

Bikini Bonini: Queen of the Cul-de-Sac

By Kate Bigman

Chapter One

On my eleventh birthday, I got two great presents from my parents: binoculars and a diary. I imagined that I'd use the diary to record all of my activities and private thoughts. But then I remembered that my life wasn't particularly exciting and a diary of a boring life would be really depressing. Truthfully, I felt kind of like an outsider at my school, and even in the neighborhood. I was considered too smart by the popular girls, too shy to be a leader, and not particularly athletic or artistic. It's not like I was some kind of loner or weirdo or something. It's just that I'd never really found a best friend. And life without a best friend when you're eleven, well, it's tough, believe me.

My mom and dad think that I worry too much. And you know? They're right. It's just that I've always been afraid of lots of things. I tend to imagine or expect the worst, so I don't often feel like exploring beyond my own little world within the safety of the cul-de-sac, where I live.

I decided to break in the binoculars right after dinner. I brought along my diary to record my bird sightings. I figured that even if nothing exciting was happening in my life, at least the diary would be put to good use as a notebook tracking my favorite hobby. Bird-watching is one of my most well-kept secrets. Only my parents know that I'm a birdwatcher (I'm actually a people watcher too). I don't let any of the kids know about this hobby because I'm sure they'd make fun of me. Truth is, I just love to go out in the evening, about an hour before sunset, and find myself a cozy spot to hide where I can quietly watch the birds as they busily feed their babies and prepare their nests for a safe sleep.

That evening, with my new binoculars and diary in hand, I headed over to check on a robin and her eggs that I'd been spying on for the past two weeks. The robin lives in this massive oak on the old Bonini estate at the end of my cul-de-sac. I always feel a little creepy and fearful when I sneak onto the Bonini property. The house has been abandoned for forty years, and all the kids around here think it's haunted by ghosts. Mom says it's just the wind and the trees that make the statues all over the house look like people are moving inside. I don't know, I get a really spooky feeling and usually stay far away from the old estate, especially after dark.

But tonight I could hear the chirping of the little robins as I approached the Bonini property, and just had to get closer to check out the newly-hatched baby birds. I climbed over the **dilapidated** fencing and crept closer to the house, to where the huge oak tree was practically leaning onto the front porch. I pulled myself up into an apple tree alongside the oak, where I **camouflaged** myself so I wouldn't disturb the robins and could still get a great view through the binoculars into the nest.

Oh, they were so cute! Six little babies with mouths opened wide as the mother bird fed them **regurgitated** bugs and worms. I quietly spied on the family of robins as

they settled in for the nights, until I was distracted by a slow creaking sound coming from the other side of the old Bonini house. It was almost dark now and I couldn't see clearly across the yard, but I swear I saw a shadowy figure wearing a full length, black-hooded dress emerge from the ground about ten yards from the house. A cellar trap door opened right out of the ground. Looking through my binoculars, I could just make out this shadowy figure crouching low and moving very secretly through the woods on the south side of the estate. My heart was beating so fast I wanted to scream and run away. I hate being such a fraidy-cat; I was even too scared to scream. I made myself as tiny as I could until I was sure the figure was gone, and then I sprinted back home to tell my parents what I'd seen.

They gave me a cup of hot chocolate and tried to calm me down. They kept telling me that all I'd seen was "the wind, the trees, my imagination getting the best of me." But I know I saw someone, and it was definitely not the wind or the trees! I'm never going near the Bonini house again; I don't care how cute those little robin chicks are!

I heard my parents talking after they had tucked me in for the night. They said maybe it's just as well that the old Bonini estate was going to be torn down in the morning. That way all the kids in the neighborhood could forget about haunted houses and all that spirit nonsense. What?!!! Torn down?!!! But what about those newly hatched babies! They'd be crushed and then die! The tree is so close to the house. I decided right then and there that I'd have to get up extra early the next morning and move that robin nest to a safe tree, far from the house. I set my alarm for 6am, determined to save those birds, ghost or no ghost.

I woke up even before my alarm went off to the sound of heavy machinery and equipment arriving on our street. Looking out my window I could see a huge wrecking ball setting up to take aim at a freshly painted bulls-eye on Mrs. Thornsby's front door! A large sign said "Condemned Property." That sign had been posted for almost two years in front of the Bonini estate, but someone had moved it during the night to the front yard of Mrs. Thornsby's house. Old Thornsby had been trying to get the Bonini house destroyed for twenty years. She had always hoped to take over the property and expand her rose garden by a few more acres. As the widow of the town's former mayor, Mrs. Thornsby wielded a lot of power in our town and neighborhood. But she'd been frustrated for years by the Middletown Historical Society and others who wanted to preserve the Bonini property. My parents and I both signed the petition to keep the house intact and turn the land into a neighborhood park, but this only put my family on old Thornsby's bad side.

I jumped out of bed, got dressed quickly, and raced out of the house as my parents called after me to slow down. I ran down the street toward the Boninis' and watched as the wrecking ball took aim at the wrong front door. Mrs. Thornsby suddenly threw open her door, wearing only her nightdress, with the wig on her head totally **askew**.

She shrieked at the wrecking-ball operator, "You complete idiotic lunatic!" She pointed across the street to the Bonini estate and showed the foreman of the wrecking crew copies of the order calling for the destruction of the Bonini estate, and then

slammed the door in the face of the embarrassed workmen as they **desperately** tried to apologize for their mistake.

As the workmen moved their wrecking equipment onto the Bonini home, I raced to the tree beside the old house and climbed up to save the robin nest. The mother bird started freaking out when I gently freed the nest from its place in the branches. I tried to explain to the mother that I had to do this or they'd all die, but it was no use, and she continued screeching and flapping her wings **frantically** above my head.

A group of about thirty people had gathered in front of the Bonini estate to watch the wrecking ball do its job. Many of the neighbors were upset, including my mother and father. I showed them the nest I'd saved as all the grownups talked about what a shame it was to destroy such a beautiful old mansion filled with **antique** furniture and marble statues that could be seen through the lace curtains. I wished someone would stand up to that old biddy, Mrs. Thornsby. I mean, why should the old abandoned house be destroyed just because one person thinks it's an eyesore?

But **wringing** hands and concerned citizens were useless when faced with legal documentation in the hands of a wrecking crew. A now fully coifed and neatly dressed Mrs. Thornsby joined the crowd and eyed the crew.

"Stop dawdling and get on with it," she demanded.

The wrecking ball took aim, the bulldozers ground into gear, and the equipment slowly moved forward, closing in on all sides of the house.

