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opening extract from

The Babysitters' Club: The Summer Before

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The Babysitters Club – The Summer Before

1. Kristy

The Baby-sitters Club. I'm proud to say it was totally my idea, even though the four of us worked it out together. "Us" is Mary Anne Spier, Claudia Kishi, Stacey McGill, and me – Kristy Thomas. But that was at the beginning of seventh grade, after the summer in which my friendship with Claudia nearly fell apart, Mary Anne began to find out who she was, Claudia experienced her first love, and an unhappy girl left New York City and moved to our town. It was quite a summer.

When Mary Anne and Claudia and Stacey and I talked about it later (when we were older), we discovered that during those long hot months we had all, separately, felt that we didn't quite belong where we were. Not one of us. Up until that summer we hadn't paid much attention to such things. But now Mary Anne felt that she was suddenly teetering between childhood and teenagehood, or whatever you call it, and that she didn't fit into either world. Claudia felt that she was drifting away from Mary Anne and me, drifting toward her own teenagehood alone – while Mary Anne and I lingered on the shore. Stacey had survived a horrible year and had been shunned by her classmates and friends, and now her parents had decided to move the family here to Stoneybrook, Connecticut, where she knew absolutely no one. And I, Kristin Amanda Thomas, felt like a stranger in my family. I would look around at my mom and my brothers who were oh-so-happy with Mom's new boyfriend Watson, and I'd think, *How can they leave Dad behind? Am I the only one who still wants him to be part of the family?* And so I decided to give my father a second chance.

The summer started off like most of the other summers of my life. But by the end of it, everything was different. *We* were different. And the summer brought the four of us, Claudia, Stacey, Mary Anne, and me, together to form the Baby-sitters Club – something we would belong to, in one sense or another, for the rest of our lives.

When the bell rang at the end of the last day of sixth grade, I was ready. I had cleaned out my locker early that morning, before school began – and I mean really cleaned it. With a tiny bottle of Fantastik and a bunch of paper towels that I had stuffed into my backpack before I left home. I had removed every last scrap of paper from the locker, every old eraser, every gum wrapper and paper clip and pencil stub, plus one gray sock, and thrown them away (including the sock, which smelled). Then I had scrubbed the locker down with the Fantastik. I wasn't taking any chances on being called at home in a day or two about the condition of my locker. I did not want to have to set foot in Stoneybrook Middle School again until September when seventh grade began. So when that last bell rang, I ran from my language arts class (calling a hasty and not at all heartfelt good-bye over my shoulder to Mrs. Alpin, whom I loathed) directly to the front door of SMS where I met Mary Anne, my best friend in the world. Mary Anne had also cleaned her locker thoroughly that morning, and the two of us had not one single school responsibility left.

We had to wait for Claudia, though. Claud had not thought quite as far ahead as we had, and she still had to deal with her locker and also have a chat with her math teacher, whose class she had not exactly flunked, but hadn't quite passed either. These were Claud's words, and while they didn't make sense to me, I didn't care. School was out!

“You know what my grandmother used to shout on the last day of school?” I said to Mary Anne as we waited, lolling against the doorframe and watching kids stream past us, calling and hooting.

“No. What?” I could tell that Mary Anne was impatient for Claudia to show up.

“She used to shout, ‘School’s out! School’s out! Teacher wore her bloomers out!’”

Mary Anne stared at me. “What does that mean?” she said finally.

“Well, how should I know? It just sounds funny.”

Mary Anne twirled the end of one brown braid thoughtfully around her finger. “Maybe – ” she started to say.

But I interrupted her. “There’s Claudia.”

Mary Anne turned around and we saw Claud coming toward us through the crowded corridor at a pace ordinarily reserved for snails and turtles. She was walking arm-in-arm with Dori Wallingford. Howie Johnson and Pete Black were flanking them.

“Dori,” Mary Anne muttered.

“Boys,” I muttered.

Claudia and Mary Anne and I used to sit together at lunch sometimes, but that had changed between our winter break and our spring break. Dori and several other girls who were more interested in clothes than in practically anything else, had suddenly become more interesting to Claudia than Mary Anne and me or practically anyone else. Except boys.

Claudia waved cheerfully to her new friends. “See you!” she called as Dori and Howie and Pete crossed the lawn to the line of waiting school buses. “Hi, you guys,” she said to Mary Anne and me, and for an instant I felt like something hanging on the Reduced rack at Bellair’s Department Store.

"Hey, Claud," said Mary Anne as we began our walk to Bradford Court, "what do you think 'Teacher wore her bloomers out' means?"

Claud shrugged and snapped her gum.

Mary Anne tried again. "So what are you guys doing this afternoon?"

Now Claudia answered in an instant. "Nothing. Wonderful, glorious nothing. That is the beauty of no homework." She paused, then added thoughtfully, "Well, not really nothing. I think I'll paint."

