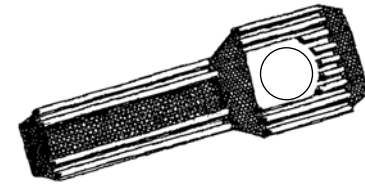


6

A STEVIE DIAMOND MYSTERY

How can a brilliant detective shine in the dark?

LINDA BAILEY



KIDS CAN PRESS

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Kids Can Press acknowledges the financial support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada, through the BPIDP, for our publishing activity.

Published in Canada by Kids Can Press Ltd. 29 Birch Avenue Toronto, ON M4V 1E2	Published in the U.S. by Kids Can Press Ltd. 2250 Military Road Tonawanda, NY 14150
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www.kidscanpress.com

Edited by Charis Wahl
Typeset by Karen Birkemoe
Printed and bound in Canada

CM 03 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
CM PA 99 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Bailey, Linda, 1948–

How can a brilliant detective shine in the dark

(A Stevie Diamond mystery ; 6)

ISBN 1-55074-896-3 (bound). ISBN 1-55074-750-9 (pbk.)

I. Title. II. Series: Bailey, Linda, 1948– .
Stevie Diamond mystery ; 6.

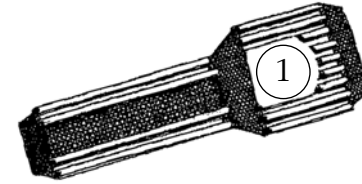
PS8553.A3644H58 1999 jC813'.54 C99-931361-4
PZ7.B1526Ho 1999

**This book is for Anna and Jesse Koeller,
long-time friends and as close as family.**

Thanks to my daughter, Tess Grainger, for her thoughtful reading and astute comments on the draft manuscript. Thanks to Charis Wahl for another fine edit and for hanging out with Stevie, Jesse and me through all these years.

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CHAPTER



EVEN AN EXPERIENCED DETECTIVE CAN MISS things.

Take me, for example. Stevie Diamond, girl detective, just turned thirteen. In the past year, I've brought five crooks to justice. I've been thanked by the police, congratulated by the mayor and interviewed on the six o'clock news. All that, and I *still* didn't see the freight-train-sized mystery that was sitting there, right in the middle of my own family!

At least ... I didn't see it at first.

It all began with Uncle Archie.

He was the uncle who ran off to Europe to join the circus, way back before I was born. Nobody ever talked about him much, and anyway, he was my mother's uncle, not mine. Who pays attention to their mother's uncle?

So I never gave Uncle Archie a thought – not until my mom and I were on the ferry boat heading for Catriola Island. Catriola is where Aunt Edna and Aunt Ivy live. They're my mom's aunts, and they'd organized a family reunion to welcome Uncle

Archie home. For most of the family, it would be a first introduction. Uncle Archie had been gone for forty-five years.

Wait a minute!

Did I say forty-five years? Without a single visit? That *alone* should have made me suspicious.

But even on the ferry, it took me ages to clue in. First, I checked the lifeboats, just to make sure this wasn't a *Titanic*-type situation. Then my mom and I had a snack in the cafeteria – fries and gravy for me, clam chowder for her. Back on deck, we watched a seagull flying into the wind. Seagulls aren't the brightest birds, I've noticed. This one was just about flapping its feathers off, trying to keep up with the boat.

It wasn't until we'd done all those things that I noticed my mom seemed ... well, lost in her own thoughts.

"Mom? Hey, Mom. MOM!"

"Hmmm ... yes, Stevie?" She was staring out at the ocean. Greenish saltwater with ribbons of foam on top. Murky. Dark. Deep.

"Mind if I swim back to Vancouver? I passed Level 6 in swim class."

"Mmmm ... if you like."

"For Pete's sake, Mom! Hel-LO!"

She blinked, shook her head and looked at me – really looked – for the first time since we'd gotten on the boat. Her wiry brown hair whipped around her face. I waited while she pulled a strand out of her mouth.

"I guess ... I was thinking about Uncle Archie," she said.