I couldn't watch! I squeezed my eyelids shut and held tightly onto my mom's hand. The sound of huge tires crunching dirt and crushing bushes in their path was horrible and violent. But then, another sound emerged: a clanking **cacophony** of horns blowing, tires screeching, and an engine that sounded more like a jet than a car; this surprising sound began to overshadow the noise of the wrecking crew's equipment. Everyone turned to look down the street as an amazing pile of junk pulled up to the curb in front of the Bonini estate. It looked like a trailer on top of a truck on top of a plane (which is basically what it was) and when it stopped, four kids leapt from every **conceivable** door of the vehicle.

A humongous girl wearing army boots and a bikini bathing suit made out of green moving blankets led the way. She stomped up the overgrown path with the biggest smile I'd ever seen spread across her face, acting as if all this chaos were some sort of weird welcoming committee. She started shaking hands with everyone and introducing herself.

"I'm Bikini Bonini and these are my brothers: Buckly, Rat and Pee Wee. It's so nice of ya'll to come out like this for our homecoming!"

Everyone in the crowd was **dumbfounded** and took a minute to look over this **motley** crew of kids. Bikini seemed to be about 5'10" tall and must have weighed almost 180 pounds. In addition to the bizarre bikini and boots, she wore a tool belt around her massive middle. Her long, wild red hair erupted from her scalp in tight

corkscrew curls. She didn't look like any kid I'd ever seen before, and it was impossible for me to guess her age.

Her brother, Buckley, was about the same size as Bikini—which is to say gigantic. He had a massive square jaw and looked shyly at the ground, as if trying not to take up too much space. His football jersey was dotted with various foodstuffs; he was clearly not a neat eater. Brother Rat, meanwhile, was a skinny little kid wearing rumpled clothing. He had a tiny pet rat sitting on his shoulder, his hair was slicked back with oil (it turned out to be margarine), and he wore thick glasses. He continually whispered to his little rat, trying to calm the rodent down. Pee Wee looked to be about two years of age. He was dressed in an **impeccable** sailor suit, starched and white in contrast to the rumpled look of the other kids. He looked intensely grumpy, and wore a **severe** scowl on his face.

"Gaaaagaaa googoooo." Pee Wee said with a gravelly and intimidating voice that sounded a lot like Popeye's. Rat patted him on the back, but Pee Wee just glared at all the neighbors and **sidled** up next to Bikini.

No one in the crowd had said a word when the foreman called off his wreckers and scratched his head. Bikini walked right up to him as the engines sputtered off and shook his hand.

"What the heck is goin' on here?" her voice boomed as she asked the question. It was like an opera star's voice in its strength and in the intense, deep resonance of each word. The foreman showed her the paperwork authorizing him to destroy the old home. She looked it over and laughed. "Whoa...this house isn't abandoned! My Aunt Meanie Bonini lives here, and my brothers and I are moving in with her, so you can just pack up your beautiful machinery and go find someplace else to wreck!" She turned serious and put her face right up into the construction foreman's as she said, "This house has been in my family for one hundred years and you're not going to tear it down. I'm here now, and I'm not going to allow that to happen!"

Most of the people in the crowd burst into **spontaneous** applause, cheering this strange-looking girl on. Bikini turned and bowed, accepting the neighbors' **adulation** with a huge grin and a wave.

By then, Mrs. Thornsby had had enough. She pushed her way into the dialogue between Bikini and the foreman. "You cannot listen to this....uhhh....child?!" she said. "You have been legally authorized to destroy this home—now do it!" Turning her voice all syrupy for just a moment, Mrs. Thornsby addressed Bikini. "My poor child, you are **deluded** if you think that your Aunt Meanie Bonini lives here; she left this place almost forty years ago." Her voice became cold as she continued, "No one has seen her or heard from her in all that time. Your dear auntie is very likely DEAD. So you're going to have to go back to wherever you came from. There is no one here to take care of you and your brothers... and this house is not safe. IT IS CONDEMNED. And I have the paperwork to prove it. Now, get out of the way while we proceed with the **demolition**, or I'll call the police and child welfare agents to deal with you **miscreants**."

Bikini planted her feet firmly on the ground and adjusted her stance to face Mrs. Thornsby. "Buckley, Rat, Pee Wee," she said in a quiet but intense tone of voice, "get inside the house right now! It's time we were reunited with our dear Aunt Meanie."

Buckley darted through the crowd and pulled himself up to the roof of the porch as the crowd gasped. Mrs. Thornsby sputtered an order for the crew to continue. Pee Wee toddled over and gave Mrs. Thornsby a kick in the shins, which made her squeal and chase after the tiny tot. The foreman hesitated, giving Buckley a chance to enter through an upstairs window and open the front door to Rat, Pee Wee, and his sister, Bikini. They all stood inside the open door to face off Mrs. Thornsby and the wrecking crew.

"As of right now, this house is obviously not abandoned. This is our family's property, and we're moving in," announced Bikini. "The place needs a little work; sure, it has a few problems..." Bikini continued as she shook a beam on the front porch and caused it to collapse, "...but I CAN FIX IT. I'm really handy with tools. So if any of you'd like to help us unload our stuff, we'd really appreciate it. And all of you are invited over for the best barbecue you've ever tasted tonight, because I also happened to be a great cook!"

I couldn't help myself. I raised my hand and volunteered to help. A bunch of other kids and some grownups offered to help the Boninis move in as well. The wrecking crew foreman informed Mrs. Thornsby that he couldn't proceed under these circumstances, and he called for his crew to retreat. Thornsby whipped out her cell phone and called her brother-in-law, the housing inspector, whom she had manipulated into condemning the property in the first place. Before she turned on her heels and left, she announced in a chilling voice that the inspector would be there by noon to re-condemn the house and force the children out of the property so she could continue with her plan for destruction.

Bikini shouted a pleasant goodbye to Mrs. Thornsby as she stomped off. "You're still invited to the barbecue, neighbor lady!" Shrugging her shoulders in an "oh well" kind of gesture, she turned her attention to organizing the neighbors who stayed behind to help the family unload the vehicle and carry their belongings inside.

Once she had everyone working, Bikini approached me and surprised me with a huge bear hug. "THANK YOU SO MUCH," she boomed. "You were the first one to volunteer to help me and my brothers move in! That makes you our guest of honor for the barbecue tonight! What's your name, guest of honor?"

I could barely breathe during the hug, but it felt very special to get Bikini's attention. "My...my name is Kat," I mumbled. "I'm eleven, and I'm going into the sixth grade this fall."

"Well that's the best news I've heard all day!" Bikini exclaimed. "Cause I'm turning twelve next month and I'll be going into the sixth grade this fall myself! We're gonna be classmates, and friends... that's all there is to it!"

My jaw must have dropped open. I couldn't believe we were in the same grade because she was about three times bigger than me! I would have guessed she was at

least fifteen or sixteen years old. I just couldn't imagine her fitting into those little desks in our classroom.

