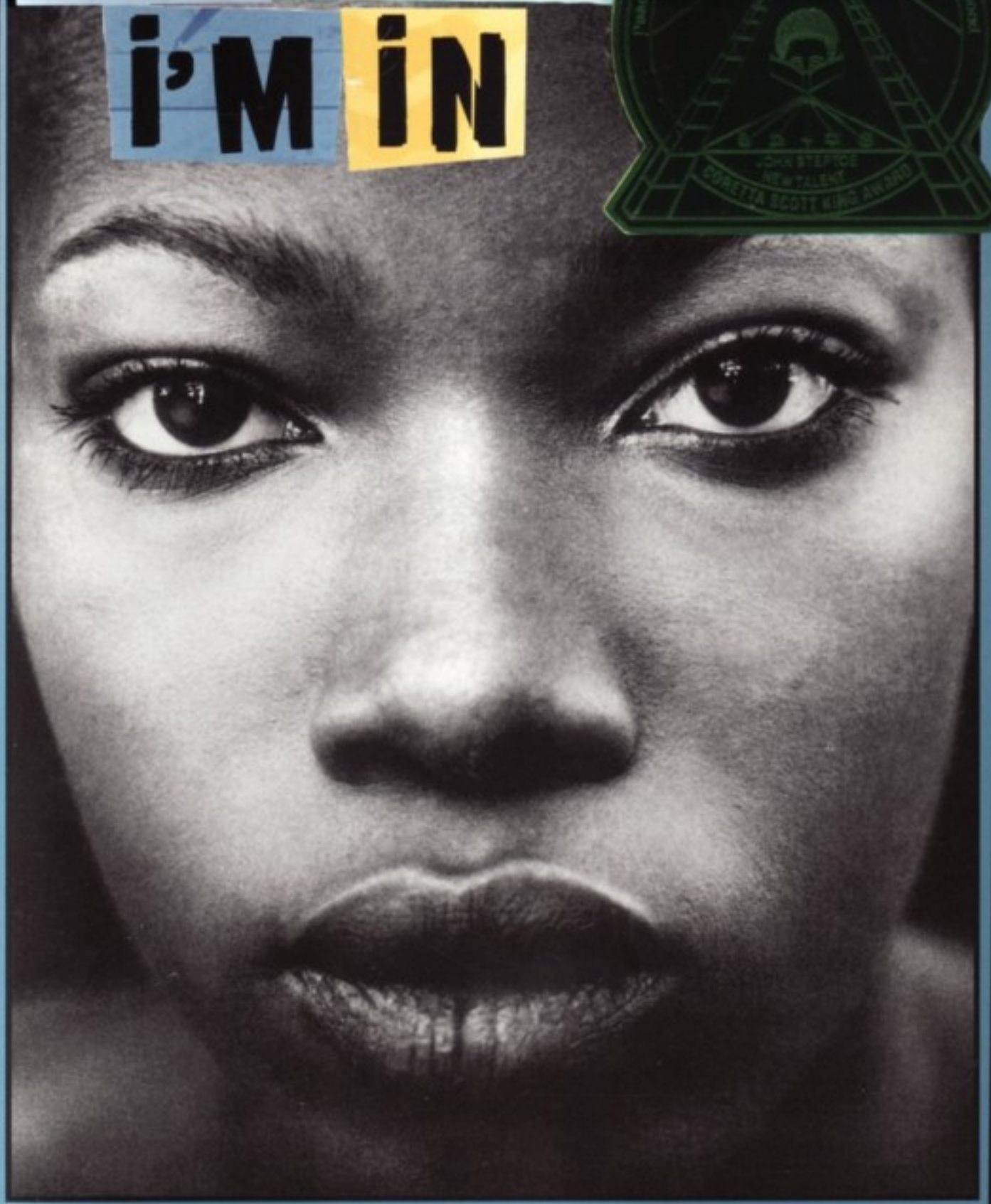


THE SKIN

i'm in



Sharon G. Flake

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST TIME I SEEN HER, I got a bad feeling inside. Not like I was in danger or nothing. Just like she was somebody I should stay clear of. To tell the truth, she was a freak like me. The kind of person folks can't help but tease. That's bad if you're a kid like me. It's worse for a new teacher like her.

Miss Saunders is as different as they come. First off, she got a man's name, Michael. Now who ever heard of a woman named that? She's tall and fat like nobody's business, and she's got the smallest feet I ever seen. Worse yet, she's got a giant white stain spread halfway across her face like somebody tossed acid on it or something.

I try not to stare the first day that amazon woman-teacher heads my way. See, I got a way of attracting strange characters. They draw to me like someone stuck a note on my forehead saying, "losers

wanted here." Well, I spend a lot of time trying to fit in here at McClenton Middle School. I ain't letting nobody ruin it for me, especially no teacher.

I didn't even look up when Miss Saunders came up to me that day like I'm some kind of information center.

"Excuse me," she says. She's wearing a dark purple suit, and a starched white shirt with matching purple buttons. That outfit costs three hundred dollars, easy. "I'm trying to find the principal's office. I know it's around here somewhere. Can you help me?"

Before I catch myself, my eyes ricochet like pin balls, bounding from John-John McIntrye's beady brown eyes right up to hers. I swallow hard. Stare at her till John-John whacks me on the arm with his rolled-up comic book.

"That-a-way," I say, pointing up the hall.

"Thank you. Now what's your name?" she says, putting down her briefcase like she's gonna stay here awhile.

"Maleeka. Maleeka Madison—the third," I say, smacking my gum real loud.

"Don't let that fancy name fool you," John-John butts in. "She ain't nobody worth knowing."

T H E S K I N I ' M I N

Miss Saunders stares down at him till he turns his head away and starts playing with the buttons on his shirt like some two-year-old.

"Like I say, the office is that-a-way." I point.

"Thank you," she says, walking off. Then she stops stone still, like some bright idea has just come to her, turns around, and heads back my way. My skin starts to crawl before she even opens her mouth. "Maleeka, your skin is pretty. Like a blue-black sky after it's rained and rained," she says. Then she smiles and explains how that line comes from a favorite poem of hers. Next thing I know, she's heading down the hall again like nothing much happened.

When she's far enough away, John-John says to me, "I don't see no pretty, just a whole lotta black." Before I can punch him good, he's singing a rap song. "Maleeka, Maleeka—baboom, boom, boom, we sure wanna keep her, baboom, boom, boom, but she so black, baboom, boom, boom, we just can't see her."

Before I know it, three more boys is pointing at me and singing that song, too. Me, I'm wishing the building will collapse on top of me.

John-John McIntyre is the smallest seventh grader in the world. Even fifth graders can see over his head.

**WINNER OF THE
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Maleeka suffers every day from the taunts of the other kids in her class. If they're not getting at her about her homemade clothes or her good grades, it's about her dark skin.

When a new teacher, whose face is blotched with a startling white patch, shows up at their school, Maleeka can see there is bound to be trouble for her, too. But the new teacher's attitude surprises Maleeka. Miss Saunders loves the skin she's in. Can Maleeka learn to do the same?

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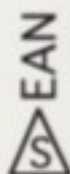
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