"What about him?"

"Oh ... well ... nothing." Her eyes glazed over again.

The first wrinkle of suspicion stirred in my brain.

It was the word "nothing." That was exactly what everybody always said about Uncle Archie. Nothing! Nobody ever really *talked* about the guy. Not even Aunt Ivy and Aunt Edna, and they were his sisters. What made it even stranger was that the aunts loved to gossip, especially about relatives. It was almost a hobby. So how come Uncle Archie's name never came up?

I thought back to the couple of times I'd asked about him. The answers were five words long, max. Once, I dug a picture of him out of an old box of photos – a little kid sitting on a fence. Aunt Ivy's eyes got all teary when she saw it. Aunt Edna clenched her teeth so tight that her chin stuck out like a bulldog's. But they didn't *say* a word.

Something was definitely going on here.

When in doubt, ask.

"So what's the story, Mom? On Uncle Archie."

For a moment, I thought I was going to get another "nothing." Instead, she gave me a searching look and nodded.

"Something happened," she said quietly. "All those years ago. Before Uncle Archie left."

Bingo! I held my breath. "What?"

She shrugged and rubbed her upper arms, which were covered in goose bumps in spite of the summer sun. "That's what's bothering me. I don't know."

I waited. Sometimes if you're trying to get information and you say too much, the person you're talking to clams up. Silent Stevie, that was me.

It worked.

"All I know is – back when I was a girl, when I spent my summers on the island – Aunt Ivy used to have nightmares." My mom was staring at the water again, looking sort of hypnotized. Excellent. People in a trance talk freely.

"She had the same nightmare over and over. She would call out in her sleep, 'Archie! Archie!' Sometimes I went into her room to wake her up. She'd be mumbling and moaning all kinds of things – I couldn't tell what – but she seemed to be trying to help Archie. To save him."

"From what?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

To me, the next step was obvious. "So let's ask her!"

That got my mom's attention. Her head whipped around, and she held up a warning finger. "Don't you dare, Stevie!"

I shrugged. "Why not? You always say that the only way to find out about things is to ask."

"I say that about math! About science! This is different. If Aunt Ivy and Aunt Edna don't want to talk about why Archie left, then we are *not* going to drive them crazy with questions. Got it?"

I nodded. *We* – me and my mom – were definitely not going to drive them crazy with questions. *I*, on the other hand ...

"Good." My mom pointed off the front of the

ferry. A wooden dock was coming into view. "We're almost there, so let's get a few ground rules straight. One – no complaining about the food."

I felt my face twist into a grimace. Somehow I had managed to get all this way without thinking about Aunt Edna's cooking – a serious mistake. I should have eaten a full-meal special in the cafeteria. I should have ordered a bunch of desserts to go. My mood took a sudden dive.

"Two – be nice to your cousins."

The cousins. The thought of *them* made my mood drop even lower. I think it ended up in my shoes.

My mom must have heard my teeth grinding. "It's only for a few days, Stevie."

I grunted. A few days with the cousins could feel like a *decade*.

"How come Dad didn't have to come?"

"I told you. He couldn't get away from work. Besides, somebody has to look after Radical."

Radical's our cat. I pictured the two of them, my dad and Radical, lying around on the couch, eating takeout pizza and watching baseball on tv. They were probably cheering a home run right this minute.

Not fair.

"Oh, look!" My mom's face lit up as she pointed. "There they are! Aunt Edna and Aunt Ivy and – and that must be Uncle Archie."

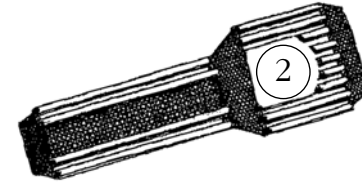
Uncle Archie? I perked up.

Peering at the spot on the dock where my mom pointed, I could see the aunts – Aunt Ivy thin and

birdlike, Aunt Edna squat, like a human fire hydrant. They were both waving, and Aunt Ivy was doing these funny little excited jumps. In between them was someone I'd never seen before. A man. He wasn't waving – just rocking back and forth, back and forth, heels to toes, heels to toes.

