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5

A STEVIE DIAMOND MYSTERY

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**What's a daring  
detective like me  
doing in the  
doghouse?**

LINDA BAILEY



KIDS CAN PRESS

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This book is for my sisters — Debby Barney and  
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## CHAPTER



**I**T WAS JESSE WHO GOT THE IDEA THAT WE COULD catch the Prankster.

For months – ever since the Prankster first started pulling his pranks – the newspapers had been full of articles about the guy. Jesse cut out every one of them and saved them in a shoebox, which he kept under his bed, along with all his other collections. Marbles. Feathers. Coins. Wasps’ nests. Potatoes with interesting shapes. Believe me, you would *not* want to crawl under Jesse’s bed.

“You’re obsessed,” I told Jesse when he showed me the articles. “And anyway, the guy’s a bozo.”

“Am not obsessed,” said Jesse stubbornly. “And why wouldn’t I be interested in the Prankster? The guy’s a *criminal*, Stevie.”

I’m Stevie Diamond. Stevie, short for Stephanie. Jesse’s my friend and also my neighbour, and sometimes even my detecting partner. Diamond & Kulniki, that’s us. Over the past year or so, we’ve managed to solve a few mysteries together. Nothing huge – I mean, no dead bodies or anything. Still, we’ve been on TV a few times. Not bad for a couple of kids.

But lately, things had been a little slow. Well, okay, really slow. Jesse couldn't stand it. He had an itch to do some detecting – an itch as bad as chicken pox. The only way he could “scratch” it was to read those articles about the Prankster.

Like I said, he was obsessed. And one day on the way home from school, he tried to drag *me* into it.

“Hey, Stevie, wow! Look at that!” Crouching, he pointed at a newspaper box.

The headline was in giant capital letters. “PRANKSTER STRIKES AGAIN!”

I squinted. “So what did he do *this* time?”

“Just a second. I’m reading.”

Jesse’s not exactly a speed reader. While I waited, I had plenty of time to think about some of the pranks the Prankster had already pulled on important visitors to Vancouver.

Like there was this famous opera singer – a chubby guy with a beard who you’ve probably seen on TV. Just before he had to go onstage, his toupee disappeared. In its place was a note. “Have a hairy nice performance. Sincerely, the Prankster.”

That’s right. Hairy nice. The Prankster had a baaaaad sense of humour. But guess what? The opera singer wasn’t laughing. Poor guy had to walk onstage as bald as a golf ball.

Then there was the big-star basketball player who came to town – one of the Chicago Bulls. He got locked in a broom closet in the last few minutes of a game against our Vancouver Grizzlies. One minute he was heading for the bathroom. The next minute there was a blanket over his head and a bunch of brooms falling on him. A little while later, the

electronic scoreboard flashed this message: “Vancouver Grizzlies Make a Clean Sweep of Chicago Bulls. Best wishes from the Prankster.”

Like I said, baaaaaad.

He’d pulled a lot of other pranks too, but you get the picture.

Jesse giggled. “This time he *really* did it, Stevie.”

“What? Tell me.”

“He stole the prime minister’s underwear!”

“You’re kidding!”

Jesse explained. It seems that the prime minister of Canada – our prime minister – had arrived in town that morning for a big conference of world leaders. The other leaders hadn’t shown up yet, so the prime minister took an afternoon nap in his hotel room.

While he was sleeping, his room was robbed. Well ... sort of. When the prime minister woke up, he discovered that a small leather suitcase had disappeared from his closet. It didn’t contain anything very valuable – just some socks, a pair of pyjamas and *all* of the prime minister’s underwear. A note was taped to the closet wall. “You snooze, you lose. Signed, the Prankster.”

“You snooze, you lose,” Jesse repeated. “I love it! Hey, Stevie! Snooze? Lose?” He let out a snort-cackle laugh and slapped the side of the newspaper box. I sighed. The Prankster wasn’t the *only* one with a corny sense of humour.

“And just think!” said Jesse. “We’ve got a whole week off school to catch him.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s spring break, Stevie. We’ve got –” he counted on his fingers “– nine whole days to find the

Prankster and get the prime minister's stuff back. You and me. Diamond and Kulniki!"

OK, I'll admit it. For about ten seconds, I got sucked in. After all, Jesse and I had caught crooks before. I could see us handing the Prankster over to the cops. I could even picture the prime minister shaking my hand in front of dozens of TV cameras. "I am *extremely* grateful," the prime minister was saying, "to Ms. Stephanie Olivia Diamond, who showed great courage in locating my polka-dot boxer shorts and my –"

"Wait a minute!" I did a little jerk backwards. "Underwear, Jesse? We're going to spend our spring break detecting for underwear?"

