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A STEVIE DIAMOND MYSTERY

**What's a serious
detective like me
doing in such a
silly movie?**

LINDA BAILEY



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CHAPTER



THERE THEY WERE — NINE WORDS I'D WAITED MY whole life to hear.
“How would you like to be in a movie?”

I was holding the phone so tight I'm surprised the plastic didn't snap. At the other end of the line was Gertie Wiggins, my neighbor. Gertie's an actor, and she knows a lot of people in the movie business here in Vancouver. For months, she'd been promising to get me a job in the movies.

And here it was. My big break! My foot in the door! One thing would lead to another, and before you could say “Academy Award nomination,” I'd be launched on a fantastic new career.

I know what you're thinking. It's not easy to become a movie star. Well, it's not easy to become a kid detective either, and somehow I'd managed that.

I'm Stevie (short for Stephanie) Diamond, and the truth is, I got into detecting through pure dumb luck. On my first case, I just *happened* to be in the right place at the right time when a thousand bucks

got stolen. On my second case, I stumbled into a smuggling ring. After that, the mysteries just started dropping into my lap ... a third, fourth, fifth, sixth. It was like I was Nancy Drew!

I figured it could be the same with the movies. All I needed was a lucky break.

“Hot dog!” I said. “Where do I go? What do I do?”

“Whoa,” said Gertie. “You have to get hired first. It’s a horror film called *Night of the Neems*. They need lots of kids.”

“Neems? What’s a neem?”

“Haven’t a clue,” said Gertie. “Your first step is to sign up at the T-for-Talent Agency. Tell them I sent you. As an extra.”

“An extra?” I slumped a little. “Does that mean I don’t get to say anything?”

“Extras stay in the background.”

“Sure, fine. But I get to say *something*, don’t I?”

“Not a word. That’s why you’re extra.” There was a pause. “Nobody starts at the top, Stevie.”

I nodded into the phone. “Got it. Stay in the background.”

For about a day, I thought. They’d be sure to notice me after a day.

“They want boys, too,” said Gertie. “Can you tell Jesse?”

“Sure.” Jesse Kulniki’s my friend and neighbor. Also my detecting partner. Those six mysteries I mentioned? He was there all the way. Diamond & Kulniki — that’s us. I wouldn’t dream of becoming a movie star without Jesse.

Gertie asked to speak to my mom. I handed the phone over and raced around the corner to Jesse’s

house. He was sitting cross-legged on the living-room rug, hunched over a book the size of a small raft.

“How would you like to be in a movie?” I asked.

“Just a second, Stevie. Let me write this down.” He scribbled something in a notebook.

Didn’t he *bear* me?

“A movie,” I repeated. “Big screen! Theaters across the nation! People lining up for our autographs!”

“Almost done,” he mumbled. I glanced at the page he was reading. It was covered with skinny long-legged birds.

“But —”

“Sshhh!” He held up a hand, palm out. It was covered in ink stains.

I waited, staring at the part in his straight brown hair. It took him a good *three minutes* to get done! I couldn’t believe it.

“There,” he said finally, dropping his pen and stretching. “What’s up? You want to go to a movie?”

“Not go to a movie! *Be* in a movie! *Night of the Neems!*”

“What’s a neem?” asked Jesse.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. The point is, we can be in it!” I told him about Gertie’s call.

“I don’t think so.” He reached for his pen.

“WHAT?”

“It’ll take too much time. I’ve got stuff to do.”

“What stuff?” Was he crazy?

He pointed at the giant book. “My science-fair project, for one thing.”

“Jesse Kulniki, you would actually give up a

chance to be in a movie for a bunch of dumb storks?”

He frowned. “They’re not dumb. And they’re not storks, either. They’re herons. They just look like storks because —”

My eyes rolled back in my head. “Who the heck cares?”

He didn’t answer.

Uh-oh ... Jesse can get a little weird on the subject of birds. In most ways, he’s a totally regular guy. But get to know him better, and you’ll find out about the binoculars (three pairs!) on the windowsills of his room, pointing outside, just in case. You’ll spot the bird stuff on his dresser — crumbling nests, broken eggshells, boxes of feathers. The guy *definitely* has birds on the brain. Be careful how you say that, though. He doesn’t like “birdbrain” at all.

In the end, I promised to help him with his project, which mostly seemed to involve going down to the beach and watching storks — sorry, herons — while they stood on one leg and stared at the water. Jesse planned to observe herons for at least thirty hours, which sounded to me like a serious put-yourself-to-sleep project. But the trade was that he’d be in the movie, so it was worth it.