There he was – the mysterious Uncle Archie.

CHAPTER



MY MOM AND I HURRIED TO JOIN THE OTHER passengers who were waiting to walk off the ferry. Out of nowhere, my mom started humming. Some people twitch when they get nervous. My mom hums.

She was still humming as the ramp went down and as we walked across it to land. When Aunt Ivy saw us coming, she started waving and jumping up and down again. She was wearing a floppy skirt and a baggy red T-shirt, and she held a canvas hat over her frizzy gray hair.

“Yoo-hoo! Here we are. Valerie, Stevie. Over here!”

There were only three other people on the dock, so she didn't really *need* to yell. But Aunt Ivy's the enthusiastic type.

I looked at Aunt Edna, waiting for her to tell Aunt Ivy to for-heaven's-sake-pipe-down. But Aunt Edna seemed excited too. Her square face was flushed a bright pink, and she kept clutching at her carefully ironed gray skirt, scrunching it in her hands.

Between them stood Uncle Archie. I don't know what I was expecting. Somebody wild-and-crazy-looking, I guess – a cross between Renaldo the sword swallower and Bozo the clown.

Instead, there was this totally grandpa-looking guy – the kind you'd see at a school science fair standing beside his grandson's display saying, "I used to be a science whiz myself. I bet that's where Sonny here gets his talent." His eyes had soft pouches underneath and crinkles at the sides, and his bald head gleamed in the sun. He wore a pale blue golf shirt with a kangaroo on the pocket and a pair of those loose grandpa-type pants with the stretchy waist. The only thing missing for the total grandpa look was a potbelly. Uncle Archie was thin, with ropy-looking arms.

Aunt Ivy and Aunt Edna started introducing him at the same time. It came out all in a jumble. After a minute, Uncle Archie took one of my mom's hands in both of his.

"Little Valerie?"

My mom stopped humming. "Welcome home, Uncle Archie." She gave him a peck on the cheek.

He smiled a big grandpa smile. "I haven't seen you since you were ... well, about that high." He held up a hand at knee level. "You were always dragging around a one-eyed teddy bear. You remember that bear?"

"Pim!" exclaimed Aunt Edna. "*You* remember, Valerie. He got so shabby and dirty that we tried to make you hand him over for a cleaning and a new eye. But you wouldn't."

Aunt Ivy clasped her thin hands together in

front of her chest. "You *loved* that bear, Valerie."

My mother's forehead wrinkled. I could see she didn't have a clue who Pim the one-eyed teddy bear was. She smiled anyway. "What a wonderful memory you have, Uncle Archie."

"Well, you're a hard little girl to forget. But this girl now!" He turned to me. "I sure don't have any memories of her. Could this be Stephanie?"

"Stevie," I said. "Nobody calls me Stephanie anymore."

Aunt Edna made a little harrumphing noise.

"Except for Aunt Edna," I added quickly. "*She* calls me Stephanie."

Aunt Edna started muttering under her breath. "What kind of a name is Stevie? Some kind of boy's name? Some kind of a truck driver?"

There were hugs all around. Then Aunt Ivy threw an arm around my shoulders and started moving me toward the car. "We're so glad you could come, Stevie. Natalie and the twins are already here. And little Hugo, of course."

The cousins. Oy!

I gave her my best imitation of a smile.

The aunts' car was one of those huge ones they built a long time ago, with big fins on the back and tons of chrome on the sides. My dad called it a "boat." But as Aunt Edna said, what did they need with a new car when they hardly ever left the island?

Personally, I liked it. The seats were wide enough to hold four people, and they were covered in red plush upholstery that you could sink right into. I climbed in the back with my

mom and Aunt Edna. Uncle Archie sat in the front passenger seat, and Aunt Ivy got behind the wheel.

Aunty Ivy doesn't like driving. It makes her nervous. The only reason she does it is because somebody has to. Aunt Edna *can't* drive because she refuses to wear her glasses. She says they spoil her looks. If you could see Aunt Edna, you'd know how funny that is.