He shrugged. "Not just any underwear. The *prime minister's* underwear!"

I shook my head. "I don't care if it's the queen's underwear. It's dumb. People will laugh at us."

They would, too. The kids in our class would howl. I could already hear them: "Hey, Stevie, is that why they call you guys *private* eyes? Haw, haw, haw."

"The Prankster doesn't even commit real crimes," I told Jesse. "A toupee? Underwear? How do you expect anybody to take us seriously if we take cases like this?"

Jesse bit his lip. He knew I was right. We didn't always get the respect we deserved as detectives. Even though we'd solved four cases, some people still looked at us and thought "Kids!" So we had to be picky. Crimes with dignity – that's what we needed. Crimes with class. A diamond heist, for instance ...

"Too bad the Prankster didn't steal the prime minister's watch," said Jesse, reading my mind. "A watch would be serious enough, wouldn't it?"

I shrugged. "Face it, Jesse, the guy's a goof."

I was sure Jesse would give up then, but no. He said maybe there was a reward for returning the prime minister's stuff. I said forget it, the prime minister was rich. He could buy all *new* underwear. And Jesse said, yeah, but wouldn't that be kind of embarrassing – standing in line in the underwear department when you're the prime minister? And I said, what, are you nuts? The prime minister has servants for that kind of thing. And then we started laughing, thinking about the poor servant who would end up in the underwear line. Jesse said maybe we should go downtown – cruise the underwear departments looking for him. And then we started imagining the prime minister in all kinds of different underwear, and then we started imagining him in *no* underwear, and ... well, that got us a little hysterical.

Anyway, Jesse didn't mention the Prankster again all the way home. But on Saturday he came by my house and tried again to talk me into going after the guy. And who knows? Maybe he would have finally worn me down ...

Except that on Sunday, I got a job. A real job, paying real money – for the whole week of spring break. Not a detective job or anything like that. Just an ordinary job, walking dogs. It had nothing to do with the prime minister. It had nothing to do with pranks. And it had absolutely *nothing* to do with underwear!

So here's the weird thing. In the end, it was my job that led Jesse and me – in a very roundabout way – to the prime minister's stolen underwear. It was my job that put us right in the path of the Prankster, and it was my job that got us into more trouble than I *ever* want to be in again.

That's right. My job.

And the dogs, of course. One dog in particular.

It's a long story.

## CHAPTER



I GOT THE JOB BECAUSE OF DINNY'S LEG. DINNY'S A friend of my mom, and on Sunday she tripped taking out the garbage. This wasn't the first time something like this had happened – Dinny's a little accident-prone. Anyway, she wrecked some things in her knee called ligaments, which meant that she'd have a hard time walking for a few weeks.

The problem was – walking was Dinny's business. Dinny owns Barking Buddies, a kind of day care for dogs. People bring their dogs in the morning, and she looks after them during the day. Mostly that means walking them.

On Sunday just after lunchtime, Dinny phoned our house in a panic. I almost never get up before noon on Sunday, so I was still eating breakfast when the call came. I could tell from my mom's side of the conversation – “Oh dear!” and “How awful!” and “You poor thing!” – that something was going on, but it wasn't till I heard my name that I really paid attention.

“Stevie's off school this week,” said my mom. “Yes, spring break. Listen, Dinny, I'm sure she'd be – oh

yes, absolutely – no, no trouble at all – she’d be happy to – yes, I’ll tell her.”

By the time she hung up the phone, it was settled. I was a Barking Buddies employee – for a week at least, until they got someone else. Dinny told my mom I should show up the next morning at eight and report to her assistant, Gaylene Schultz.

“Gaylene will be walking the dogs, too, of course,” said my mom, “but there are too many for her alone to walk. So you’ll take a bunch, and Gaylene will take a bunch and – well, it will work out fine, I’m sure.”

“Uh, Mom?”

“Yes?”

“The only animal I’ve ever been around is Radical.” I nodded in the direction of our big orange cat snoozing on a chair. Radical wasn’t much of a walker, and he’d give up one of his nine lives before he’d let me put a leash on him.

My mom nodded. “Dinny thought of that. She said you should drop into Barking Buddies today and pick up some books on dog behaviour. There’s a booklet there, too, that Dinny wrote, called ‘Barking Buddies Basics.’ You can study up tonight and be all ready for tomorrow morning.”

