



Welcome Back, Stacey!

ANN M. MARTIN

SCHOLASTIC INC.

*This book is for Courtenay Robertson Martin,
a new fan of The Baby-sitters Club*

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ISBN 978-1-339-03762-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 24 25 26 27 28

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing 2024

Book design by Maeve Norton

CHAPTER 1

“Stacey? Do you think that if dinosaurs were still alive, a stegosaurus could beat a brontosaurus in a fight?”

“What?” I replied. I hadn’t quite heard Henry’s question. I felt bad. A baby-sitter should always pay attention to her charges.

“Could a stegosaurus beat a brontosaurus in a fight? If they were alive today?” Henry waited patiently for my answer. He and his little sister Grace were making pictures on long rolls of shelf paper with fat pastels. Henry had just drawn what looked like a big city. I had a feeling that the next thing he was going to do was draw dinosaurs in the city — and that my answer would be important to him *and* to his picture.

“Well, could a stegosaurus beat a brontosaurus in dinosaur days?” I asked. Henry and Grace and I live really near the American Museum of

Natural History in New York City, and Henry likes to visit the dinosaur exhibits.

Henry shrugged. "I don't know," he replied. "I guess it doesn't *really* matter. I'll just pretend a steg could beat a bronto." (Henry is on familiar terms with dinosaurs. Oh, excuse me. With dinos.)

Maybe I better stop here and introduce Henry and Grace and myself. I am Stacey McGill and I'm thirteen years old. Henry and Grace and I live on the Upper West Side of New York City. In fact, we live in the same building. I live on the 12th floor and the Walkers live on the 18th floor. Mr. and Mrs. Walker are artists, and Henry and Grace, who are five and three, are my two favorite baby-sitting charges.

Believe me, I do a *lot* of baby-sitting. Sometimes I'm amazed by all the things that have happened to me because of baby-sitting. For instance, I live in a large (okay, a huge) apartment building with plenty of little kids, but not many kids my age — and hardly anyone else who's interested in sitting. So I get a lot of jobs, have a lot of fun (especially with Henry and Grace), and earn a lot of money.

That's just the beginning, though. I've lived in New York City all my life except for one year.

That year, my parents and I (I'm an only child) lived in a small town in Connecticut called Stoneybrook. My dad had been transferred there by the company he works for. We thought the move was going to be permanent, so I was desperate to make friends in Stoneybrook — and fast. Guess how baby-sitting helped me. I heard about this group of girls who were starting something called the Baby-sitters Club. They wanted to run a business sitting for families in the neighborhood — and they were looking for another member! So I joined. Instant friends. I'm still really close to most of the girls in the club, especially Claudia Kishi. She's my Connecticut best friend. (My New York best friend is Laine Cummings.) Then there're Dawn Schafer, Mary Anne Spier, and Kristy Thomas. They're good friends, too. Mallory Pike is a little young to be a close friend, and I don't know Jessi Ramsey too well yet (Mal and Jessi replaced me when Dad was transferred again, and we moved back to New York), but I still consider them friends.

Anyway, yes, that's right. After a year in Connecticut, Dad's stupid company transferred him right back to where he'd been. Don't get me wrong. I ♥ New York, just like the bumper stick-

ers and the T-shirts say. I really do ♥ it. I ♥ the stores, especially Bloomingdale's, the theaters, the museums, the parks, the excitement. I even ♥ tourists, because they add to the excitement. But I didn't ♥ all the trauma and trouble of moving twice in just a little over a year.

Still, we did move, and when we got back to New York I was thirteen, not twelve, and we moved into this huge building with all these kids, and I've been sitting practically ever since. Things aren't the same without the Baby-sitters Club, even though I consider myself the New York branch of the BSC. But I wouldn't trade big-city life for anything.

I wouldn't trade sitting for the Walkers, either. I adore Henry and Grace. There's just something wonderful about them. It's not that they're well behaved (which they are). It's not that they're creative and can always be entertained with art projects. No, I think it's that they're such caring kids. They look out for each other, they stick up for their friends, and they try very hard never to hurt anybody's feelings.

So of course Henry was pleasant about my being in outer space the afternoon he asked his dinosaur question, and then about my not knowing the answer.

“How are you doing?” I asked Grace, looking at her picture.

Grace was bent over, concentrating hard. She was drawing slowly and carefully, her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth.

“Fine,” she replied, straightening up. “Do you like my picture, Stacey? It’s an elephant. And the elephant is in a bathtub, but there’s no water in it. He’s taking a nap. See? There’s his pillow.”