Anyway, you'd think being nervous would make Aunt Ivy slow and careful. Think again. It makes her want to get the ride over with as quickly as possible.

Grabbing the wheel in a grip of iron, Aunt Ivy leaned forward, hunched her shoulders and gunned it. Loose gravel sprayed the road behind us. We tore across the island so fast that the scenery – tall trees, rocky beaches, community hall, Priddy's General Store – was nothing but a blur. Fortunately, there aren't many cars on Catriola Island, and they all know enough to pull over when they see Aunt Ivy coming.

Aunt Edna tried to get her to slow down, yelling instructions from the back. But once Aunt Ivy's moving, it's like she's deaf.

Eventually we screeched into a long driveway with a sign out front that said "The Coopers." Aunt Ivy finally slowed down as we wound our way through a narrow, twisting tunnel of firs and cedars. The driveway opened onto a large meadow with an orchard on one side, a garden on the other, and a small wooden house front and center. The house was covered in cedar

shingles that had gone gray. It had a big old-fashioned porch.

The relatives were waiting on the porch as we pulled up. Aunt Patricia, Aunt Cheryl and ...

Argh! The cousins. Natalie. The twins. Little Hugo.

Maybe they'd changed?

Hugo ran across the lawn on stubby bare legs, his toddler diaper drooping. *He'd* changed. The last time I saw him, he could hardly crawl, never mind run. He spoiled his new act by belly-flopping on the grass, but when he got up, he was still grinning. Like most of the people in my mom's family, Hugo has thick curly hair. My dad calls it "Cooper hair." Hugo's rises from his head in a reddish cloud. I grinned back at him and gave him a little tap on the nose. Hugo was okay.

Kenneth and Kevin – the twins, nine years old – followed more slowly. They were dressed, as usual, in identical outfits. Today they were wearing green-and-yellow checked shirts, brown shorts, sandals and, of course, socks. The twins *always* wear socks. They probably even wear them in the shower.

"Hi, Kenneth," I said. "Hi, Kevin."

I was careful to stare right between them as I spoke. Besides wearing identical clothes, the twins also wear their hair exactly the same. Really short and parted on the left. It's impossible to tell them apart.

"Hi, Stevie," they said together.

"Want to play Go Fish?" asked the one on the right.

Nope. They hadn't changed. Their only interest was playing cards. Not just any cards either. They *only* liked Go Fish. I was hoping they might have branched out.

"Sure, Kevin," I said, trying to be a good sport. "Maybe later."

"I'm Kenneth," he said.

"Yeah, right. Kenneth."

The last cousin, Natalie, was talking to my mom. Natalie also had Cooper hair. It fell in long waves past her shoulders. "Aunt Valerie, the most fabulous thing has happened. This new mall just opened up right behind our house. It has all the *best* stores. Denim City and Caroline's Cupboard and –"

"Hi, Natalie," I said.

"– Sporty Girl and Shoes to Die For and ..."

Natalie's only two years older than me. She used to be okay. But some time in the last couple of years, she'd decided that she was grown up – and I wasn't. I guess that hadn't changed either.

My mom's sisters – Aunt Cheryl and Aunt Patricia – each gave me a hug. Aunt Cheryl, the mom of Hugo and the twins, had to reach up to hug me. She said the thing *all* adults say these days if they haven't seen me for a while.

"Stevie! You're so tall!"

It's hard to know what to answer. Oh really, I hadn't noticed?

"Yes, I am tall," I agreed. "I certainly have grown." I looked around. "Where's Uncle Bob?"

"He couldn't get away from work," she said. "Besides, someone had to look after Tiger."

Tiger. Their cat. Sure.

"Are you ready to play Go Fish now?" The voice came from right beside me. One of the twins was standing really close, staring up into my left ear. Kenneth? Kevin?

"In a minute," I said. "Right now, I want to ..."

What? What could I do to get out of playing Go Fish?

I remembered. Uncle Archie! He'd been in the circus, right?

