

1 A New Mystery

Steve narrowed his eyes. There could be no mistakes this time. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and took aim.

“Ow,” his friend Matt said as the red M&M hit him on the forehead. “Dude, you stink at this. Watch...and learn.” He raised his right hand that held a piece of candy.

Sighing, Steve opened his mouth. Sure enough, an orange candy landed directly on his tongue. He bit it in two. “How’d you get so good at this?”

“Practice, dude.” He tossed a red M&M up in the air and caught it in his mouth. “Lots and lots of practice. So, Jenn, what’s this movie about, anyways?”

Jenny Reed shrugged. “I don’t know. Dad said it was like some kind of low-budget, indie flick. But, come on. Does it really matter? We’re gonna be in a movie!”

Yesterday morning, an old college friend of Jenny’s dad had brought a bunch of movie equipment that needed fixing into his repair shop and asked her dad if he knew any kids that would want to be extras in a movie. Jenny immediately volunteered herself, and her two best friends, Matt Peterson and Steve Kemp.

Steve threw a yellow M&M high in the air. It missed his mouth and landed in his slight afro. He grunted. Had Jenny not begged him to join her on this crazy movie thing, he would’ve spent the next few days researching the duties of club officers. At the end of the previous school year, he had been elected president of both the National Junior Honor Society and the Black Student Union, and he planned to be the best president that Beachdale Middle School had ever seen. Perhaps, the best president in the entire state of California.

“Besides,” Jenny added, her blue eyes twinkling, “we might find a mystery on the movie set.”

“A mystery?” Steve perked up. If there was anything he liked better than a good book, it was a good mystery. “Why do you say that?”

“My dad’s friend Tom is the director, and he said the movie’s been hit with a streak of bad luck for the past couple weeks.”

Matt threw a green candy high in the air. It hit the ceiling, then missed his mouth and fell on the floor. “Bad luck? Like what?” He bent down to pick up the chocolate.

“Broken equipment, missing props, stuff like that.” She opened the camera roll on her cell phone. “Take a look at all the stuff Dad had to repair. It took us like five hours today to get it finished in time, and that’s after Dad worked on it all day yesterday.”

The boys flipped through the pictures.

“Broken equipment and missing items.” Steve scrunched his forehead. “That sounds like sabotage.”

“Yeah,” Jenny agreed. “I thought so, too. I bet somebody is out to ruin the movie.”

“Or,” Matt interjected, “maybe, it’s just a case of bad luck. Stuff like that does happen, you know.”

Jenny crossed her arms. “One broken light or a cracked camera lens, yeah, it happens. But this many? In just a couple of weeks?”

Matt rolled his eyes.

“Either way,” Steve interrupted before his friends began to argue pointlessly, as they often did, “we’ll make it top priority to figure out what’s really going on.”

“Oh, great,” Matt mumbled and pushed his dark brown hair out of his eyes. “Now, we’re inventing mysteries to solve.”

“Come on, Mr. Grumpy Pants,” Jenny said. “You can’t tell me you didn’t have fun the past

few days with *The Magic Sapphire*. Remember, solving mysteries is our thing now. Aren't you ready for a new adventure?"

Steve smiled at the mention of their first mystery which they had nicknamed *The Magic Sapphire*. After defeating an international jewel thief only yesterday, the trio hadn't planned on being presented with another mystery so soon.

Matt dumped the remaining candies from the bag into his mouth. "As long as we can solve a mystery without putting ourselves in danger again. Because, seriously, I am not looking forward to having a gun pointed at me like last time."

"If it's just a streak of bad luck like they say, then we've got nothing to worry about," Steve said.

"And if it's not?" Matt wadded the empty candy wrapper into a ball and threw it into the trash can across the room. "You know what, dude, don't answer that."

A honk from outside interrupted the conversation. The three kids grabbed their bags and met Mr. Reed in the driveway. The back of his red pick-up truck was filled with the fixed equipment from the movie set. "Climb in," he said through the open passenger-side window.

They placed their duffle bags into the bed of the truck, careful not to hurt any of the equipment. Steve, the smallest of the trio, pushed the front seat forward and squished into the back of the extended cab to sit on the jump seat. Jenny returned the seat to its regular position and slid into the middle next to her dad. Matt climbed in last.