"I'm baby-sitting for David Michael," I said. David Michael was my six-year-old brother. My big brothers (Charlie, who was sixteen, and Sam, who was fourteen) and I took turns watching him when school was out. While our mom had a great job at a company in Stamford, the salary wasn't enough to support four children *and* a nanny. Our parents were divorced and Dad, who had remarried and lived all the way across the country in California, sent money when he felt like it. The temporary jobs he got didn't pay much, so Mom always said, "You can't squeeze blood out of a stone." (When you think of it, you can't squeeze anything out of a stone, but I knew what she meant.)

We reached Bradford Court, where Claudia, Mary Anne, and I had grown up. It was weird to think that eleven years earlier we had all been babies on this street, Mary Anne and I next door to each other, and Claudia across from us. Our parents were young then, my mom and dad still married, no David Michael yet, Mary Anne's mother still alive. Had our parents hung out together the way we did now? I'd have to ask my mom about that sometime.

I noted Louie's exuberant barking from inside my house and realized he must have been sitting against the front door.

"I'd better let Louie out," I said.

“I’m going to start painting!” Claudia cried before running across the street.

“And I’m – I’ll see you later,” said Mary Anne mysteriously.

“Wait. What are you going to – ” I started to say, but Mary Anne was already halfway across her lawn. She waved to me over her shoulder.

“Huh,” I said, and unlocked the front door.

Louie, our aging collie, practically barreled me over in his rush to get outside. “Hey,” I said to him, “here come Charlie and David Michael.” It was Charlie’s turn to pick up David Michael from afternoon kindergarten.

Louie greeted them energetically as they hurried, hand-in-hand, along our front walk, David Michael gleefully waving his free hand to show me that it was empty of pencils and workbooks.

“He’s all yours,” exclaimed Charlie, making a show of removing David Michael’s hand from his and placing it in mine.

“Where are you going?” I asked him.

“Over to Hank’s. Baseball. Back by dinnertime,” he said in a rush as he tossed his backpack through the door. Then he loped down Bradford and around a corner.

“Hey! What about me?” asked David Michael, looking forlornly after Charlie.

“It’s okay,” I said. “We’ll have fun this afternoon.”

I let David Michael and Louie inside the house and we walked through the cool, quiet rooms to the kitchen. “Just think,” I added as I removed two apples and some cheese sticks from the refrigerator, “this is the last after-school snack you’ll have to eat until September. For the next ten weeks – ” (I had counted, many times) “– they’ll just be regular snacks.”

David Michael smiled at that and his grin broadened as he said, "I'll bet we get hoagies for dinner tonight!"

"Hoagies. Why?" I asked suspiciously. I liked hoagies, but . . .

"Because Mom's going out with Watson."

"What? Again?" My mother had just gone out with her so-called boyfriend five days ago. It seemed to me that their dates were taking place more and more often. In May, when she had first met him, they'd gone out exactly twice. Now it wasn't even the end of June and they'd already seen each other four more times. Four *more* times, for a total of six – that I knew about.

"Kristy," said David Michael, "pay attention. You're baby-sitting for me tonight. Remember? Mom's paying you? That's because of the date, duh."

"Oh. Yeah." I guess I just hadn't wanted to think too deeply about Watson.

While we ate our snack, David Michael told me a long story about a boy in his class who, at snack time that day, had first said he felt like he was going to barf, then had said he felt okay, then had gagged although nothing further had happened for five minutes, and finally had barfed in a rather spectacular manner all across the snack table.

"But none of it got on me," concluded my brother with some pride. "Or on my snack."

"Well, thank goodness," I replied. Because I was eager to change the topic, I added, "Want to go to the playground this afternoon?"

"The *school* playground?" asked David Michael, horrified. "No!"

"The one in the park then."

"Okay."

So we spent an enjoyable two hours swinging on the swings, climbing on a make-believe pirate ship, hanging from the monkey bars,

and shooting down the corkscrew slide. We returned home just in time to see Mom emerge from her car, then reach into the backseat for a large bag with the words Hoagie Heaven scrawled across one side.

"Told you so," said David Michael, and my mood darkened immediately.

My dismal mood was shared by not one single other member of my family. All of my brothers were thrilled with the hoagies and later seemed happy enough when Watson appeared at our front door. (I noted that Watson didn't ring the bell, simply knocked twice, called hello through the screen door, and let himself in before anyone had answered him.)

"All right," said Mom, as she stood smiling in the hallway with her *date*, "Kristy's in charge of David Michael tonight. Sam and Charlie, you're on your own. I'll be home by ten. Kristy, you know where the emergency numbers are. Watson and I will be at Chez Maurice."

Chez Maurice. The fancy French restaurant.

"Ooh-la-la," I muttered.

Mom heard this but ignored me. "Bedtime at nine for David Michael. Summer hours."

"Wahoo!" cried David Michael, whose school bedtime was considerably earlier.

By nine-fifteen David Michael was asleep and Sam and Charlie were at a friend's. For a few moments, I wandered through our quiet house, glad for Louie's company, wondering what to do next. And then . . . I surprised myself.