"Hey, Uncle Archie! Did you learn any tricks in the circus? Like ... I don't know ... walking the high wire or swinging on the trapeze? Stuff like that?"

Uncle Archie grinned, his eyes crinkling. "Well, after all these years, I guess I must have learned something."

Great!

"Could you show us, Uncle Archie?"

This got the rest of them going. Kevin and Kenneth started saying, "Yeah, yeah, show us," and Natalie forgot how grownup she was supposed to be and latched on to his arm, begging, "Oh please, Uncle Archie. That would be wicked." Even Hugo, who could hardly talk, got caught up in the excitement and started hopping around, yelling, "So! So!" which I figured was his version of "show."

Uncle Archie shrugged and let himself be led to the open area in front of the porch. Rubbing his chin, he looked around thoughtfully. Meanwhile, everybody – adults included – found a chair or railing or step to sit on.

“Hmmm,” said Uncle Archie. “Do we happen to have a few oranges around?”

Aunt Ivy jumped up and ran into the house, returning with a net bag full of oranges. The next thing you knew, Uncle Archie had three of them whirling in circles in front of him. Then he grabbed a fourth and juggled it too. Then a fifth. Then he switched directions. Then he juggled them behind his back. And under one leg.

Hugo screeched with excitement. The rest of us clapped and hooted.

Uncle Archie stopped juggling and bowed. He turned to Aunt Ivy. “I don’t suppose you happen to have a few flaming torches handy?”

Aunt Ivy’s mouth dropped open.

Uncle Archie laughed. “Just kidding. Although I *can* juggle flaming torches. Knives too.”

He gave me a wink, then glanced toward a tall wooden fence. It looked old but sturdy.

Before you could say Ringling Brothers Circus, Uncle Archie was on the top rail. But not the way you or I would be up there. Oh no. Uncle Archie made that railing look like a dance floor. He pranced back and forth like a ballet dancer. He jumped. He twirled. His small, narrow feet never took a step out of place.

I looked down at my own feet. Size 9. Then I glanced over at my mom’s. Lucky for Archie, he hadn’t inherited the Cooper family clodhoppers. Although maybe, on a *real* tightrope, big feet would be an advantage. More foot to grip the wire with, right?

Moments later, he hopped gracefully down

from the fence. My mom and I exchanged glances, and I knew we were thinking the same thing. Uncle Archie sure didn’t act his age.

After doing a little bow, he asked Aunt Ivy if there was a bicycle around. When she brought out an old three-speed, he jumped on and started riding it in circles around the yard.

Doesn’t sound like much, I know, except – he was sitting on it backward.

That’s right. Backward!

Then he turned around forward and asked if any of the kids wanted to “come aboard.” Well, naturally, we all did. And one by one, as he rode in circles, Uncle Archie loaded us kids onto that bike. All except Hugo, who was too little. By the end, one twin was hanging off each side, Natalie was hanging off the back, and I was sitting on the handlebars. Uncle Archie told me to stick my leg up and point my toe. It was like a real circus act – the Flying Cooper Family!

The grown-ups were all yelling and cheering. Hugo was hollering too. “Me want! Me want! Me want!”

Uncle Archie told the rest of us to jump down, and he gave Hugo his own little ride, holding him in one arm while he steered the bike with the other. Hugo stuck his leg out in the air the way he’d seen me do it. Of all the tricks so far, we cheered loudest for that one.

“Uncle Archie, that was wonderful!” said my mom, still clapping as he climbed off the bike.

“Glad you enjoyed it.” Uncle Archie waved away my mom’s compliments, but he was sweating and

puffing a little, so I guess it wasn't as easy as it looked. The aunts must have noticed too, because they insisted that he come inside and rest.

The cousins and I followed the adults in, and we all sat around the living room, eating rock-hard Edna-cookies and drinking tea. Everyone started asking Uncle Archie questions about his life in the circus. It took me a few minutes to realize what this was – a golden opportunity to work in a few questions of my own about the mysterious “something” that had “happened” all those years ago.