She patted me on the back with a huge, strong hand. I showed her the robin's nest that I still held in my hands. The chirping babies had quieted, but the mother could still be seen fluttering above the house. Bikini's eyes crinkled up in a smile, and she called over to her brother, Rat.

"Rat is nine," Bikini explained. "He's special. Animals love this boy. He can actually talk to them. And he's forever helping sick and wounded critters. Wherever he goes, he always seems to be running some kind of zoo or pet hospital. He'll work it out." Just then, Rat arrived. "Rat, my new friend, Kat, saved this little family of robins. Can you please help her get it back to its place in that old oak, and explain things to the mother so she doesn't abandon them now that they've been touched by humans?"

When Rat nodded, she continued, "Kat, go with Rat now while I figure out what needs to be done to pass this inspection."

Rat was a very serious-looking little kid. He carefully checked the baby robins and gently took the nest from me. I followed him upstairs, where he opened the window nearest the old oak. The mother bird was flying in circles watching her babies in these human hands. To my amazement, Rat began chirping to the worried mother. She landed on a branch and seemed to be chirping in response. They continued their dialogue for almost a minute. She seemed to calm down with every "cheep" from Rat. Then he climbed out the window and placed the nest in its original spot. The mother swooped in and cuddled her little babies under her wing. As Rat climbed back in, he said "She told me to thank you for saving her babies. Now, can you help me move some of my pets upstairs to the attic, please?"

I agreed to give Rat a hand. As we struggled with a large box with air holes, I asked him what we were carrying. "Fluffy," he answered.

"Is Fluffy a puppy, or a kitten?" I asked.

"Oh no, she's a boa constrictor," he replied. As we carried the box upstairs, the boa stuck her head out and I screamed and dropped my side, jumping out of the path of the emerging snake. "Relax, Kat," Rat reassured me. "Fluffy is just curious to see her new home, She's affectionate; she just wants a hug. Don't worry." I was frozen in terror, but I allowed Fluffy to slither up my arm and give me a little squeeze before she slide back inside the box.

"See," Rat explained, "she just wanted to thank you for helping move us in."

"You're welcome," I whispered. Rat translated that into a few guttural sounds for Fluffy's benefit.

After helping Rat transport his bats, rodents, opossum, various stray dogs and cats, spiders, exotic birds, goats and chickens into their new home in the attic, I went to see if I could help Bikini with the house inspection.

I found her by the cellar door inspecting the water pipes. She was deep in thought as she studied the rusty old plumbing.

“Hey, Kat, hold this flashlight for me!” she yelled. I did as I was told. I was quickly learning that Bikini had a way of issuing orders that left you no other choice. “Aha!” she said, “I see what that old trickster did!”

“What old trickster?”

“Oh, my Aunt Meanie. She’s got these pipes arranged to siphon water off the neighbor’s house—that on,” she said, pointing to the house next door.

“That’s Mrs. Thornsby’s house,” I said. “She’s the one who’s been trying to condemn this place and have it torn down since before I was born.”

Bikini nodded. “I see why Meanie did it, but it’s not going to get us past inspection. I better fix it.” Bikini dug deep into her tool belt for an impossibly big wrench. I wondered how it had ever fit inside of that tool belt wrapped around her substantial middle. She proceeded to pull out about ten different tools and went to work. She seemed to have absolutely everything she needed in that tool belt: goggles, welding iron, clamps, new pipe fittings—everything!

While Bikini worked, I got my nerve up to ask her a few questions. “Did you find your Aunt Meanie yet?”

“Ah, no, she won’t come out from wherever she’s hiding until all these people go away and it’s just us kids. She’s a bit of a recluse y’know,” Bikini responded as she struggled to loosen a rusty valve.

“All the kids around here have always thought that your house was haunted,” I began to explain, “but no one actually ever saw a ghost or anything....until...last night! I think I saw your Aunt Meanie!”

“Yeah. I can see her handiwork over there,” she chuckled, pointing to the bullseye on Thornsby’s door.

Finally, she was done rerouting the pipes. “Okay, that should do it; now I’ll just turn the water back on.” She turned the old knob slowly. At first nothing happened, and then a slow rumbling sound started from deep within the pipes. We could feel them groaning. All of a sudden we felt a surge beneath our feet and simultaneously heard a bloodcurdling scream from inside old Thornsby’s house. We turned in time to see a huge gushing fountain spurting from the second story bathroom. To my horror, we saw Mrs. Thornsby sitting on her toilet atop a magnificent fountain of water that had burst through the ceiling of her master bedroom suite.

“Oops! I must have routed something the wrong way,” Bikini said matter-of-factly. She turned the water valve off, and Thornsby and her toilet sank back inside her house. We could still hear her screaming as Bikini gog back to work. “I’ll have it fixed in no time. Now I see what I did wrong.” She seemed to be talking to no one in particular. “Guess I’ll have to fix Thornsby’s roof and bathroom as well. Boy I’m a busy bee today,”

she crowed cheerfully. "Could you hold that flashlight just a little closer, Kat? I've got to make a bit of an adjustment here to get this thing right."

My mouth was **agape**. I don't think she realized what could happen when you messed with Mrs. Thornsby. She was the most powerful woman in town, and had just been seen flying above her house on a toilet water fountain....this was not going to end well for the Boninis. Bikini just whistled and kept working, seemingly unaware of the massive problem she had created with her little rerouting mistake.

Finally, Bikini announced that the problem was fixed, and she turned the valve with confidence. No rumbling, no creaking, just a hooting and holler from inside the Bonini house that the water was now flowing! "All right!" yelled an exuberant Bikini as she gave me a high five. Next we went inside to tackle another inspection issue: the roof with gaping holes sagging over the termite-infested porch.

Quickly assessing the roof and porch situation, Bikini said, "If I can fix this, I think the place can pass inspection. I've already corrected the electrical. Same problem as the water, Meanie has been siphoning power off old Thornsby for probably forty years. So we've got about an hour to fix this porch, then I've got to get started on my barbecue sauce. We've got a party to throw tonight!"

"What about Thornsby's house?" I asked, worried.

"Oh, yeah. I'll take care of that after I get the sauce started. It's got to cook for hours," replied a **blithely** unconcerned Bikini.

After issuing a few more orders to all the neighbors unloading the boxes, Bikini focused her energy entirely on the front porch. "Hmmm...this is all rotten and infested with termites. We're gonna need to tear this whole porch off and build a new one. Fast." She looked around and saw that the wrecking crew had left one vehicle behind: a little bulldozer. "Aha! Just what we need to make this job speedy. Pee Wee, you hot wire that dozer and crash it into this porch. I want the whole thing **demolished**."