I headed home in a great mood. Jesse and I were going to have a fantastic time and probably end up movie stars, too.

My mom and dad were sitting at the kitchen table. Was it my imagination, or did they look guilty?

“Um, Stevie?” said my mom. “Look, hon, we’re sorry. We know the movies must seem glamorous ...”

Yup, they did look guilty.

She stared at her fingernails. “We don’t think this movie job is going to work out.”

I sat down and lay my forehead on the table. That stopped them.

After a minute, my dad said, “Don’t be like this, Stevie.”

“Like what?” I stared at the wood grain of the table. “Why can’t I be in *Night of the Neems*?”

“Is that what it’s called?” asked my mom.

“What’s a neem?” asked my dad.

I let out a sigh and sat up. “Give me one good reason why I can’t be in the movie.”

“We’ll give you three,” said my dad. “Number one, school. Gertie says this would be a couple of weeks full time. That’s a lot of school to miss.”

My mom jumped in. “Number two, child extras need an adult with them on set. Gertie said so. We can’t take time off work, and neither can Jesse’s mom — and Gertie’s rehearsing a play. There’s no one to chaperone you and Jesse.”

“Number three,” said my dad, holding up three fingers just in case I’d lost count. “Gram Diamond. She’s arriving tomorrow for a visit, remember? And you know what *that’s* like.”

This was the big one. Gram Diamond is my dad’s mother. She’s what my mother calls “a force.” I’m not sure what a force is, but I think it’s something like a tornado or a hurricane. That’s definitely what it feels like when Gram visits.

“We’ll have enough to cope with ...” said my mom, her voice getting a little shrill. She cleared her throat before continuing, “... without you in the movies.”

I laid my forehead back down on the table. This wouldn’t be easy. My mom gets kind of rattled around Gram Diamond, and she counts on me to keep Gram busy. Gram and I are pretty good together. When I’m not feeling blown over by her, she can be kind of fun.

Well, okay. Maybe fun is going too far.

“Stevie?” said my dad. “Are you all right?” He *sounded* guilty, too.

“I’m fine,” I said, thinking hard. I was pretty sure I could get around missing school — my marks were good. But the chaperone thing and the Gram Diamond problem were tougher. Not impossible — nothing’s impossible for a detective and soon-to-be movie star. But tougher.

Sitting up, I stared at my parents. “Okay.”

“Okay?” They both said it at the same time in *exactly* the same surprised voice.

I nodded. My mom’s mouth dropped open. My dad blinked in confusion. Good. Keep them on their toes.

“I guess I’d better do my homework.”

As I walked up the stairs, my mom’s voice drifted up behind me. “There’s always next time.” It was that cheery, chirpy Mom voice — the one they use when they’re trying to make you feel better.

Right.

In my room, I started pacing. For reasons I don’t understand, my brain seems to be connected

to my feet. I think better if my feet are moving. Unfortunately, pacing my room is a challenge. It’s not that the room’s too small. It’s just that the floor’s a little lumpy. Dirty clothes, damp towels, overdue library books, bowls of old popcorn, half-finished model of an ancient Egyptian town (which, if you’re thinking of trying it, is *way* too hard to make), bag of cat food —

“Rowwrrr!”

Cat.

“Sorry.” I lifted my foot. Giving me a hurt look, Radical slunk away.

“I really am sorry.”

I cleared a short path and started pacing again. Simple problem solving, that’s what this was, just like solving a crime. I started with the chaperone. Jesse and I needed an adult with nothing in the world to do except hang around with us. Tough one.

I was concentrating so hard I didn’t even hear the phone ring. My mom’s voice floated up the stairs, still sounding guilty-chirpy. “Stevie? It’s Gram Diamond on the line. She wants to speak to you.”

I picked up the extension in my parents’ room. Gram launched right in. “So, Stevie-girl, I bought you some terrific books at The Book Bin, the kind you like, mysteries. I hope you haven’t read them, but I wanted to check, because I could return them tomorrow. The Book Bin opens at ten, and I’ll have plenty of time because my flight doesn’t go till the afternoon.”

She went on, telling me the names of the

mysteries. I'd already read two — *Don't Go Near the Duck Pond* and *The Secret in Locker 437* — but the others were new.

"Thanks, Gram," I said. Gram Diamond is my best supplier of mystery books, even better than the library.

"Hey!" she said. "What's the matter? You sound like you lost your best buddy."

"Well, no. Not exactly." I explained that I still had Jesse, but he and I couldn't be in *Night of the Neems*. Before she could ask what a neem was, I told her why.

"They won't let you go because *I'm* coming?"