Isn't it funny how every now and then you think you're just about to, say, turn on the TV or open a book, and instead you find yourself doing something else altogether, something you hadn't even been thinking about? That was what happened then, in those silent moments.

Without knowing that I was going to do it, I found a pen and a pad of paper, sat down at our kitchen table, and began a letter to my father.

It had been nearly five months since I had written to him and even longer since I'd heard from him. So why did I suddenly feel the need to contact him? I wasn't sure, but I felt it was time to fill him in on my life since February. There were so many things he didn't know, unless Mom was in touch with him, and she probably was, but still. I hadn't told Dad about my grades this semester (they were good) or that I had started baby-sitting for some of the kids in our neighborhood or that I had missed an entire week of school because of strep throat or that Mary Anne and I were frequently shocked by the outfits Claudia put together these days or that Mom and Mr. Watson Brewer had begun a dating marathon.

I wondered if I should mention Watson, or whether Mom had mentioned him herself. Then I wondered what, exactly, it was that I hoped to accomplish by being in touch with my father again. Well, of course, part of it was simply that he was my father and I wanted to stay connected to him. That was obvious. But there was something else. One little molecule of me hoped he could be part of our family again, that things could be the way they used to be. I knew this was foolish. He and Mom had been divorced for years, Dad was remarried and lived three thousand miles away, and Mom was interested in other men, or at least in Watson. But I didn't care. I wanted Mom and Dad and my brothers and me all living in the same house again.

Also, my birthday was coming up in August and I was curious to see whether Dad would do anything about it. He had come through with a card the year before, but we'd been in touch more often then. I considered including a gentle reminder in my letter ("Can you believe that your daughter is almost twelve years old?"), but then I decided that anything he might send me would mean a whole lot more if he remembered my

birthday on his own. So finally I wound up the letter with a cheery "Have a great summer!" as if I were signing his yearbook. I sealed the envelope, stamped it, and addressed it using the return address from the note Dad had sent me over the winter. I wasn't certain it was up-to-date, since Dad moved around a lot, but I crossed my fingers and hoped for the best.

I was just sneaking the letter underneath a stack of to-be-mailed envelopes waiting on a table in the front hallway when the phone rang. I made a dash to answer it before it woke David Michael.

"Hello, Thomas residence," I said.

"Kristy? This is Mrs. Pike."

My heart jumped. Mrs. Pike was mother to the eight Pike kids and sometimes asked me to baby-sit for the younger ones. It would be nice to earn a little money, plus I was hoping to work on my sitting skills over the summer.

"Mr. Pike and I have a meeting to go to next Thursday evening," Mrs. Pike continued, "and I was wondering if you could baby-sit. All eight kids will be at home, though, so I think we'll need two sitters. I just spoke to Claudia and she isn't available. Can you do it? And do you know of anyone else who could come with you?"

"I'm available," I said, pleased, "but can I call you back tomorrow about the other sitter? I'm sure I can find somebody."

As soon as I finished the call I began to punch in numbers on the phone again. Then abruptly I hit the Off button. I'd been about to call Mary Anne, but two things had stopped me. One was the time. Mary Anne's strict father didn't let her talk on the phone after dinner on school nights. But this was summer vacation. Still . . . was it too late? I decided it wasn't, but then considered my other concern: Although Claudia and I had started sitting earlier in the year, and I'd had plenty of experience watching David Michael, this would be Mary Anne's very first job.

After staring at the phone for several more moments, as if the buttons could help me make a decision, I punched in the Spiers' number after all. Mr. Spier answered the phone, but he didn't sound upset and Mary Anne picked up the extension right away.

"Good news!" I said to her brightly. "Mrs. Pike called and she needs two baby-sitters for next Thursday evening. Want to come with me?"

"What? To *baby*-sit?" Mary Anne's voice had risen to an alarming squeak.

"Yeah. It'll be fun."

"But I've never sat before. I don't know if Dad will let me."

"Could you talk to him about it? After all, Claudia and I baby-sit. And we're all the same age."

"I really *want* to start sitting," said Mary Anne. "But . . . you know Dad."

Mr. Spier was the strictest parent I'd ever met, probably because he'd had to raise Mary Anne on his own after her mother had died. Still . . .

"Your father has to let you grow up sometime," I pointed out.

"It would be so much fun to baby-sit," said Mary Anne rapturously. "I love little kids."

"You're really good with David Michael," I said encouragingly.

"Oh, but I'd be so nervous! What if something went wrong? What if we had to call the police?"

"The po*lice*? I have never once had to call the police while I was baby-sitting."

"Aren't you afraid to be in charge?"

"No. I love being in charge." Now I was wondering if calling Mary Anne had been a good idea after all.

“Let me talk to my father,” she said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I replied.

I hung up the phone, wandered to the kitchen, and looked out the window. And that was when I saw the first shooting star of the summer. I should have felt elated. Instead, I sensed trouble.