Pee Wee smiled for the first time all day. He leaped at the chance. "Gaa gaa goo goo," he said happily.

Shocked, I asked, "Why are you having your baby brother drive that bulldozer, Bikini? Don't you think it's a little dangerous? And Irresponsible?!"

"Pee Wee's the only one with a license, silly!" she replied as if it made perfect sense. Then, quietly, so no one else could hear, she added, "Pee Wee's actually sixteen, Kat. He just refused to grow ever since he was a baby. When my parents brought me and Buckley home from the hospital, and then Rat a couple of years later...well, Pee Wee wasn't ready to give up being the baby of the family, so he just stayed that size. Even though he's already graduated from high school, and has a job writing software programs for an online game company, he'll always be the baby of our family, because that's what he wants." She turned her attention to Pee Wee, who had successfully hot wired the vehicle. "Okay Pee Wee, fire her up!"

Pee Wee roared toward porch as Bikini cleared a path for him. Everyone watched in amazement as he cleanly demolished the porch and separated it from the house. "Great job Pee Wee!" shouted Bikini. "Now we just need to put in some new front steps, and we're all set for inspection!"

She called for volunteers to help her father some lumber she'd found in an old woodshed behind the house. I went with her. Once we got inside, she directed the volunteers to move a large stack on two-by-fours to the front of the house. She looked around and then her face lit up. "This is the perfect place for my workshop!" she announced. Turning to me, she continued, "See, I'm building a spaceship and my plan is to launch it on my sixteenth birthday. I'm hoping to be the first astronaut to explore Venus!"

I shyly told Bikini it was also my secret dream to be an astronaut. She let out a huge whoop of delight and then invited me to be her partner in building the spaceship together. "It's a two-seater!" she exclaimed. "Y'know, I need a new best friend, Kat, and you're obviously perfect for the job!" Sticking out her big right hand, she grabbed my own little one, and we shook on it. "All right then, starting tomorrow, we get this workshop in order and get busy on the spaceship. Girl, we have a lot of work to do," she warned.

Within an hour, Bikini and her brothers had built stairs leading to a small and simple porch to replace the larger, termite-infested one. Moments after they'd hammered the final nails, Mrs. Thornsby arrived with her brother-in-law, the housing inspector, in tow. Verne Thornsby was a short, pudgy man with thick glasses and a shy smile. He seemed truly embarrassed to be put into this awkward position by Mrs. Thornsby, who loudly proclaimed that he needed to re-condemn the house and get the children out immediately, "for their own safety, of course..."

"Heh-heh-heh," he chuckled nervously. "Now, now, Milicent, let me just take a look and see whwat we have here."

Bikini marched up with a hearty handshake and introduced herself. As she led him up to the front door, she told him, "You'll see that we've already taken care of the three main problems, Verne. I've corrected the electrical problems, I've reconnected the water and straightened out the plumbing problems. And I've gotten rid of the termite infestation. Now, I've got lots of other plans for improvements, but I'll need about two months to handle jobs like a new roof and some new flooring. So, let me show you what I've done to comply with the immediate inspection issues listed on that mean old demolition order you were pushed into signing."

Mrs. Thornsby stood outside the house fuming while Verne checked everything out. When he came back, Bikini was slapping him on the back and laughing. Verne stopped smiling when he saw his sister-in-law standing impatiently tapping her foot. He sheepishly approached her and explained, "Now Milicent, there's nothing I can do. The house passed inspection. It can't be considered abandoned, so I have to rescine the order to demolish it. It's out of my hands."

Thornsby's face turned beet red and he hissed through closed teeth. "Fine! We'll see what the child welfare agency has to say about four children living unsupervised in this crumbling fleabag of a house! Mark my words, you children will be out of here within twenty-four hours!" With that, she turned on her heels and stomped toward her home.

Bikini called out cheerfully, "Don't worry yourself about our safety Mrs. Thornsby! Your old friend and our dear Aunt Meanie will be looking out for us. But thanks for your concern...oh, and I'll be over today to help with that little hole in your roof, neighbor."

Thornsby shouted over her shoulder, "NO THANK YOU! I will have that fixed by a legitimate contractor, but I'll send YOU the bill!"

Bikini thanked Verne and then thanked everyone else for their help moving in. She reminded them all to come back at six p.m. to enjoy "the finest barbecue on the planet." Then she looked at her watch and raced inside to begin preparations for her secret sauce.

When I returned at six with my family, I couldn't believe my eyes. The Bonini kids had decorated the whole house with tiny white Christmas lights. They'd lit tiki torches all over the yard and created a huge fire pit with meat sizzling in a barbecue sauce. Tables were all set and lit with candles and flowers. Soft drinks were overflowing in ice-filled bathtubs. Bikini had changed into another bikini, made out of fabric decorated with chefs hats, spatulas, and salt and pepper shakers. On her head sat a huge chef hat that matched her bikini.

All the neighbors came out—all except Mrs. Thornsby, of course, who stayed inside her house, peering out from behind her curtains and spying on the whole affair. Oddly enough, all the smoke from the barbecue was wafting in the direction of Thornsby's place, so her house was surrounded by smoke. We could hear her coughing and threatening to call the fire department.

I'd never seen such a huge amount of food in my whole life. The corn was piled as high as a haystack. The barbecued ribs filled one bathtub, and salad filled another one. Bikini was beaming as everyone congratulated her on her accomplishments that day. Not only did she manage to keep her family's house from being torn down, but she truly delivered on her promise to serve the best barbecue on the planet.

After filling our bellies with this delicious food, the neighbors all started to drift home. Interrupting her hostess duties, Bikini pulled me aside. "Don't forget, Kat. We start getting our spaceship together first thing tomorrow. And we'll introduce you to our Aunt Meanie. She was too shy to come out tonight. But don't worry, she's not really a witch; I'm pretty sure that she's just pretending to be one! See you bright and early tomorrow!"

All of a sudden, my life had changed. I had a new best friend, and I could see that there would be lots and lots to write about in my brand new diary.

Chapter Two

I slept soundly, but I have to admit that I did have some nightmares about witches and haunted houses. In the morning, I slipped out bright and early and headed down the street to the Boninis'.

I found everyone up, creating lots of chaos and noise as Bikini flipped pancakes onto the kitchen table in a huge, precariously balanced stack that was growing taller and less stable by the second. Bikini was dressed in yet another bikini, this one made of blue denim-workshirt material. She reached into her tool belt for a change of spatulas. She kept flipping until the pancakes literally filled the entire table. I could see no table surface beneath the stack that was now about two feet deep and five feet in diameter. Bikini then poured a gallon of melted butter and hot dripping syrup over the tableful of pancakes. No plates, no forks, no knives. The whole kitchen looked like a disaster area with batter and pots and pans everywhere. It was as if pancake batter had exploded onto every surface of their kitchen.