So that’s how, just after dinner, I ended up riding my bike over to Barking Buddies. Jesse offered to come along. He’d never heard of a dog day care and wanted to have a look. On the way, we stopped at Dinny’s house for the key. Dinny limped to the door on crutches. Her knee was – I’m not kidding – as big as a grapefruit. I didn’t *say* that, of course. I also didn’t ask how a person could wreck

her knee taking out the garbage, even though I was dying to know.

As we biked from Dinny’s to Barking Buddies, Jesse started talking about the Prankster again. He could do the “legwork” on the case during the day, he said, and we could have “brainstorming meetings” after I finished work.

“No,” I said firmly. No way was I going to let Jesse turn us into underwear detectives. I didn’t care if he had *ten* shoeboxes full of newspaper articles.

As I opened the door to the day care, Jesse whistled. “Look at this place,” he said. “Dog heaven!”

Well, not exactly. But Dinny did sell some pretty fancy dog stuff. It was all laid out on shelves just inside the door. Dog shampoos. Rubber bones and balls. Woolly dog sweaters and plastic dog raincoats. Dog toothbrushes, nail trimmers, seatbelts and flea sprays – at least six different kinds. All sorts of dog food and treats, too, including rawhide bones and beef jerky. There were even real pigs’ ears – all dried up and chewy-looking. Jesse winced when he saw them. Some things are hard to take when you’re a vegetarian.

The walls were covered with paintings and photographs of dogs, and there was a cabinet full of shiny china dogs – collies, dachshunds, Great Danes, chihuahuas. Off to one side, a carpeted area held a desk, a couple of chairs and a couch. Down the middle of the room was a fenced walkway.

“What’s with the fence?” asked Jesse.

“The dogs go through here,” I told him, “on their way to the yard out back. See?” I pointed to

a sign with an arrow on it and the words “Pooch Playground.”

“Great!” said Jesse. “Let’s go see the pooches!”

“No dogs today,” I told him. “It’s Sunday, remember? Barking Buddies is only open on weekdays.”

“So who’s barking?”

“Barking?” I listened. Jesse was right. Only it wasn’t really barking – more like a high-pitched whine with a few barks thrown in.

“That’s strange,” I said.

“Maybe it’s a ghost dog.” Jesse let out a long, eerie howl. “Ow-ow-owooooo!”

Immediately, the whine came back – higher this time, and louder. Something was definitely out there in the playground.

“Better go look,” I said, glad I wasn’t alone. Jesse followed me down the long hall, past the storage room, the bathroom and a little lounge kind of room with a big couch. I opened the back door slowly and not very wide – just in case whatever was out there had huge fangs.

Sitting in the middle of the yard was the most pathetic-looking creature I’ve ever seen. It was a dog all right, but you had to look closely to tell. It came about halfway up to my knees, and its fur was smeared in brown muck. Underneath the muck, its hair was all matted and tangled in bumpy knots. When I looked closer, I could see why. Burrs! Those prickly clingy seeds that grab onto anything that walks by. The dog was covered in them.

When it spotted us, it whined in this sad little voice that sounded more like a cat than a dog. Its tail started thumping on the cement.

“What happened to you, pal?” asked Jesse as he stepped out into the yard.

The dog toddled over, and Jesse reached out to pat him. Then he made a face. “Phew! What’s that smell?”

“He must have rolled in something.”

“Like what?” Jesse stared at the smears.

I took a couple of steps closer and sniffed. “Don’t ask.”

Jesse’s face was still wrinkled in disgust, but he was down on his knees now, patting the dog, who was staring up with wet black eyes.

“Poor thing,” said Jesse. “He looks lonely. How’d he get in here anyway?”

Good question. I looked around the yard. Mostly, it was just a big open area for the dogs to run around in. There was a grassy part, a large paved area and a small fenced-off corner with a sign that said “Jail.” That was where dogs got sent when they weren’t behaving. The whole yard was surrounded by a high wooden fence. There used to be a door in it, but Dinny decided there were too many big trucks driving down the back lane, and she’d had the door boarded off.

“Do you think it could have jumped the fence?” asked Jesse.

I glanced up. The top of the fence was three heads taller than me. I glanced down at the dog.

“Not a chance.”

“Well, maybe it got left here on Friday night by mistake?”

I shook my head again. “Dinny would never do that. Anyway, what about these smears? And the burrs?”

“Maybe you should phone Dinny. Tell her what the dog looks like.”

“Good idea,” I said. “What *does* the dog look like? Underneath all that gunk, I mean.”

We both stared at the dog, who whimpered and blinked back.

“Good question,” said Jesse.

The three of us – dog, me, Jesse – just stood there in the middle of the yard.

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” said Jesse. “We can’t just leave him like this. We’ll have to give him a bath.”

