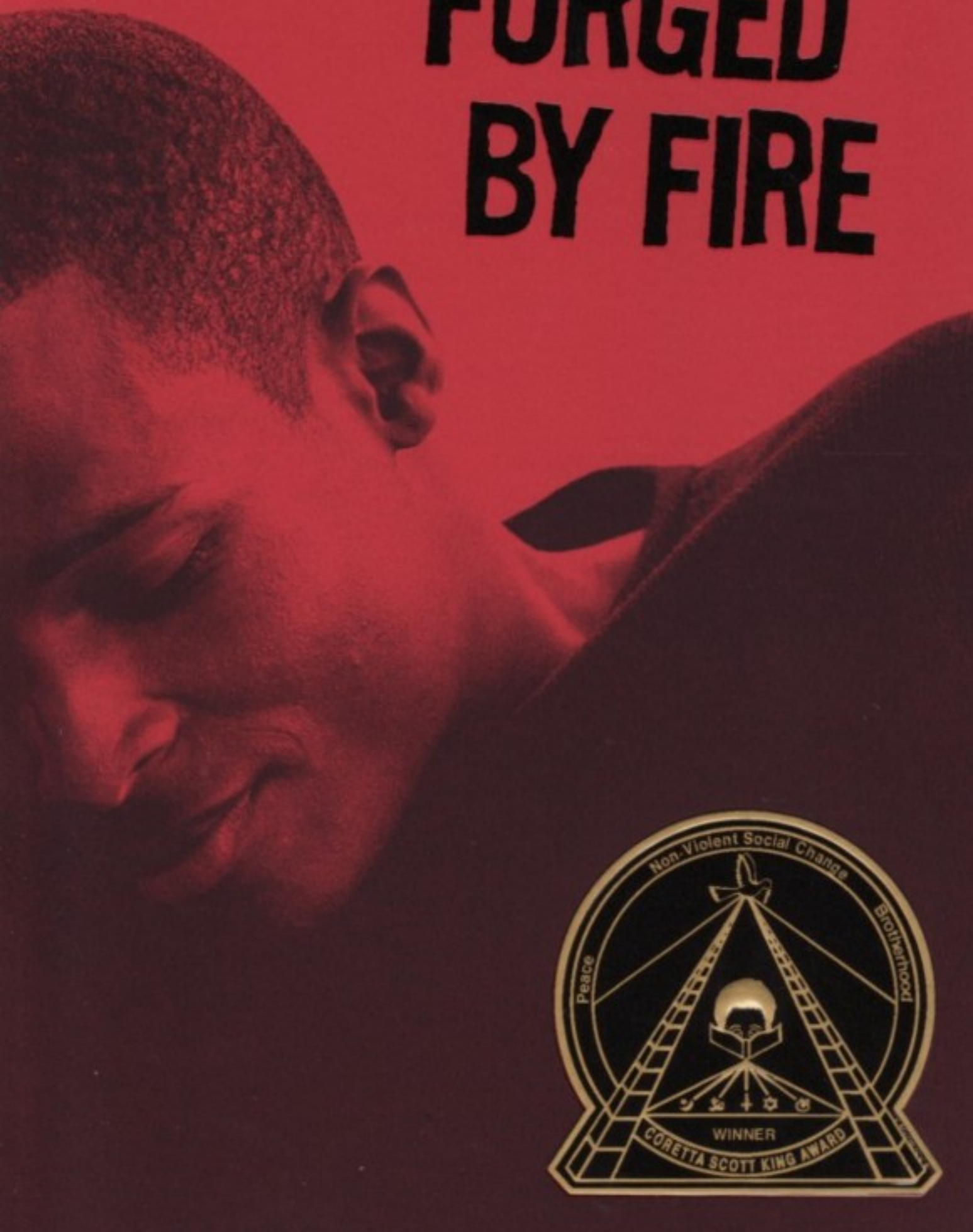


SHARON M. DRAPER

The second book in the powerful Hazelwood High trilogy

FORGED BY FIRE



ONE

“**I**F YOU DON’T sit your stinkin’, useless butt back down in that shopping cart, I swear I’ll bust your greasy face in!” she screamed at the three-year-old in front of her. He studied her face, decided she was serious, and put his leg back inside the cart. He was standing near the front end of the cart, amidst an assorted pile of cigarette boxes, egg cartons, and pop bottles. He didn’t want to sit down anyway because of the soft, uncomfortable load in his pants, which had been there all afternoon and which felt cold and squishy when he moved too much. He rarely had accidents like that, but when he did, Mama sometimes made him keep it in his pants all day to “teach him a lesson.”