Henry giggled, his dark brown skin glowing with joy. “Give him a blanket,” he said. “And show that he’s dreaming about a bronto.”

“How do I draw a dream?” wondered Grace. She pulled at her curly hair.

“Like this.” Henry drew a “dream bubble” over the elephant’s head. “Now put a bronto in there,” he instructed his little sister.

“Oh!” said Grace. “Thank you, Henry.”

I smiled. What terrific kids. In fact, the whole Walker family is terrific. Mr. Walker is an artist and Mrs. Walker illustrates children’s books. They’re both pretty well known. The reason I was sitting for Grace and Henry that Wednesday afternoon was that a showing of Mr. Walker’s work was going to open soon, and the Walkers had gone to the gallery to help supervise the hanging of some of his paintings.

Anyway, I'll admit I was having trouble concentrating that day. It's a good thing Henry and Grace are so easy to sit for. Earlier, I'd been off in Never-Neverland, thinking about my parents.

Here's the thing about Mom and Dad. They have not been getting along too well lately. It's just like when Laine Cummings and I were in fifth grade. We called ourselves best friends, but we were forever getting into fights. Then we would snap our heads around, or turn our backs on each other, and one of us would say, "I'm not talking to you."

The other would reply, "I don't care."

"Good."

"Good."

"So there."

"So there."

Then we would spend about two days pretending that other girls were our new best friends, and finally we'd give it all up and realize that *we* were our only best friends. When that happened, we'd start sneaking looks at each other in class. Then one of us would offer a smile, usually the one who had said, "I'm not talking to you." After that, at our first opportunity — in

the girls' room or the cafeteria or someplace — we'd apologize and make up. Sometimes I felt that the fights had been worth it, because making up was so nice. Considering how much my parents had been fighting and arguing lately, I certainly hoped that they felt the same way about making up.

I don't like hearing my parents argue. Sometimes it's scary. Not because I'm afraid they'll hit each other or anything, but because I never know what's going to come out of their mouths. They hurt each other with words instead of with fists, which is almost as bad. You can't take back either a punch or an insult. You can *apologize*, but what's done is done, what's said is said, and some things are hard to forget.

Like the time my father called my mother a selfish spendthrift. I hated both of them then. I hated my mother for doing whatever she'd done to cause my father to call her a selfish spendthrift, and I hated my father for having called her one, whether she was or not.

I had felt very confused.

"Hello!" called Mrs. Walker's voice then. "We're ho-ome!"

Henry and Grace jumped up from their little table in a frenzy of excitement.

"Mommymommymommymommymommy!" cried Grace.

She and Henry grabbed their pictures and tore into the living room.

Such pandemonium. You'd think the Walkers had been gone for two months instead of less than two hours. But it was awfully nice to see a couple of smiling, nonangry parents greeted so enthusiastically by their kids.

"How did everything go?" asked Mr. Walker. (Grace had wrapped herself around his left leg.)

"Oh, fine, as usual," I replied, grinning. "We have plenty of masterpieces to show you."

"Daddy, can we hang my dino-fight in your show?" asked Henry.

"We'll see," said Mr. Walker.

Mrs. Walker paid me then, and Henry and Grace each had to hug me twice before I could leave. When the door was closed behind me, I walked to the elevator and rode down to the 12th floor.

The doors opened.

I could hear the fight even before I reached my apartment.

Mom and Dad were at it again.

Slowly I crept toward 12E.

“Look at this bill!” my father was yelling, and I mean *yelling*. “Four hundred and ninety dollars on jewelry at Altman’s? Do you think I’m made of money?”

“You ought to be,” replied my mother sarcastically. “You practically live at the office. I’m surprised Stacey recognizes you anymore.”

I looked at my watch. Five-thirty. What was Dad doing at home? He usually didn’t get home until seven-thirty or eight. Mom and I were used to eating our dinners alone those days.

I put my hand on the doorknob and felt around in my pocket for my keys. I was about to go inside. But then I drew back. I did not want to walk in on the middle of a fight. I did that once and my parents immediately started arguing about *me*. See, I have diabetes and I have to stay on a strict low-sugar diet, give myself insulin, and go to the doctor a lot. If I don’t do those things, I could get really sick. So Mom and Dad would argue over whether I’d stick to my diet at a party (of course I would), or whether I should be allowed to go to summer camp (they finally let me). That kind of thing.

No more noises were coming from inside my apartment, so I decided it would be safe to go inside. I was just about to put the key in the lock when my father positively roared, "Fifteen hundred and sixty-eight dollars at Tiffany's. Good lord, what did you *buy*?"