Bikini invited me to join them and have some breakfast. "Dig in! There's plenty!" she said. "No doubt about that," I thought as I watched the family dive into the humongous stack using only their hands to pop the dripping pancakes into their mouths. I knew my parents would disapprove, yet eating without utensils was too great an opportunity to pass up. I gobbled down about ten pancakes while Buckley and Bikini must have eaten at least one hundred apiece. Pee Wee was quite fastidious with his meal, making one pancake last fifteen minutes as he nibbled along the edges in a circular pattern until it finally disappeared. Rat ate about as many as I did, which left approximately 200 pancakes remaining on the table.

"The leftovers are for your animals, so bring 'em in for breakfast," Bikini told Rat. Within minutes, Rat's animals had eaten every crumb of pancake and licked every inch of the table, chairs, and floors clean up syrup and butter. After they'd sated themselves, Rat **corralled** all of his critters back to their various pens. This was the signal for Bikini and Buckley to get busy cleaning up. First, Buckley attached a hose to the kitchen sink and proceeded to hose off table, chairs and floor with a gushing spray of warm water. Bikini swept the extra water out the back door and turned on seven high-powered fans that she'd set up all over the kitchen. Within a couple of minutes, she said, "Kat, it's time for us to get to work building out dream! Follow me!"

We walked outside to the woodshed. "Buckley and I moved my spaceship inside here last night," Bikini explained while reaching for the doors and pulling them open with dramatic flair. "Behold...our vessel to Venus!"

"Ohhhhh...it's...it's...amazing," I sputtered, unsure of exactly what I was looking at. On a platform sat a portion of the vehicle the Boninis had arrived in. Shaped somewhat like a rocket with two seats in front, it seemed more like a go-cart than a rocket ship. But I truly saw the potential, and Bikini's **enthusiasm** was **contagious**.

"My goal is to spark this thing up and head into space for my sixteenth birthday! That'll be here before we know it. Right now the engine is just a placeholder, more like a lawnmower engine than a rocket engine, but I'm souping it up bigtime! Watch this!" Bikini pulled on a rope like an outboard motor cord, and the rocket roared to life. As

lights blinked on the dashboard, we scrambled inside and pretended to be heading for Venus.

Buckley slipped into the workshop without our hearing him over the roar of the engine. He climbed up behind us and was reaching for something placed on a really high shelf. As he attempted to lift a large plastic bag down, it slipped and landed with a thud on the back of our spaceship. He lifted the bag off the ship, but a large hole was ripped open and the contents of the bag spilled into the engine.

"Oh no! BIKINI! TURN OFF YOUR ENGINE!" He yelled.

Before Bikini could respond, the engine whirred madly and started emitting a sticky, pink substance that quickly filled the entire spaceship and expanded into the workshop. We were surrounded within seconds, encased in gooey pink. Buckley had spilled the entire contents of a ten-pound bag of cotton candy granules into Bikini's engine! The engine sputtered to a sticky, lifeless stop.

I used my arms to bat away the cotton candy from my face and created a path to Bikini. She was sitting perfectly still, her hands frozen onto her control panel. Buckley was apologizing madly and using a machete to cut a path to us. When he got to us, he looked completely panicked. I had to laugh at how ridiculous we all looked surrounded by whipped pink sugar. Buckley smiled appreciatively at me, but we both stopped smiling when we looked at Bikini.

She was still frozen to the controls, looking straight ahead. It seemed as if only her hair was moving, pulling back, as though it were trying to flatten, or escape, or become invisible. I thought how strange it was that her hair seemed to have a personality, as though somehow separate from Bikini. Finally, she spoke in a very calm voice, which seemed to scare Buckley even more.

"Buckley, you've set our mission back by months. We basically have to start completely over in the building of this ship. We'll have to take every single bolt and screw apart and clean every surface before we put it back together. Whole sections must be replaced. You're now my slave until we get this thing rebuilt. While you clean up every inch of the rocket ship, Kat and I will start earning money for replacement parts. You should cancel your life until I'm ready to release you. Now get started."

As Bikini and I extricated ourselves from the sticky ship, we discussed our money-making options on the cul-de-sac. Bikini asked me, "Who's got kids around here that need babysitting? Who's got plumbing problems that need fixing? Who's got automotive needs? We'll wash cars, fix cars, clean up yards, cook dinner, clean houses...you know this neighborhood, Kat...who needs us?"

"Well, the Russells have five wild boys from the ages of four to eight. Their mother's always begging me to give her a break. Maybe we could work for her."

"Alright then," said Bikini, "let's change and go see about those darling little Russell boys."

"They're really troublesome, Bikini," I warned her. "When I say WILD, I mean REALLY WILD." I wouldn't have the nerve to babysit them by myself, and I'm only suggesting it because there will be two of us, and if anyone can control them, I guess you can."

"Well, thank you, Kat," she replied happily. "I appreciate your confidence in me. I'm gonna change into my babysitting bikini. You'll need to go home and change into clean clothes yourself. Then we'll meet back at my house in five minutes." She disappeared inside.

I returned after a quick shower and knocked on the front door. There was no answer, but the door creaked open. I heard Bikini from inside a shower call out that she'd be right down. I stepped gingerly inside and took a look around the main living quarters. The room was as beautiful as I'd always imagined. Sheets had been removed from all the furniture, revealing gorgeous, Victorian-style antiques with their original fabrics now faded and somewhat tattered from age. The lighting fixtures and lamps featured elegant, leaded glass with beaded trim. The paintings hanging on every wall showcased eccentric Bonini relatives of the past hundred years. While studying one particularly curious painting of a young woman dressed in all black, I found myself looking into a pair of live eyes! I screamed and jumped back! The eyes dropped out of sight, leaving gaping holes in the painting. I cowered as Bikini came running to my aid.

"Ah, heck, don't be scared," she assured me. That's just out Aunt Meanie. Lemme introduce you." In a booming voice, Bikini yelled out, "Meanie, you come out of hiding right this minute and meet our neighbor AND my new best friend, Kat!"

After a moment of silence, we heard the sound of a glass break, an owl hoot, and a cat screech, followed by a puff of smoke from which Aunt MEanie emerged. She was completely covered by a black hooded cape. I could only see that she had impossibly long nails that were painted bright blue. She pointed a long, bony finger at me, and in a voice that sounded like nails on a blackboard, she said, "Ah, so this is one of those dreadful little neighbor children who've been stealing berries and plums and apples from my trees...I recognize you...but you didn't realize that old Meanie Bonini was living here all these years, now did you?...Why, I ought to put a spell on you right now, hex you and turn you into one of Rat's little rodents...your parents might now like that, eh? Well, I didn't like watching you steal my fruit, either...I could have starved to death in here. I couldn't just run to the market; I had to live off those gifts from nature..."