“Hey, Uncle Archie,” I said. “What made you decide to join the circus? Was it a sudden decision, or what?”

Until that moment, I didn't know there was such a thing as a loud silence. This one was deafening. I didn't look at my mom, but I could feel her glare burning into my cheek like a hot iron.

Uncle Archie stretched his arms slowly above his head. “Gosh, Stevie, it was such a long time ago. I suppose I just wanted an adventure.”

He might have said more, but Aunty Ivy jumped in. “Speaking of adventure, did Edna and I tell you about our bus trip to Seattle? We went with the Catriola Seniors Group, and if you want to hear about *adventure* ...”

And that was that. Before long, the grown-ups were talking about Great-Great-Grandpa, who had died in the war, and Great-Great-Grandma, who had been the best quilter on Catriola Island. Then they got onto the eastern branch of the Cooper family, who were still living in Pickering,

running a dairy farm and ... well, it was time for any kid with half a brain to leave.

I wandered out into the yard with a twin right behind me. The bicycle was still lying on the ground.

“Hey, Kenneth,” I said, “want to try riding double on the bike?”

“It's Kevin.” He shook his head no.

“Aw, come on. Just once. I'll ride, and you can sit on the handlebars.”

“Uh-uh.”

The other twin wandered out, cookie in hand. Natalie followed. Flopping down on a wicker chair, she pulled a bottle of nail polish out of her bag and started painting her nails. I invited her and Kenneth to try the bike with me.

“Uh-uh,” said Kenneth.

Natalie gave me the kind of look you'd give someone who'd just suggested a trip to Pluto.

“Fine,” I muttered. “I'll do it myself.”

I rode the old bike around the yard twice, taking careful note of all the bumps, holes and buried rocks in the ground. Then, figuring I'd had enough practice, I got off and climbed on again.

Backward.

Whoooooooooooooooooaaaaaaa!

For the first three seconds, it was great – more exciting than a roller coaster and at least as scary.

Then it was over.

“Did it hurt, Stevie?” The twins stood above me, side by side, staring down. From where I sat – lay, actually – they looked like a matched set of salt and pepper shakers.

“Hardly at all,” I lied. Slowly, I untangled my legs from the metal. I rubbed the spot on my backside where a softball-sized bruise was getting started.

“Anybody want to try fence-walking?” I asked.

The twins shook their heads. How *did* they *do* that – move their heads in exactly the same direction at exactly the same time? Did they practice?

Brushing grass and dirt off my clothes, I headed for the fence. I had walked plenty of fences. It couldn’t be that hard. True, I had never tried *this* fence before. It was shoulder-high and – as I discovered when I gave it a push – a wee bit shaky. Lucky for me, I have terrific balance.

“Upsy-daisy!”

Upsy-daisy went really well. Unfortunately, I was only halfway through upsy-daisy when downsy-doozy started. I clutched frantically at the fence, then the air –

“Did *that* hurt, Stevie?”

“NO!”

“You don’t have to yell,” said Kevin. Or maybe Kenneth.

“You’re going to break something,” Natalie added without looking up. “Your neck, probably.”

Well, okay. Maybe I *should* try something safer. I headed for the oranges.

Juggling turned out to be safe, all right, but no easier than Uncle Archie’s other tricks. After ten minutes of practice, the ground was littered with cracked-open oranges. The twins gazed at them in silence.

“Aunt Edna’s not going to like that,” said Natalie from the porch.

“Want to play Go Fish?” asked a twin. He and his brother stared at me blankly, their pudgy arms hanging limp at their sides.

Oh, what was the point? Bending over, I started picking up oranges. “Sure, Kevin. Why not? Let’s play Go Fish.”

“Kenneth,” he said.

“Whatever.”

For the rest of the day, I played Go Fish with the twins. Two out of the three of us were very, very happy.

Dinner was a typical Aunt Edna meal. I won’t torture you with the details, but if I tell you that the best part was the mashed turnips, you’ll get the idea. The brown gooey stuff was meatloaf – that’s what my mom said when I asked her later. The white soupy stuff was potatoes. Aunt Edna must have cooked them for hours to get them to dissolve like that.