The discussion about the potential mystery stopped. Because of the amount of danger the last adventure had put them in, the three twelve-year-olds decided it would be best not to tell their parents about their new hobby.

By seven-thirty, the group turned off the highway and onto a deserted dirt road. When they

finally reached the movie set an hour later, Mr. Reed parked in front of what appeared to be the main trailer. As they exited the truck, Steve took a good look at his surroundings. A small, fake town had been built in the middle of a forest of pine trees. It reminded him of an old ghost town he had visited when he was a little kid. To the right of the town were three rows of trailers.

A tall, lean man in his forties with a clean-shaven face and light brown hair opened the door of the main trailer. "Glad you made it, Eric." He heartily shook Mr. Reed's hand.

"Glad to be here. Tom, this is my daughter, Jenny, and her friends Matt and Steve."

The movie director shook their hands. "I sure am grateful to the three of you for doing this, especially on such short notice. Our last group of kids ended up backing out, so I was ecstatic when Eric said you three were interested in the job."

"What exactly will we be doing, Mr. Mason?" Steve asked.

"Not much, really. And, please, call me Tom. We just need you to be in the background of a couple shots. Coppertown is supposed to be a family town, and we haven't shot any scenes with kids in them, yet."

"Coppertown?" Steve repeated.

Tom nodded. "Yeah. That's the name of the movie. *Coppertown* is set in an Old West boomtown from the mining days of the mid-1800s."

Mr. Reed held up his hand. "I hate to interrupt, but I've got a long drive back, and I want to get going before it gets too late."

"Would you like something to eat before you go?" Tom asked. "The mess hall's not too far from here."

"No, thanks. I'll be fine. Just show me where to unload the equipment."

Tom took them all outside and pointed to a nearby shed. Jenny's dad pulled the truck around,

and Tom and the kids unloaded all the equipment.

After kissing Jenny good-bye and promising to return in a few days, Mr. Reed left.

The movie director turned to the kids. "How about you three? You guys hungry?"

"You bet we are," Matt said enthusiastically. Jenny and Steve smiled at each other. Matt was always hungry.

"Okay, then," Tom said and laughed. "I'll give you a quick tour of the lot and drop you off at the mess tent."

For the next half-hour, the director escorted the trio around pointing out the different parts of the set, including the wardrobe trailer where they would be outfitted with western wear early the next morning.

Tom finished the tour and dropped his new extras off at the mess hall, where a caterer had set up a variety of sandwiches, chips, vegetables, and desserts. The three friends piled their plates with food and headed outside.

They chose a table occupied by an elderly man with a curly gray beard. The kids greeted the man who simply grunted in reply.

"You know," Jenny said as she chomped on a carrot stick, "I thought there would be a lot more people around."

"I know what you mean." Matt grabbed a giant pile of potato chips from his plate. "This place looks deserted." Pieces of chips flew everywhere as he tried to fit the fistful of food into his mouth.

Steve glanced around and shrugged. "Most likely, everyone's done for the night." He took an enormous bite from his ham and cheese sandwich.

"I guess," Jenny said, sounding a little disappointed. "I just figured stuff would still be going on, even when they're not filming."

“They’re scared,” the grizzled man said.

“Excuse me?” Jenny said, looking around to see if he was talking to them.

“You know what happened to them kids that was supposed to be in the movie, don’t ya?” His voice barely above a whisper.

“No,” Steve said in an equally low voice. “Would you tell us?”

He looked around, as though to make sure no one was watching. “They saw *her*.”

“Who?” Steve asked.

He lowered his crackling voice even lower. “The Lady Ghost.”

Matt swallowed the giant bite of food in his mouth in one gulp. “Did you say g-ghost?”

“Matt,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “There are no such things as ghosts.”

“Believe what ya will.” The man stood up in a huff, obviously upset with Steve’s statement.

“But, mark my words. She’s angry at us and wants us to go away. This here place is cursed and is gonna stay cursed till we leave.”

He stormed away leaving the three kids staring blankly at each other.