

BITSY AND THE
MYSTERY AT
HILTON HEAD ISLAND

VONDA SKINNER SKELTON

SILVER DAGGER
M Y S T E R I E S

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book, set on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Some of the landmarks are accurately placed in their true settings, while others are completely fictional. Any other resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher. I hope those familiar with Hilton Head Island will enjoy reading about both the real and the imagined.

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to my mother, Ruth Skinner Poole,
and to my daddy, the late Bobby Skinner.
Your love, sacrifice, and example laid the foundation for
the Bitsy Burroughs Mysteries.*

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C H A P T E R · 1

Sometimes it stinks being the only girl on the baseball team. And it doesn't have anything to do with being strong enough or fast enough or tough enough. Sometimes things aren't fair just because you're a girl. Take my trip to Hilton Head Island, for instance.

Everything was perfect that morning when we packed Coach Payne's rust-covered van and his wife's red Civic Hatchback. My teammates stuffed all the suitcases, baseballs, gloves, and bats into the van while the coach's daughter, Nikki, and I crammed the groceries into Mrs. Payne's little car.

I had just finished painting "Go, Marlins!" on the back window of the van when Coach yelled, "Okay, team, go ahead and get in while I check the oil." He raised the dented hood of the old van. "Hey, Bitsy, are you riding with us guys?"

Nikki opened the red car door and sing-songed, "We've got air conditioning." Her coal-black braids bounced with the beat.

I wiped the blue paint from my hands and studied the two cars. On my right, the hot, stale air from the van smelled like we'd already been to bat nine times and were working on extra innings. On my left, a cool breeze floated from the Civic. "I think we girls should stick together," I said, jumping into the backseat. "Hilton Head, here we come!"

We were about halfway there when Nikki first got sick. And I mean really sick. And every time she threw up, I thought I was going to throw up, too. It was miserable. Have you ever tried to breathe in a closed car while somebody was hurling their guts? I rolled down the window. So much for air-conditioning.

Three hours later, Coach and I were standing under the mossy oak trees outside the Hilton Head Urgent Care Center. The news wasn't good.

"But Coach, what about equality?" I crossed my arms and scrunched up my mouth. "You always said it didn't matter that I was a girl . . . or that I was short. You said I could do anything."

Coach Payne rolled his midnight eyes to the sky and shook his head. "Bitsy, you know this has nothing to do with being equal or not."

"Well, it's only because I'm a girl, right?"

"Of course it is. But it's for your own good." He put his hand on my shoulder and talked to me like he was my daddy. "Look, Nikki and her mom have to go back home. A twelve-year-old girl can't stay with the boys

and me without a woman around. You know that.”

I knew that.

“But I can’t stay with people I don’t know, either. It’ll be awful! What if they don’t like me?”

Coach rubbed his forehead and scratched his whiskers. “How could they not like you?” Then he took my hands. “Listen, Bitsy. Just be yourself—your own sweet self—and you’ll be fine.” It sounded just like something my daddy would say.

Minutes later, I watched as Mrs. Payne helped her daughter out of the doctor’s office and over to us. Coach leaned over and hugged his daughter. Nikki’s mom whispered something in her husband’s ear, gave him a kiss, and then helped Nikki to the car. The stink of vomit hung around in the air. When they reached the Civic’s red door, Nikki’s mom stopped and turned back to me. “I’m sorry,” she mouthed.

I watched as she put my sick friend in the backseat and then climbed in on the driver’s side. Mrs. Payne looked a little pale herself. I was thankful for the sweaty smell of boys and baseball. I turned to my coach. “How long can your wife hold her breath?” I asked.

“Not long enough,” he said. “Not long enough.”

C H A P T E R · 2

Twenty minutes later, Coach Payne turned onto the cement driveway and parked our van in front of the most beautiful house I'd ever seen. "Here we are," he announced. "Number 32 Barnacle Road, Port Royal Plantation, Hilton Head Island.

My mouth hung open as I stared at the mansion. The other Marlins looked just as impressed as I was.

Coach climbed out and I jumped from the passenger seat. It didn't take me long to figure out I had jumped into another world. Sure, I knew the rusted van was in bad shape, but it suddenly looked a thousand times worse once it was parked between the BMW and the Lexus SUV. A tall, thin man walked from the big car, while a beautiful woman with dark brown hair unfolded out of the black BMW. I wondered if she was a model. I ran my hand through my own dark curls and tried to smile.