"Er ... yes."

"Well, that's a load of horse hooey," said Gram.

I didn't answer. It *was* horse hooey.

"Listen, Stevie, I'll fix everything."

"You'll — what?"

"You need a chaperone, right? And you're supposed to spend time with your poor old Gram?"

"Uh, yes."

"Two birds with one stone, kid. *I'm* your chaperone!"

I sucked in my breath. "Gram! Do you mean it?"

"Stevie-girl, I *love* the movies. You and Jesse and I will have a fantabulous time together. It'll be a blast." She said a bunch of other things, too. Once Gram gets started, it's hard to stop her. She ended by asking to speak again to "those nervous Nellies," meaning my parents, and I knew my movie problems were practically solved.

So I stopped pacing and started my homework instead. Since I'd have to talk to Ms. Warkentin

about missing school, I did a real A⁺ job. Even my handwriting looked good.

Later, as I stood brushing my teeth, my mom poked her head into the bathroom and told me she had good news. Gram had offered to chaperone and, provided we could arrange things with my school, maybe the movie would work out after all. My mom's cheerfulness looked genuine now, and I realized that *Night of the Neems* solved a problem for her, too — how to deal with Gram Diamond's visit.

I thought about how lucky I was to have a grandmother who was "a force."

I don't know why it didn't cross my mind that "a force" is something you can't always control. You can't stop a tornado, right? You can't harness a hurricane. Throw in a major motion picture and some criminal activity, and you're bound to have trouble.

Of course, I didn't know about the criminal activity then. But I *did* know about Gram Diamond.

I should have seen it coming. The trouble, I mean.

CHAPTER



SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY LASTED AT LEAST A HUNDRED hours. But I paid extra-close attention and laughed at all Ms. Warkentin's jokes — even the math joke about rabbits and multiplication, which I didn't get. At lunchtime, my dad dropped in to talk to her. He tracked me down in the schoolyard afterward and said it was okay to miss school because there'd be a tutor on the movie set.

"A tutor? You mean, like a teacher?"

"Someone to help you keep up with your schoolwork. Ms. Warkentin's had students working on movies before. She's agreed to give you all your reading and assignments ahead of time. You won't miss a thing."

"Great." So much for a holiday from school.

After school, Jesse's mom drove Jesse and me to the T-for-Talent Agency. Before we left, I spent twenty minutes in the bathroom fixing my hair, which is kind of like taming a wild animal. I have a lot of hair — a lot! — and every strand grows exactly the way *it* wants to grow. Mostly sprouting

right out from my scalp. I put some water on it and tried to flatten it, but there's not much I could do. I smiled into the mirror. Best black jeans. Last clean sweatshirt. I'd even scrubbed my running shoes with paper towels.

Jesse didn't even try. He was wearing an old faded T-shirt with a cartoon of a gorilla sticking its finger up its nose. His jeans and shoes were smeared with dried mud from playing soccer at lunch. His mom tried to brush him off, but it was hopeless.

"What's the big deal?" said Jesse. "I'm not going to wear this stuff in the movie."

I was too annoyed to answer. Maybe if I stood in *front* of him in the agent's office ...

The T-for-Talent Agency was in an old brick building, kind of run-down looking. But the office was fancy, with leather furniture and thick white carpets. The walls were covered in huge black-and-white photos of actors. I imagined my own face up there — looking back over one shoulder maybe, my eyes dark and mysterious. There were a couple of photos like that.

A tall curly-haired guy named Brad invited us into a little office. He was wearing a shiny green shirt and a tiny gold earring. Handing Jesse's mom some forms to fill out, he took my picture and then Jesse's. Then he showed us a book full of photos. Most of the kids looked ordinary, but a few were gorgeous. Unlike Jesse, they all looked *clean*.

"You could at least have combed your hair," I whispered.

"Why?" he whispered back. "You didn't."

Brad spoke to me and Jesse as if we were grown up. He said there was work coming up for child extras in the next few months, and that Jesse could start the next day on *Night of the Neems*.

It took a second for this to reach my brain. I held up one hand. "Excuse me? Did you say — Jesse?"

Brad gave an apologetic smile and shrugged. "Here's the thing, Stevie. They want eight-to-twelve-year-olds."

"I'm barely thirteen!"

"The age doesn't really matter. But you have to *look* the right age — and be the right height."

The right height? Uh-oh. I'd been doing a lot of growing lately. Somehow I'd gotten half a head taller than Jesse.

"Sorry," said Brad, closing the book.

NO! This couldn't be happening. All that planning, all that begging, all that work — to get *Jesse* in the movie?

