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**Level II Semifinalist**

***Letter to Sharon Flake concerning her book, *The Skin I'm In****

Dear Sharon Flake:

I loved your book *The Skin I'm In*. This book really got to me. It really changed how I feel about and view myself and made me see that I don't have to rely on other people's opinions. In many ways, Maleeka and I are exactly alike. I, too, can't afford the in-style clothes, I'm not very popular, I have extra dark skin; I hang around the wrong people. The reason why I can't afford the in-style clothes is because my dad is on an eight dollar and hour job and they keep cutting his hours; my mom is in jail because of me—she owes child support. Sometimes, I wish I wasn't born so that my parents wouldn't have to suffer. I'm not very popular because everybody thinks I'm weird. I would not anything for some friends. I hang around the wrong people just to get friends. I have this friend who hits me all the time and calls me all types of names and I just take it all, just to be popular. My dad tells me I don't have to deal with people like that, but he just doesn't know what it's like to be me in a private school. I struggle to keep my grades up to A's so that he'll be proud of me.

I get bullied at school, and I try to laugh it off but I can't—it hurts too much. When I get talked about, there isn't a moment that goes by that I don't think about killing myself. In *The Skin I'm In*, Miss Saunders asked, "What does my face say to the world?" For homework, I was assigned an essay in which I had to answer that very same question. What does my face say to the world? My face says that I'm ugly and I hide my sadness under the smiles I force onto my face. Everybody thinks that I'm okay, when deep down I'm not. I wish somebody would ask me if I'm okay. My face says, go on and talk about me. My face says that I'm not smart. My face says my friends (that I don't have) don't care what I say. Nobody cares! My face says I'm blind because I need glasses. My face says I'm too dark and everybody talks about it. My face says that I'm deaf because, people have to repeat stuff for me to hear. My face says that it hurts when other people talk about their perfect life, because they have a better life than me. My face says that I have to pretend to have the things they have because I think they won't like me anymore if I don't have what they have.

I've been in the same situation that Maleeka and Caleb were in. A boy named Jerrell and I used to get along very well. Then, I found out that he liked me, and in that time I liked him even though everybody kept saying that he was ugly. We started spending time together. Then, when we got into Sixth grade, something happened. He didn't want to talk with he and he joined in with the people who teased me. Then, on the last day of school, he started talking to me and we have remained friends. I hope that we will always stay that way. The friendship between Maleeka and Sweets reminds me of another friend named Crystal. She likes me because of my personality and how we get along. She doesn't care what I have or don't have because we like the same things and I think we are going to be friends forever. Time to time we have fights; what best friends don't?

Whenever people told me I'm beautiful, I never believed them. When Maleeka stood up to Char and said "This is the skin I'm in," I found out that I don't have to listen to what people say about me, because it only matters what I think about MYSELF. My dad tells me that when people talk about me, all I have to say to them is, "You wish you were me," because most of the time they are talking about me because they are jealous of me. When I read your book, that

thought had occurred to me, too. Didn't Char, after all, talk about Maleeka because she was jealous of her? Since reading your book, I have come to realize that I might be an emotional person but I sure am NOT any of the hurtful words that they call me. Like Maleeka, all I have to do is believe in myself and just be ME. I have to stay focused on my schoolwork, instead of my clothes, hair and shoes. Sometimes, I wish that I was a different person, but then I think: maybe they're going through the same thing. Then I figure out that I have a reason to be who I am. I might not know what right now, But soon I'll figure it out. It's also like my dad says: "God didn't put you in this situation if he didn't think you could handle it."

Your book meant so much to me. I figured out what I'm supposed to care about and what not to care about. Your book helped me because I am happier at school. I don't care what people say to me anymore and I just feel GREAT!

Sincerely,

**Damere Herron**