



## McGuffin

What can I tell you about Camden Town?  
It's a place in north London with a market and a canal. What you can't find in the market you'll find floating in the canal - only cheaper.

And that's why we'd moved to Camden Town. Because it was cheap. Our new offices were small and sleazy but that was OK because so were most of our clients. We hadn't taken much with us. Just some old furniture and

some bad memories. And the door. It was cheaper to bring the door with us than get another one painted.



That's what it said on the glass.

They were the last words Jake McGuffin ever read. But when you're being chased by two Dutch killers with a knife and a gun and your name on both of them, you don't have time to start a paperback book.

It was a long, hot summer. Although I didn't know it then, it was going to be longer and hotter for me than for anyone else. The day it all started, it was my turn to make lunch – but I'd just discovered there was no lunch left to

make. I'd done my best. I'd got a tray ready with plates, knives, forks, napkins and even a flower I'd found growing on the bathroom wall. All that was missing was the food.

"Is that it?" Tim asked as I carried it in. He was sitting behind his desk, making paper boats out of pages from the phone book. "A carton of milk?"

"Half a carton," I replied. "We had the other half for breakfast." It was true. Half a carton of long-life milk was all that stood between us and starvation. "I'll get some glasses," I said.

"Don't bother." Tim reached for a cardboard box on the corner of his desk. He turned it upside down. A single straw fell out. "That's the last straw," he announced.

I'd been living with my big brother, Herbert Timothy Simple, ever since my

parents decided to emigrate to Australia. Herbert called himself Tim Diamond. He also called himself a private detective. Neither was true. He wouldn't have been able to find a fingerprint on the end of his own finger. Dead bodies made him feel queasy. When it came to pursuing an investigation, he was so hopeless that the investigation usually ended up pursuing him.

I gazed sadly at the milk. "You need a job, Tim," I said.

"I've applied for jobs, Nick," Tim protested. He slid open a drawer in his desk. It was bulging with letters. "Look! I've applied for hundreds of jobs."

"How many rejections have you had?" I asked.

He scowled. "These *are* the rejections." He fumbled in the pile for a minute and pulled one

out, his face brightening. "Here's one I haven't heard from yet," he said.

"Maybe your application got lost in the post."

Tim opened the letter and spread it out in front of him. "Head of Security at the Canadian Bank in Pall Mall," he read out. "Forty thousand quid a year plus luncheon vouchers and car. In other words, meals and wheels."

"When will you hear?" I asked.

"Don't worry. The phone'll ring..."

"We don't have a phone," I reminded him.

"We got cut off."

Tim's face fell. He folded the letter and put it back in the drawer.

"Things aren't so bad," he muttered. "I'll get a case sooner or later. I bet you any day now somebody's going to knock on the door."

Somebody knocked on the door.

Tim gulped like he'd just swallowed a chicken bone. He looked around him. What with the lunch tray on the desk, the paper boats and everything else, the office hardly looked like the headquarters of a successful private eye. And here was a potential client knocking at the door! For a moment he froze. Then we both went into action.

The paper boats went into the bin. Tim opened another drawer and threw the knives, forks and napkins inside. At the same time, I grabbed the milk carton and slipped it into a vase on a shelf. That just left the tray. Tim handed it to me. I looked for somewhere to put it. I couldn't see anywhere so I put it on a chair and sat on it.

"Come in!" Tim called out. He was bent over the desk, scribbling away at a blank sheet of

paper. It would have looked more impressive if he'd been using the right end of the pen.

The door opened.

Our visitor was carrying a gun – and it was the gun that I looked at first. It was small, snub-nosed, a dull, metallic grey. So was the visitor. He was only a little taller than me and he was so pale he could have just stepped out of one of those old black and white films they show on TV. He had a square chin, close-cropped hair and small eyes that seemed to be hiding behind the thick lenses of his spectacles. Either he was extremely short-sighted or his optician was. Or maybe it was just that he felt safer behind bulletproof glasses.

He shut the door behind him. It must have been raining outside because there were big drops clinging to his forehead and dripping off

the hem of his coat. Or maybe he was sweating.

"You Tim Diamond?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm Tim Diamond," Tim agreed.

The man moved further into the room and saw me. For a moment the gun pointed my way and my hands flickered automatically towards a position somewhere above my head. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Nick Diamond," I said. "His brother."

His eyes travelled down. "Why are you sitting on a tray?" he demanded.