"Miss Bonini, I never would have touched those berries or plums if I'd known you lived here," I apologized. "We all thought that the house was abandoned. I just figured the fruit would rot if I didn't eat it. I'm so sorry. I really am. "

As she pulled her hood off to peer at me more closely, I got my nerve up to look back. I expected to see a hunchbacked old witch with a long nose with a wart on the end of it. I was shocked to see that Aunt Meanie was actually quite beautiful, with thick, wavy black hair streaked with silver. When she saw my surprised expression, she started to laugh, and her voice changed from the witch's cackle to a rich alto, a theatrical stage voice that was her normal speaking tone. She moved across the room with large, graceful steps. She put her arm around me and kissed my cheek.

"I was only teasing you, darling. I know all you children on this cul-de-sac think I'm an old, ugly witch, so I din't want to disappoint you." Then her voice whispered conspiratorially in my ear. "In fact, I AM a witch, but I'm a good witch...an excellent witch actually; right, darling Bikini? Why, I wouldn't dream of putting a bad spell on anyone, except perhaps Millicent Thornsby or one of her evil busybody cohorts, but certainly not on any child, certainly not one in the neighborhood...and certainly not on Bikini's best friend. Well, darling, it's been an absolute pleasure making your acquaintance, but I must get back to work. Idle hands are the devil's playground, as they say. Pee Wee, Rat, darlings, come keep your auntie company. How about a bowling match? It's Millicent's nap time, and that means bowling time in this house. I'll meet you at the lanes." With that, she enveloped herself in her cape, flung something from her hand that created a big puff of smoke, and disappeared.

"Bikini...is she really a witch?" I whispered.

"You mean that little coming and going thing she does?" Bikini snorted. "That little puff of smoke is just a theater trick. She's just a great actress pretending to be a witch. I've never actually seen her do any spells that work. But you never can tell." She shrugged and continued, "Aunt Meanie has studied all of the healing arts and the powers of nature. When she turned eighteen, she left this town and traveled all over the world. It was when she returned to open an alternative health center here at the house that Mrs. Thornsby and her husband, the mayor, closed it down before it ever opened for business. Soon after, Meanie's parents, my grandparents, died. That's when she became such a recluse that everyone forget she lived here."

"Wow," I said. "That's so sad."

"Not really. My aunt's not sad at all! Next time you're over I'll show you her pad downstairs. It's totally underground, and she has all these tunnels that take her all over town. And she's got an awesome dance floor with psychedelic lights flashing constantly. Man, that woman loves to dance. Best of all, she's got a bowling alley, right under Mrs. Thornsby's bedroom! Boy, she's really got it out for that lady! Ha!"

Changing the subject, Bikini said, "All right, Kat. I figured out that we need a hundred bucks to get the rocket back in shape. That means we need to earn \$10 a day for the next ten days. So, let's meet those Russell kids and see what makes 'em tick."

As we walked toward the opposite end of the street where the Russells lived, I tried to find out more about Bikini's background. I felt kind of shy asking her, but I was so curious, I just had to know. "Where are your parents, Bikini?"

She stopped, closed her eyes and answered, "Let me see...today is the second of August, so they must be in southern Indonesia by now, if the migration is still on the same track. A BIG 'if.' My parents are entomologists, Kat. They're following the migration of the stink bug around the world. They've been on the bug track now for seventeen years. My brothers and I have spend out whole lives following that dang bug," she laughed. "Don't get me wrong. It's been great! I've lived everywhere along the equator: Africa, South America, Asia...man, it's been fantastic. Living in tents, wearing nothing but bikinis, seeing the world. But, me and the boys decided we

wanted to a home. I need a place to build my spaceship, Buckley really wants to play on sports teams, Rat needs a place for all his animals, and Pee Wee, well, Pee Wee needs reliable sources to telecommute to his job as a software programmer for computer games! It's time for us to have a real home. So, my parents agreed that we could live with Aunt Meanie for the final year of the migration. By next year, they'll be able to join us. Maybe sooner if those dang bugs stay on course and don't pull any surprises..."

As we reached the Russell's front door, I knocked once. The door was immediately opened by a very frazzled Mrs. Russell. She had curlers in her hair and an old robe on with matching fuzzy slippers.

"What is it girls?" she asked in a tired voice, struggling to catch her breath. Behind her all hell was breaking loose. We saw the Russell boys flying down the staircase on cardboard and swinging from a rope they'd hung off of a ceiling beam. One of the older boys was chasing a younger one with an ax that looked like a toy but could have been real. Another brother was shaking a soda in a can and spraying it at the brother who was sliding down the stairs. It was absolute chaos!

"Well, I cleared my throat, "this is our new neighbor, Bikini Bonini, and she and I thought that if you'd like a break, maybe we could babysit for you sometime."

A look of total bliss came over Mrs. Russell's face. "How about right now?" she asked hopefully.

Bikini walked right inside, pulling me along with her. "Absolutely. We charge \$1 an hour, per kid," she said boldly.

"Yes. Fine. Anything," said Mrs. Russell before she rushed upstairs to change and quickly make her escape. Within sixty seconds she rushed out the door with her hair all fixed up, makeup on, and high heels to match her suit. "I'm off to lunch at the club with my friends. I'll be back late this afternoon." With that, she was gone.

I looked warily at the Russell boys, who were gathering together to get a closer look at me and Bikini. They were quietly whispering among themselves, clearly making some kind of devious plan. I started to get really nervous, but Bikini just marched into their midst and demanded to know each one's name.

"Puddentame," said the eldest, and they all cracked up at his pathetic little joke. "Don't tell her anything, boys," he warned, "even if she tortures you. She's the enemy. Run for cover if you value your lives!" With those words, each of the Russell boys took off in a different direction and hid from our sight.

"Great! I love playing hide-and-seek. Base is the bottom of the stairwell," exclaimed Bikini as she and I split up to look for the boys. Bikini found the first one in the pantry. When she opened up the door, she was squirted full in the face with a bottle of ketchup. She reached deep inside her tool belt and pulled out a spray water bottle and a clean rag which she used to wipe away the thick red sauce. The Russell boy raced by her, laughing all the way until he tagged in free at the base.

I found the eldest boy at the top of the stairs, hiding inside an antique urn. As he raced to get out and beat me to the base, he knocked over the urn. It rolled down the stairs, smashing into a hundred pieces. "I'm telling my mom you broke her urn!" he shouted. "You'll have to babysit us for a free for a gazillion years to pay her back!" Just the thought of the threat give me a splitting headache.