“A bath?” I shuddered. The last time I bathed Radical, it had taken two weeks for my scratches to heal. “Do you know *how* to bath dogs?”

“What’s the big deal? Soap him up and rinse him down, right?”

I really, really, *really* didn’t want to do this. But it was one of those times when you don’t have a choice. The dog *did* need a bath. Badly.

“Okay,” I said finally. “If we’re going to do it, let’s do it. Fast!”

The trouble was, there was no fast way to do it – at least not at Barking Buddies. The only sink was a tiny one in the bathroom that wouldn’t have held a hamster. There was a hose out in the yard, and I guess we could have hosed the dog down, but it was cold out, and he was already shivering. After a while, it became obvious – we needed a tub. That meant we’d have to take the dog home.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I said as I emptied out my backpack. “Here, quick, drop him in. Ugh! Ick! Let’s get *out* of here!”

I had the idea, you see, that as long as the dog was on my back and I kept moving, I could stay ahead of the smell. Mostly it worked, too – except for a few horrible moments as we scrambled around looking for the books I was supposed to pick up. Once we were on our bikes, it got better. I sucked in fresh air and pedalled fast. The dog sat quietly in my pack with just its head peeking out.

Lucky for us, my parents were out at a play. I sent Jesse and the dog-filled backpack into the bathroom, while I made a quick call to Dinny. *Tried* to make a quick call. When I heard the busy signal, I headed upstairs.

Jesse was perched on the edge of the toilet seat with the backpack on his lap and the dog’s head poking out the top. Ears cocked, tongue hanging out, the dog stared at the gushing tap in the tub. He looked – and smelled – as bad as ever.

“We’re going to need all the help we can get,” I said. Opening the cupboard, I handed Jesse a quarter-full bottle of Peaches & Cream bubble bath. “Let’s start with this.”

He emptied it into the tub.

“Throw this in, too.” Handing Jesse the Autumn Passion bath salts, I stared sternly at the mutt. “I hope you appreciate this, dog. It was part of my dad’s Christmas present to my mom.”

“He appreciates it,” said Jesse quickly, as he dropped the bath salts in. “Don’t you, dog?”

The dog barked happily.

“Water’s ready,” said Jesse, testing it. “Put him in.” He didn’t appreciate it.

The second the dog’s feet touched the water, he

started acting as if we were trying to drown him – splashing, squirming, scrabbling up the sides of the tub, barking so loudly I was sure the neighbours would complain. Even though the dog wasn't much bigger than a large rat, it was really hard to hold on to him. Jesse was dumping on shampoo, but only about half was actually hitting the dog.

“Hold still, dog,” I grunted. “Here, let's – Jesse, can you rub it in over his – hold *still*, dog!”

“Is it coming off, Stevie?”

“I think it – oof – try to get his – HOLD STILL, DOG!”

Within seconds, the water in the tub was an icky grey, and the smell of bubble bath combined with whatever-it-was was enough to make you retch. We soaped, scrubbed and wrestled with the dog. Mostly we wrestled. Finally, after what felt like an hour, we rinsed the dog off and pulled the plug.

“Somebody should give us a medal.” Jesse collapsed onto the toilet seat, his white T-shirt soaked and covered in brown smears. The dog was on his hind legs, trying to get out of the tub.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Does he look any better?”

Jesse craned his neck and squinted. A smirk crossed his face. “Uh, Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“It's ... not a he.”

I looked. “Oh. Right. Does *she* look any better?”

“A bit. At least the muck is gone. I think she's supposed to be white. But the burrs are still there.”

Jesse was right. The dog's long hair was grubby grey now instead of brown, but the shampoo hadn't even touched the tangles.

“What now?” asked Jesse.

I thought for a minute. “Conditioner.”

“What?”

“That's what I use on my hair when it gets tangled. It kind of loosens things up.”

Jesse couldn't argue. Between the two of us, I am definitely the expert on hair. I have at least ten times as much as he does, and mine is what commercials call “hard to manage.” This means that combs get stuck in it. Sometimes they even get *lost* in it.

We tried both kinds of conditioner in the cupboard, the one with ultra-shine and the one with vitamin E. We also tried a frizz-tamer and some stuff that's supposed to fix split ends.

The dog stayed knotty.

“Hopeless,” said Jesse.

“Nah, there's got to be – hey, wait, here's something!” I handed Jesse a package I'd discovered behind a twelve-roll pack of toilet paper.

Jesse peered at the package. “Henna. Isn't that a dye?”

“Some kinds are. But this kind just makes your hair smooth and shiny. My mom's used it on my hair a couple of times.”

Jesse eyeballed the dog and shrugged. “She couldn't look any worse, right?”

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