At least there were no weird surprises. One of the problems with Aunt Edna doing the cooking – and not wearing her glasses – is that sometimes she makes mistakes. The vanilla bottle and the soya sauce bottle, for instance, sort of look alike.

Soya sauce cupcakes. Vanilla chow mein. Think about it.

I did my best *not* to think about it. Shoveling in as much Edna-food as I could stand, I concentrated on the conversation at the table.

The aunts had invited a neighbor for dinner – Hank Dooley. He and Uncle Archie had been

best friends when they were kids. Uncle Archie started rattling off the things they used to do together – build treehouses, swing on branches in the woods, fish, swim, make fires. He told lots of stories, and they *should* have been interesting. But somehow they weren't. Not much expression, if you know what I mean. He sounded like someone giving a report at school.

I waited for Hank to tell us what *he* remembered, but he just chewed on his lip and listened. A strange old guy, Hank, all sharp angles – knees, elbows, nose, chin. He had long curly yellow-gray hair that grew every which way and a huge yellow-white mustache that seemed to be trying to crawl into his mouth.

Living all alone in a little cabin on the beach must have made Hank shy because he never spoke up much in company. I tried to imagine him as a little boy, yelling and swinging on branches, but it was hard. It was even harder to imagine him and Uncle Archie as best friends. They seemed so different.

Thinking about best friends made me think about *my* best friend. Jesse Kulniki. He and I are pretty different too. (For one thing, Jesse wouldn't be eating this meatloaf I was pushing around my plate. Not now. Not ever. Jesse's a vegetarian.) He lives a few doors away from me, so he's my neighbor as well as my friend. For the past year or so, he's been my detecting partner too.

I pictured Jesse, back home in Vancouver, packing to go to Caribou Ranch Resort. He and

his mom would be leaving the next day. The brochure he'd shown me said the resort had horses, swimming pools, hot tubs and hiking trails. Gourmet food too.

Looking down at my meatloaf, I sighed. Now I knew why I'd been such a grouch with Jesse before I left. Jealousy, plain and simple. When he'd mentioned horseback riding, I'd brought up horse-fly bites. When he'd talked about the gourmet food, I'd mentioned fish eggs and chicken livers.

Suddenly I felt really crummy. Jesse never treated *me* that way. When my baseball team made the finals and his didn't, Jesse was happy for me. He even came to my games and cheered. But me? Well, what could I say? I was a Lousy Friend. Nothing I could do about it now either. Unless ...

"Mom? Can I phone Jesse?"

She thought for a moment. "It's long distance, sweetie." Then she thought again. "Well, okay, if you charge the call to our home number and don't stay on too long."

"I promise."

Seconds later, I was talking to Jesse. He sounded so *normal* after the cousins.

"Hey, Stevie! What's up? How's the holiday?"

"It's ... fine," I said. "But that's not what I wanted to talk about. Listen, I'm sorry I said all those things about Caribou Ranch Resort. I'm sure you and your mom will –"

"We're not going."

"What?"

"We're not going." He sounded really unhappy.

“They phoned from the resort. There are forest fires burning all around it. They might even have to evacuate. They’ve canceled all the new people coming in – like us.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t think of what to say.

“It stinks, Stevie.”

I nodded. Then, realizing he couldn’t see me, I said, “You’re right. It does.”

“My mom says she’ll take time off later in the summer and we’ll try somewhere else. But for now, she’s going back to work. And me? I’m just sitting around here, staring at my toenails.”

Better than at the twins’ socks, I thought. Then – wait a minute!

“JESSE!”

“Ow, Stevie. That hurt my ear.”

“Listen to me. You can come here! To Catriola Island!”

“What?”

“I mean it. You can take the ferry over, and we’ll meet you, and you can stay here and – it’ll be great.”

There was a pause. “What’s it like there?”

“Oh ... well, Uncle Archie’s really something. Remember I told you he was in the circus? He does all these great circus tricks. Juggling. Tight-rope walking. And the island has beaches and forests and –”

What else did he like? Birds! Jesse was interested in birds.