The man grabbed Coach Payne in a bear hug. "Johnny, how're you doing, man? What's it been—fif-

teen years?”

“Yep, ’bout that,” my coach answered. “A long time since our college days.”

The man shook his head and looked straight at Coach Payne. “Yeah, those were some good times, weren’t they? I wouldn’t want to go back to college life again, but I’ll never forget those lean years.” He looked far away for a moment. “You know, there’s something to be said for the poor ol’ days.”

Coach Payne’s eyebrows questioned the man. “There is?”

“Oh, come on, Johnny,” he said, patting my coach on the back. “You know there is.” Then he turned to me and smiled, revealing his perfect, white teeth. “So, this must be Betsy—”

“Bitsy,” I said, too fast. “Bitsy Burroughs.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He put out his hand. “I’m Coach Wilder. Steve Wilder. Looks like you’ll be staying with us, huh?”

But before I could answer, a girl with sandy-colored hair pulled herself out of the fancy black car, her pink tank top and lime green shorts perfectly matching her multicolored flip-flops. She looked about my age, but that’s where the resemblance ended.

I tried to cover the stains on my secondhand clothes, but the stains won. Then I studied my green shorts. *Grief!* I thought. *When did they get so faded?*

The daddy model hugged the mommy model, who

put her arm around the girl model.

This is going to be a long week.

Coach Wilder motioned toward his family. “Bitsy, I’d like for you to meet my wife, Nicole. And this is my daughter, Mallory.” All the models smiled.

Are they laughing at my clothes?

“Our son’s with the team,” Coach Wilder said. “I’m sorry, but the guys are a little slow getting out of the cars.”

I faked a smile back and turned to my own coach. “Could I talk to you a minute?” I took a few steps and pointed. “Over there?”

My sleepy-eyed, ragtag teammates began unloading from the van, as boys with matching red and yellow River Cats shirts jumped out of the SUV. Coach Payne and I stepped behind a large oak tree.

“Please don’t make me stay, Coach, please. I’ll do anything. I’ll even sleep in the van if I have to.” I grabbed both of his arms. “Just please let me go with you.”

Coach took my hands from his arms, but he didn’t let go. “It won’t be bad,” he said. “I promise. You’ll still be a Marlin. Coach Wilder will get you to our practices. The only difference is that you’ll be staying at a different house.”

“But look at them. We don’t have a single solitary thing in common. They have money, I don’t. They have nice clothes and perfect teeth, I don’t.” I brushed

at the stains on my faded shorts. “And little Miss Malory looks like she’s never been dirty a day in her life!”

Coach Payne sighed and gazed out over the yard full of boys. “I’m sorry, Bitsy, but this is the way it has to be. Either you stay with the Wilders and the River Cats team, or I’ll have to call your parents to come get you.”

“My parents? Here?” I threw my hands in the air and paced around my coach. “Oh, great—that’s all I need! The River Cats would take one look at my ragtag family and I’d never live it down.” I plopped back against the oak tree and crossed my arms. “Grief!”

A few minutes later, Coach Payne had unloaded my stuff and sent the team over to tell me good-bye. I hadn’t moved from the tree.

“It’s not so bad,” Will said. “At least you get to ride in a Lexus.”

“Who cares about a Lexus.”

Wade jabbed my arm with his fist. “You better not give away our signals to your new friends.”

I glared at him. “They’re not my friends.”

Josh leaned over and whispered, “Maybe they’ll feel sorry for you and give you some of their money.”

“I don’t want their ol’ money.”

“If you’re not going to be on our team anymore,” Darin said, “can I play first base?”

This is getting ridiculous! “No, you can’t play first base, because that’s my spot and I’m not going anywhere! And stop treating me like a traitor. This isn’t

my idea, you know.”

Will took off his dusty Marlins hat and scratched his blond, buzzed head. “It might not be your idea, but you sure got the good end of this deal. I’d be happy if I was you.”

“Well, you’re not me,” I said, heading toward my Scooby-Doo suitcase. “And I’m not happy about it at all.”