

Ralph Fletcher

FLYING SOLO



7:03 A.M.

— Rachel White —

Rachel lay in bed, reading, waiting until the last possible minute when she absolutely had to put down her book and get out of bed.

Many people believe that it is the air passing under the wings that supports the plane as it flies, she read. In fact, it is the air passing over the wings that provides the lift that keeps the airplane in the air.

“Rachel!” Mom yelled. “C’mon, gal, shake a leg!”

Rachel sighed and looked up from her book at the posters around her bedroom. Amelia Earhart. Charles Lindbergh. Sally Ride. John Glenn. It was hard to believe that they all had to go to school, too.

Rachel swung her legs out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom. She didn’t look forward to school much these last six months. There wasn’t much to enjoy, except for Mr. Fabiano.

He was by far the greatest teacher she had ever had. Smart and funny. And simply gorgeous, with black-black eyes that could always find a place deep inside her. She had a crush on him, all right, not that she was alone. Most of the other sixth-grade girls had crushes on "Mr. Fab."

She would never call him that nickname. No way. It made her think of Fab laundry detergent. She would always think of him as Mr. Fabiano.

Rachel leaned forward to wash her face with cold water. She brushed her teeth, rinsed her mouth, and cleared her throat.

The guttural sound startled her. There was a hint of her voice in that sound and she had not heard her voice in the past six months.

She remembered the day it happened. Tommy Feathers, a kid in her sixth-grade class, had brought to class some raspberry pies he'd made at his parents' bakery. Tommy had brought a wedge of pie for everyone, but he put the biggest piece of pie on her desk.

Tommy smiled at her. He had a rather big head, and an annoying habit of humming loudly in class. He was a little slow—already he had been kept back twice, so he was two years older than anybody else in sixth grade. It was no secret that he was in love with her. Every day he tried to give her cards, stories, seashells, and now this huge chunk of raspberry pie. She tried not to be mean, but sometimes he really got on her nerves.

"I don't like sweets," she said, pushing the pie back toward him.

After school Tommy showed up at her house, something he had never done before.

"I made you a whole pie," he said, grinning and holding it out to her. "A whole pie made from yellow raspberries. They're like gold. Gold is my favorite color."

"Golden raspberries?" Mom exclaimed. "Really? How marvelous! I never heard of such a thing."

"We picked them in New Hampshire," Tommy explained, still flashing that foolish grin. "In New Hampshire."

"I told you I don't like pie," Rachel told Tommy. "I don't eat sweets. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Tommy lowered his eyes and bit his lower lip.

"Well, I certainly do," Mom said, taking the pie from him. "Thank you, Tommy. I'm going to enjoy every bite."

That was on October 28. Next morning her best friend Missy phoned to tell her the news. Tommy Feathers was dead.

"He died in his sleep," Missy said.

"Oh my God," Rachel whispered into the telephone.

She stared at the TV, a stupid cop show. A detective had just handcuffed a suspect, and the man looked guilty: scruffy beard, haunted eyes,

Friday, April 28, 9:00 a.m.



ppportunity is knocking at the door of Mr. “Fab” Fabiano’s sixth-grade class. Mr. Fab is absent and a substitute never arrives.

The class wants to prove that kids rule, so they decide to run the class on their own. Supersmart Karen leads the way in the class routines, and most of the kids join in. But for Rachel White, this isn’t just any day. Rachel’s been silent for six months and communicates by writing notes. She knows today is exactly six months since their classmate Tommy Feathers died. In her own way, Rachel reminds the class about Tommy—and for the first time, Mr. Fab’s students reveal their true and sometimes hurtful thoughts. Where is Mr. Fab’s class headed now? The school day isn’t over yet. Will they keep flying solo, or crash?

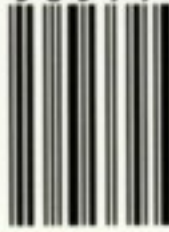
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