“Plenty of interesting birds!” I finished, remembering the seagull above the ferry. I had also spotted a sparrow in front of the house. “It’s practically Bird Island.”

“Sounds great. But, uh, don’t you have to ask?”

“Hold on.”

My mom was busy being family photographer. She had the twins and Hugo posed together on the couch. Her forehead furrowed when I asked about Jesse. She said we were guests ourselves, and another person would make more work for the aunts. But Aunt Ivy overheard and said, “Nonsense, Valerie! We’ll hardly even notice him in this crowd. Stevie, you go right ahead and invite your friend. Tell him we’ll put some country roses in his cheeks.”

I went back to the phone. “Aunty Ivy’s going to put roses in your cheeks.”

“What?”

“Never mind. You can come. My mom wants to talk to your mom.”

A few minutes later, it was all arranged. Jesse’s mom would put him on the ferry the next day. We’d meet him in the afternoon the same way the aunts had met us.

I was feeling pretty cheerful as I helped my mom drag the aunts’ old tent out of the garage. With the house being so small and Uncle Archie visiting, there wasn’t much room for people to sleep inside. Natalie was sharing Aunt Ivy’s room, but the rest of us were going to camp out.

This suited me just fine. I asked my mom if we could set up our tent at the far end of the meadow, near a clump of tall birch trees. There was a stream back there too.

“Good idea,” said my mom. “We won’t hear Hugo if he wakes up in the middle of the night.”

As we put up the tent, the birch leaves shivered in the wind and the meadow grasses quivered. I felt so happy I could have giggled. This spot was perfect – far enough from the house that we would feel almost as if we were on a camping trip. Jesse was a city kind of guy – nervous about bears and so on – but we’d camped together before, and I knew he liked the *idea* of the wilderness. This corner of the meadow would be just right.

Later, lying in my sleeping bag beside my mom, I listened to the wind, the burbles of the stream, and the rustles, creaks and croaks that make up nighttime on the island. A cool breeze wafted through the window screen and danced across my face and hair, making me shiver even though the rest of my body was feather-bed warm.

I love tents.

My mind drifted back through the day. I thought about Uncle Archie’s circus tricks and how they were a *lot* harder than they looked. Then I thought about Uncle Archie’s mysterious past – the “something” that had “happened” before he left. I still hadn’t found out much about that. In fact, I hadn’t found out anything.

Never mind. Jesse was on his way. Between the two of us, we had tons of detecting experience. A little case like this, with no complications? We’d wrap it up in no time. Piece of cake.

Cake? Argh! That’s the *last* thing you should think about after one of Aunty Edna’s meals.

Too late now. There it was in my mind. Thick.

Gooley. Three layers of dark chocolate. Vanilla icing. Chocolate sprinkles and pink roses on top.

I don’t *really* believe in mental telepathy. I don’t *really* think you can send someone messages in your thoughts. But it was worth a try.

I concentrated hard. Jesse would probably be in bed now. *Bring cake*, I signaled, sending the message on what I hoped was a fairly direct brain-to-brain route. *Bring chocolate cake to Catriola Island.*

“Whussat?” My mom’s voice was drowsy. “You say something, Stevie?”

“No, Mom. Nothing. Go to sleep.”

“Night,” she said.

Holding a hand over my mouth to make sure no sounds came out, I finished the message.

Sprinkles. Roses. Big!

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

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



Thirteen-year-old Stevie Diamond is already a seasoned detective. But she's always dreamed of seeing her name in lights; so when she gets the opportunity to be an extra in a local film, she jumps at the chance.

On the set of *Night of the Neems*, Stevie and her detecting partner, Jesse, discover that making a movie isn't all it's cracked up to be. Stevie is anything but bored, though. A rash of suspicious accidents has people believing the production is cursed. As a movie extra, Stevie may have a lot of time on her hands; but as a detective, she's stumbled onto a mystery filled with lights, cameras — and lots of action!