Gerald was only three, but he had already learned many such lessons. He’d never seen *Sesame Street*, never heard of Riverfront Stadium—he didn’t even know he lived in Cincinnati. But he knew the important things—like never mess with Mama when she was in bed—Mama got really mad when you woke her up, especially if she had somebody in bed with her. And never touch the hot thing that Mama used to light her cigarettes, even if the mysterious orange-and-blue fire that comes out of it liked to tease you

and dance for only a moment before running away.

Mama had once caught Gerald playing with the lighter, and she made the fire come out and she held his hand right over the flame. It wasn't his friendly fire dancer, though, but a cruel red soldier that made his hand scream and made him dizzy with pain and he could smell something like the meat Mama cooked, but it was his hand. When she stopped, she had washed his hand with cool water and soothed him with warm hugs and wrapped with salve and bandages the place where the fire soldier had stabbed him. She told him that she had done it for his own good and to teach him a lesson. He had tried to tell her that he was just trying to find the fire dancer, but she wasn't listening and he had given up, thankful for the hugs and the silence.

One other lesson that Gerald had learned was *never, never* stay near Mama when she sniffed the white stuff. She got it from a man named Leroy who smelled too sweet and smiled too much. When he leaves, you hide behind the couch and hope Aunt Queen comes over because sometimes Mama yells and gets her belt or her shoe and hits, and hits, and hits. . . . And sometimes she just goes to sleep on the floor and it gets dark and you cry and your tummy feels tight and hurty, but at least there's no shoe to run away from.

Once Aunt Queen had found Gerald curled up behind the couch sucking his thumb. His pajamas were soaked and smelly and he was shivering and

hungry. Mama had been gone all day. She had told him not to leave the room, and he had really, really tried to be good, but he was so cold, so very cold. Aunt Queen had taken him to her apartment and given him a warm bath, a bowl of hot soup, and some warm, fuzzy sleepers, even though she had to pin the back of them so they wouldn't fall off. Then Mama had come and she and Aunt Queen had yelled and screamed so much that Gerald had to hold his ears while he lay curled at the foot of the bed. Finally Mama started crying and Aunt Queen was saying stuff like, "I know, honey," and Gerald knew he was going back home.

That night, Mama had hugged him and kissed him and held him close until he fell asleep. Gerald had felt so warm and special and golden—he wanted to feel like that forever. He knew his mama loved him. She had bought him a G.I. Joe man last week and it wasn't even his birthday or Christmas or anything, and most days she combed his hair and dressed him in clean clothes, and told him to say, "Yes, ma'am" to grown folks. And sometimes, on really good days, she would hug him and say, "You know you're my best baby boy, don't you, Gerald? You know you're my baby, don't you?" And he would smile and that warm, golden feeling would start at his toes and fill him all the way up to his smile.

Even though Mama had yelled at him, today was a good day. Mama always yelled—it was no big deal. (Some days he yelled back at her. Then she would

WILL GERALD FIND THE COURAGE TO STAND UP TO HIS STEPFATHER?

When his loving aunt dies, Gerald suddenly is thrust into a new home filled with anger and abuse. A brutal stepfather with a flaming temper and an evil secret makes Gerald miserable, and the only light in his grim life is Angel, his young stepsister. Gerald and Angel grow close as he strives to protect her from Jordan, his abusive stepfather, and from their substance-addicted mother. But Gerald learns, painfully, that his past can't be extinguished, and that he must be strong enough to face Jordan in a final confrontation, once and for all. . . .

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