Bikini and I resumed our search for the other boys after we carefully swept up the precious urn bits and dumped them into a box to store them until we could deal with them later. We found the youngest Russell hiding outside a window on the second story. Bikini and I nearly panicked, since we knew he could fall off the roof and hurt himself. We tried to coax him inside with bribes of candy and soda. He remained stubbornly outside, refusing to come in off the roof. I could tell that he actually liked scaring us. I wanted to call my mom, but Bikini said she had a plan. While I kept him occupied, Bikini snuck outside and climbed up a ladder on the roof and grabbed him from behind, carrying him down the ladder to safety.

When we all came back inside, we were bombarded by water balloons flying at us from every direction. It seemed as though the boys had an endless supply. We were completely soaked and the floor was covered with an inch of water when they finally ran out of ammunition. Looking around at the devastation, Bikini announced, "Kat, we've got to get help with the 3se boys. They're a menace! I'm getting some advice from my aunt Meanie. You stay here; I promise I'll be right back."

I waited, watching the Russell boys make boats out of furniture and float around the living room, while Bikini sought help. She returned five minutes later with a book of spells she'd borrowed from her Aunt Meanie.

Pointing to a spell called "Little Lord Fauntleroy," Bikini whispered in my ear, "Kat, Meanie suggested we might need to take somewhat desperate measures, and this is the spell she recommended." Before the boys could make their move, Bikini began to circle around them, muttering incantations while tossing some of her aunt's sparkling dust all over them. The Russell boys froze in their boats for a few moments, hypnotized by Bikini's words and actions.

When she snapped her fingers to complete the spell, a miracle occurred. The Russell brothers rubbed their eyes, awakening as if after a long nap. They looked around the living room at the disaster area they had created, and the eldest one announced to his brothers, "This place is a mess! We've all got to chip in and clean it up so mother won't be distressed." His voice had changed completely. He spoke in a very sweet and refined manner, with the hint of an English accent! All the boys hopped to it and got to work.

"Excuse me, please," said the youngest Russell boy as he tried to mop the floor around us.

"Goodness me, we were so naughty. Please forgive us for our earlier behavior. I assure you it won't happen again," the eldest brother promised.

For the next three hours, the boys cleaned the house from top to bottom. They made us lunch and insisted that we sit down in the back yard under an umbrella while

they worked. When they were finally done cleaning, they showered and put on their best clothes, little coats over matching shorts and striped ties. After serving tea to Bikini and me, they sat attentively on cushions in the spotless living room, at the feet of the eldest brother, who read aloud from *Wind in the Willows*.

When Mrs. Russell came in the door to this peaceful reading scene, she thought she'd entered the wrong house. The boys ran up to her, pleading, "Mummy dearest, we've missed you."

"Come have a cup a tea."

"Did you have a lovely time, Mummy?"

They all spoke at once in these polite, sweet little voices tinged with English accents.

Mrs. Russell was in shock, but she hugged each of them and caressed their little heads. She looked quizzically at Bikini and me, but then dug into her purse and handed us a \$20 bill for the four hours. "I feel like I owe you so much more," she said.

"Well, we did have a teensy accident with your urn when we were playing with the boys, and it got smashed to bits," I admitted, handing her the box of broken urn pieces.

"Not a problem, it wasn't a real antique. I wouldn't dare have anything of real value in the house with these boys of mine," said the slightly dazed Mrs. Russell, accepting the box while surrounded by her adoring sons.

As we left, we heard the boys call to us in unison. "Goodbye, dear babysitters! And thank you ever so kindly for looking after us!"

Bikini and I ran back to her house, giggling all the way. "How long do you suppose the spell will last?" I asked.

"Unfortunately for Mrs. Russell," responded Bikini, "Meanie says the spell will diminish when the boys go to sleep, and it will be gone by tomorrow morning. So I guess some of Meanie's spells really do work. Maybe I've been underestimating her. Hey, let's go check on Buckley and see how he's coming with the cotton candy cleanup. I hope he's not totally done—I'm starving for a snack!"

Chapter Three

The next morning I raced over to Bikini's house to help figure out what else we were going to do to earn more money for the spaceship. I heard some weird chanting coming through the open front door, so I slowed down and peeked inside. I could smell incense, and my eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the darkened room. I could make out a number of silhouetted figures inside, frozen in positions of seemingly impossible balance.

"Tai kwon-do!" I jumped in surprise as all the voices of the "statues" spoke in unison, and all of the figures shifted into a new position. At that point, my eyes could

see that some of the statues actually were statues, and the moving figures were the Boninis. Meanie was leading the morning exercises. She beckoned me inside and directed me to take a position behind Bikini, where I'd learn to mimic the Tai Chi exercises. I followed her instruction through the end of the exercise session, even though I felt gawky and silly.

After we completed the positions, Bikini and I went out to the Space Ship & Shape Shop (which now had a sign proclaiming its name over the front door). I commended her on the sign and she told me to thank Buckley, who was already inside working. He blushed a deep red when I told him I thought it was a beautiful sign.

"Alright, the place looks great, Buckley," Bikini said. "You're forgiven for yesterday's cotton candy extravaganza. Now, do you want to help me and Kat raise enough money to anodize the engine parts before we put it all back together?"

Looking down at his feet, and glancing sideways at me, Buckley mumbled his acceptance to join our quest. Turning her attention to me, Bikini said, "Kat, you know this neighborhood best. Where are the jobs? Let's not babysit today, though. I'd rather FIX something, anything except kids!"

I sat there racking my brain, trying to think of someone—anyone—who would hire three kids to fix something. Unfortunately, my mind was blank. All I'd ever done to earn money was babysit or help serve at parties, and I didn't know of any parties planned for that day.

"Hey, wait a minute," interrupted Bikini with sudden inspiration. "HOW ABOUT A CAR WQASH? RIGHT HERE ON THE STREET?! Buckley, make another one of your gorgeous signs, a big one that says: Best Old-Fashioned Carwash Ever: \$5 Inside and Out."

She called outside to Pee Wee and Rat that she needed their help. Pee Wee grumbled miserably, "Gaaa Gaaaaaaa, goooo-goooo" (which means, "If you think I'm going to soil my newly laundered dress whites participating in a slimy, filthy car wash, you're out of your mind!")

Bikini cut him off, "Oh, stop complaining, Pee Wee—all you've got to do is drive the cars through the carwash—nothing is going to mess up your perfect little sailor suit!"

Rat and Bikini and I discussed which of the animals might be able to help out. We decided that the goats could be harnessed to a pulley system that would be rigged to haul water out of the well. The insects and earthworms would be let loose inside all the vehicles to clean up and the food and dirt particles. The flapping wings of the birds could be used to dry the cars and all the furry creatures would make great buffers. Rat went to convince his assorted animal troops to participate in our fundraiser.