"Listen, Mr. — uh, Brad. I'm not really this tall. I mean, I am, but I can be much shorter. See? Look!"

I slouched down onto one hip. Brad just smiled.

"Don't worry, Stevie. There'll be other chances."

I didn't hear the rest of what he said. I was too busy listening to a voice in my head that was going "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" It kept it going "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" all the way out to Mrs. Kulniki's car. I think Jesse's mom said something, but the voice drowned her out. It was now going "Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats!"

As soon as Jesse and I were in the back seat, he patted my hand. His forehead was wrinkled with sympathy.

"Sorry," he said.

"Thanks."

I spent ten seconds being glad I had such a good friend. Then I went back to the voice. "Rats! Rats! Rats! Rats!" It lasted most of the way home.

The house was empty. A note on the table said, "Gone to get Gram at airport. See you soon. Congrats on the movie! Love, Mom and Dad."

I picked up a pencil and made a thick black line through the "Cong," leaving ...

"Rats!" I said, kicking the table. "Rats on the movie!"

How was I supposed to explain this to Gram? She was almost as excited as me. It wasn't fair! How could I help how tall I'd grown? What did they have against tall people, anyway?

When the phone rang, I almost didn't answer it. Grabbing it at the last second, I grunted, "Hello?"

"Hello," said a woman's voice, uncertainly. "Mrs. Diamond?"

"No," I said, still thinking about the rats. "This is Stevie."

"Oh. Stevie. This is Melanie from T-for-Talent. When you and Jesse left, you forgot to get the directions to the movie set tomorrow. They're expecting you at 8:00 A.M."

There was a long pause as I took this in.

"Expecting *me*?" I said finally.

"You and Jesse," said Melanie. "Brad's gone for the day, but he gave me the file and said that your mom — or was it Jesse's mom? — didn't take the directions. I just called the *Neems* people and told them you're coming. Stevie Diamond

and Jesse Kulniki. Is there a problem?”

“No problem,” I said quickly. Inside my brain, the rats were turning into butterflies and fluttering with joy. “Where do we go?”

I wrote down the directions and said good-bye. I dialed Jesse and left a message on his machine. Then I tried to figure out what had happened. I was pretty sure Brad hadn’t changed his mind, so there must have been some mix-up between him and Melanie.

I didn’t care. I was in the movie! I was going to the set tomorrow! All I had to do was figure out how to get half a head shorter.

I was swooping around the kitchen, knees bent — looking *quite* short, I thought — when my parents came in. With Gram Diamond.

Throwing her arms wide open, she bent over into a crouch. “STEVIE-GIRL!” she yelled.

I ran into her arms and we swooped around the kitchen together, Gram singing ya-da-da, ya-da-da to keep us going. I got a little tangled up in her red cape, and my head kept banging against her hat — a big navy one with a wide stiff brim. Gram has a thing for hats. She has a whole closet full. Also shoes. Name a color — any color — there’s a pair of shoes to match in Gram’s closet. Today she was wearing ankle-high red boots — to match the cape, I guess.

“Who’s going to have a *grrreat* time in the movies?” she asked and then waited, her mouth open wide in a grin, for the answer.

“Um ... us, Gram,” I said. I glanced over at my parents, who were standing by the door looking as

if they were at the back of a theater and couldn’t find seats. Gram has that effect on people.

“Hol-ly-wood, here we come,” sang Gram, grabbing me again. More ya-da-da, ya-da-da. By the time we slowed down, my mom was making tea, and my dad was sitting at the table, leafing through the newspaper.

“How was the audition, Stevie?” My mom talked in that slightly nervous voice she always uses around Gram.

“It wasn’t really an audition.” I told them about it, leaving out the part about being too tall. Good thing Melanie and I had straightened that out.

“We’ll have to be up at the crack of dawn,” said Gram happily. I nodded. Gram was always up at the crack of dawn. Usually, she’d been for an hour-long walk before anyone else opened their eyes.

My dad cleared his throat and shook his newspaper. “I ... uh, hate to rain on your parade, Stevie, but there’s an article here about your movie. It has me a little concerned.”

Gram put her arm around Dad’s shoulder and squeezed. “Oh, you!” she said, giving him a big kiss on the cheek. “You’re always *concerned* about something.”

My dad squirmed. Whenever Gram shows up, he starts looking about six years old. “No, really,” he said, wiggling around in his seat. “Look at this.”

I leaned over. The headline of a small article said *IS NIGHT OF THE NEEMS JINXED?* Right below that, it said “Trouble on Local Movie Set.”