Bikini and I surveyed the property for the best location for the carwash. We selected the side yard near the fountain and the well, and then rigged our water system using an elaborate mix of pulleys, buckets, and hoses attached to various livestock and goats supplied by Rat's forces. Once we were setup, we realized it was time to market our services. Buckley rigged his sign at the end of the cul-de-sac,

announcing that the car wash was now open for business. We stood there encouraging cars to come inside for a wash. After an hour or more, no one had come, so we decided to go door to door to drum up some business.

First, we knocked on Elaine MacGregor's door. Elaine is a classmate of mine at school. When she opened the door, I introduced Bikini and told her that she would be in our sixth grade class in the fall. Elaine chuckled her usual chuckle, "heh-heh-heh." I instinctively moved out of her elbow reach, but Bikini didn't know any better and Elaine moved in toward her for the kill. Elaine's elbow was now firmly positioned at Bikini's rib cage, and when she let loose with her next "heh-heh-heh," her sharp elbow poked into Bikini's belly three times in rhythm to her chuckle. Elaine had been digging into my rib cage at the bus stop for five years, and I'd learned to avoid those sharp elbows at all costs. The only time she ever got me now was if I was in a crowd with her and couldn't get away, or if she surprised me from behind.

When Elaine tried to elbow her again, Bikini jumped way back to the safety of the first step. I interrupted her chuckling by asking if her parents might need a car washed. Elaine called her mother to the door. Mrs. MacGregor was the local Girl Scout Troop Leader, and she immediately went to work on getting Bikini to join our group. Bikini negotiated, agreeing to join only if Mrs. MacGregor agreed to let us wash her car. We had our first customer!

Bikini assured her she had nothing to do except hand over her car keys and the car would be returned to her garage completely clean in about an hour. "Who's driving my car to and from your carwash, dear?" Mrs. MacGregor asked.

"My older brother, Pee Wee. He has a driver's license, and he's working with us today."

Elaine brought us her mother's keys and opened the garage which held their family car, a beautiful white Cadillac. Then, she and her mother departed for a shopping trip in their other car, a little blue Toyota. Bikini called after them, offering to wash their second car at a reduced rate. Mrs. MacGregor said she'd decide after she returned and judged the quality of the Cadillac cleaning.

Bikini handed over the keys to Pee Wee, who maneuvered the car over to the washing area. His job was to stay inside the car throughout the wash cycle, wash the interior windows, and then return the Cadillac to the MacGregor garage when we were finished.

Rat's goats started moving, which initiated our pulley system and supplied water to our operation. As water started flowing onto the car by the bucketful, Buckley used his plastic water blaster to spray a soapy substance over the entire car. Then all the little furry creatures, wearing booties to protect against toenail scratches, smapered onto the Car, rolling and laughing and splashing in the soapy mixture.

The goats supplied the next blast of clean water to rinse the car. Then the birds surrounded the vehicle, hovering in place and furiously beating their wings of flying in formation over the car, creating a breeze of drying air. We supplemented with fans

and then let loose more soft, furry critters, our "buffers," who polished every surface. When we were finished, the white Cadillac was spotless and shiny on the outside.

Rat released all of the insects inside the car to eat up any crumbs of food and earthworms to eat up the dirt that had gathered on rugs and seats. Suddenly, Pee Wee leaped out of the car, furious that one of the insects had an accident while crossing the white fabric of his sailor suit, leaving an unfortunate bright yellow spot on his sleeve.

"Gaaaa gaaaaa goo goooo," wailed an angry Pee Wee.

Rat raced over to discuss the problem with Pee Wee and the errant earthworm. "Okay, Pee Wee, earthworm Joe would like to apologize for his accident, and now you need to apologize for calling him a 'dirt eating bag of gook!'"

While Rat and Pee Wee were arguing about the apology, all of our attention was focused on them until Bikini suddenly shouted at us and pointed at the Cadillac drifting backwards, down the driveway and into the street, without a driver. We all chased after the car, which unfortunately had been put in reverse by Pee Wee just before he jumped out of it in a state of panic over the mess on his sleeve. Even worse, he had locked the doors from the inside and left the key in the ignition. As we caught up to the errant car, it was crossing the street and heading for Mrs. Thornsby's driveway. Bikini tried opening all the doors, but none was unlocked. She pulled a hanger out of her toolbelt and untwisted it quickly, sticking one end inside the rubber between the window and the door. She aimed for the doorknob, attempting to open the lock before the car crashed into Mrs. Thornsby's garage door. There were less than ten feet between the car and the garage door when I heard a "pop" as the lock finally released. Bikini jumped inside the Cadillac and applied the brakes to stop it from crashing through the garage—with only inches to spare.

Just then, Mrs. Thornsby marched out of her front door with a scowl on her face and her darling kitty, Queenie, held tightly in her arms. "What are you doing trespassing on my property? And what is this car doing in my driveway?" she demanded.

Bikini applied to brake, put the car in park and unlocked all of the doors. "Well, Mrs. Thornsby, we just wanted to show you the excellent work that we do at our carwash service. Mrs. MacGregor's car is just about done now. Would you like to take a look at the kind of quality we can provide in a car wash?"

Thornsby's interest was piqued, so she examined the Cadillac. Just as she began to discuss price and schedule her own car for a washing, she opened the door to inspect the inside. Shrieking and slamming the door, she sputtered to Bikini, "It's filled with...with maggots and insect....it's... it's horrifying!" Then she ran inside, screaming about nightmares and demonic children.

Bikini called after her, "Y'know, inside each of us are a lot of living things, little creatures doing their work keeping our insides clean. You don't need to freak out about nature's methods of cleaning." Turning to us, she said, "C'mon kids, let's get this car back into the MacGregor garage before there's any more commotion."

Rat soothed the insects and earthworms after Mrs. Thornsby's rude remarks, and Pee Wee carefully drove the Cadillac back into the garage before scampering home to change into an unsullied sailor suit.

When Mrs. MacGregor returned, she was so pleased with our work that she let us clean her blue Toyota as well. All afternoon we had a steady stream of cars and satisfied customers, until Rat pulled the plug on our operation by giving our crew the rest of the day off—but not before we had earned thirty-five more dollars for our spaceship rebuild fund.

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You need to download entire book. In order to do this, ask your parents to purchase the book for you. The cost is \$5 to download and read the entire book. Tell your parents you are enjoying this book and want to continue reading about me and Bikini and our adventures in the neighborhood. I'm sure they'll be delighted! If they tell you that they can't afford it; email me (see home page of website for my address) and we'll see what we can do to help you finish my book!

Fondly,

Kate