“Read it out loud, Mike,” said my mom from the counter, where she was filling the sugar bowl.

So he did. The article said that *Night of the Neems* had started filming in Vancouver a few days earlier — directed by Frank Brusatti and starring Sir James Sloane.

“No!” Gram slapped both hands against her cheeks. “Really? Sir James Sloane?”

“Yes,” said my dad, “but that’s not the —”

“Sir James Sloane! Incredible. He’s my favorite actor ever — after Mel Gibson and Harrison Ford. And Clark Gable, of course, but he’s dead. Sir James Sloane!”

“Fine,” said my dad, a little impatiently. “But *this* is the important part.”

He read on. Accidents had been happening on the set of *Night of the Neems*. A camera had fallen over, injuring a member of the crew, and some cast members had gotten food poisoning from contaminated mushrooms at lunch.

“I don’t even *like* mushrooms,” I said quickly. It wasn’t hard to see where this was going.

“Sir James Sloane,” said Gram, staring out the window. “He was in *Tell Mary I Love Her*, wasn’t he, Valerie?”

“Um, I think so.” My mom let go of the tea tray a little too soon, and it hit the table with a thunk that made tea slop out of the pot. “Oops,” she said.

My dad kept reading. There was more about the director, Frank Brusatti. Apparently, there’d been minor accidents and injuries on the last movie he directed, too. He was getting a new nickname around town — Bad Luck Brusatti.

“Minor accidents?” I said. “That means nothing serious, right?”

My dad raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’d call food poisoning pretty serious. Wouldn’t you, Valerie?”

He gave my mom a questioning look. She bit her bottom lip. Bad sign.

“I adored *Tell Mary I Love Her*,” said Gram, with a dreamy smile. “Especially the sad scene at the end when the ship went down.”

“Nobody died, right?” I said, thinking about the mushrooms.

“Almost everybody died.” Gram frowned. “It was the *Titanic*, for Pete’s sake!”

My dad looked from me to Gram, then rolled his eyes. “I’m not sure this *Neems* thing is a good idea, Stevie. If people are getting hurt ...”

“What?” said Gram, finally paying attention.

“I said — I’m not sure Stevie should be in this movie. Food poisoning, accidents ...”

“Oh, for goodness sake, Mikey. You’re not going to get into one of your flaps, are you?” Gram reached across the table and squeezed my mom’s hand. “When he was little, he worried about everything. Monsters in the closet, spiders in his bed. He even worried about taking a bath. Remember, Mikey-boy? You thought you’d get sucked down the drain?”

My dad looked as though he’d like to get sucked down a drain right now — and end up in some other house. Maybe some other city.

“You kids worry too much.” Gram patted my mom’s hand. “Loosen up. Relax. Enjoy yourselves! I’m the chaperone, right? I’ll take care of Stevie.”

I glanced over at Mikey-boy — I mean, my dad.

All the fight had gone out of him. My mom just sat there, blinking.

“Well, good!” said Gram. “Stevie? Big day tomorrow. Crack of dawn! Off to bed now.”

“Right,” I said. Better make my getaway. “Crack of dawn.”

As I reached the door, Gram’s voice stopped me.

“Stevie?”

I turned around. “Yeah?”

“What’s a neem?”

I grinned. “Something really great, Gram.”

She grinned back. “That’s what I thought. See you in the morning.”

A Stevie Diamond Mystery

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



Stevie Diamond doesn't plan to be a daring detective during her spring break. She's supposed to be walking dogs at Barking Buddies, a Vancouver dog daycare.

But when a strange little stray shows up, Stevie begins to realize that she is right in the middle of a mystery. Where did the dog come from? And what is its connection to a mysterious criminal named the Prankster? As Stevie and her partner, Jesse, untangle the clues, they find themselves taking on their biggest and scariest case yet.

Bailey has written another lively story that will keep readers involved to the very end.

— School Library Journal, January 1998

How can a brilliant detective shine in the dark?



A freight-train-sized mystery involving Stevie's strange relatives is right there under her nose and she's missed it — until a family reunion welcomes long-lost Uncle Archie back into the fold. No one knows why Uncle Archie ran away more than 45 years ago, but there is talk of a hidden cave, missing gold and ... an unsolved murder.

Stevie tricks Jesse, her best friend and detecting partner, into joining the reunion — and soon the pair is headed for adventure!

Ready for some mystery in your life? You could try it Stevie Diamond style. This time, Stevie un-covers a dark family secret while staying with her aunts. But say no more! You'll have to read this yourself. Great for kids 8 and older.

— The Toronto Star