"Because I feel like a cup of tea." It was the first thing to come into my head but the answer must have satisfied him because a moment later, walking over to the window, he'd forgotten me.

"I didn't catch your name," Tim said.

"Jake McGuffin." The man peered out of



the window, his eyes as narrow as the venetian blind we'd sold the week before. He glanced back over his shoulder at the door. "Is that the only way in?"

Tim nodded. "Are you in some sort of trouble?" he asked.

"Somebody's trying to kill me," McGuffin said.



He turned away from the window just as a high-velocity bullet fired from the street drilled a neat hole through the pane, flashed across the room a bare millimetre from his face, smashed the vase on the shelf opposite and exposed the carton of milk I had hidden there earlier. Milk fountained out.

“What makes you think that, Mr McStuffing?” Tim enquired.

I was staggered. Even McGuffin had gone pale. But evidently Tim just hadn’t noticed there was anything wrong. The truth was he was so wrapped up in his own performance that he probably wouldn’t have noticed if his visitor had been hit then and there. I edged closer to the filing cabinet, ready to hurl myself behind it if any more bullets blasted into the room.

McGuffin slipped the gun into a shoulder

holster and moved across the carpet, keeping clear of the window. "I need to use a phone," he said. The words came out fast, urgent.

"Why?" Tim asked.

McGuffin hesitated. I think he still hadn't worked Tim out. But then he had other things on his mind.

"You can tell me, Mr McMuffin," Tim went on. He tapped his nose. "I'm a private nose with an eye for trouble. Trouble is my middle name."

McGuffin looked around the room. If he could have seen a telephone I reckon he would have used the flex to strangle Tim and then made his call uninterrupted. But whoever was waiting for him outside had him cornered. Time was running out. He had no choice. "OK," he said. "I'll tell you."

He sat down opposite Tim and took out a

cigarette. "You got a light?" he asked.

Tim switched on his desk light. McGuffin scrunched his cigarette on the desktop. He seemed to have got a lot older in the last few minutes. "Listen," he said. "I'm an agent. It doesn't matter who I work for."

"Who *do* you work for?" Tim asked.

"It doesn't matter. I'm on the track of a man called Charon. He's a killer, an assassin, the head of a murder organization that's bigger than Esso."

Tim was puzzled. "Charon?" he asked. "What sort of name is that?"

"It's a code name," McGuffin explained. "It comes out of the Greek myths. You ever hear of Hades, the Greek underworld? In the old legends, it's where people went when they died. Charon was the person who took them there."

He was the ferryman of the dead."

The sun must have gone behind a cloud. For the first time that summer I felt cold. Maybe it was the breeze coming in through the bullet hole.

"Nobody knows who Charon really is," McGuffin went on. "He can disguise himself at the drop of a hat. They say he's got so many faces his own mother wouldn't recognize him."

"Do you know his mother?" Tim asked.

"No." McGuffin took a deep breath. "There's only one way to recognize Charon," he said. "He's lost a finger."

"Whose finger?" Tim asked.

"His own. He only has nine fingers."

Tim smiled. "So that'll help you finger him!"

McGuffin closed his eyes for a few seconds. He must have hoped he was dreaming and that

when he opened them he'd be somewhere else. "Right," he said at last. "But I've got no time. Charon is about to kill a Russian diplomat called Boris Kusenov."

"I've heard of him," I muttered. And it was true. I'd seen the name in the last newspaper I'd read. It had been underneath my chips.

"If Kusenov dies, that's it," McGuffin went on. "The Iron Curtain goes back up. There'll be another arms race. Maybe even war..."

"As bad as that?" Tim asked.

"I'm the only man who can stop him. I know when Charon plans to kill him. And I know how. I've got to make that call."

Tim shrugged. "That's too bad, McNothing. We don't have a phone."

"No phone..." For a moment I thought he was going to murder Tim. He'd told us everything.

And he'd got nothing for it. His hands writhed briefly. Maybe he was imagining them round Tim's throat.

"There's a phone box round the corner, in Skin Lane," I suggested.

McGuffin had forgotten I was even in the room. He looked at me, then at the bullet hole. The bullet hole was like a single eye and that seemed to be looking at me too. "It's an alley," I added.

"Outside." McGuffin licked his lips. I could see his problem. If he waited here much longer, Charon would come in and get him. And next time it might not be a single bullet. One grenade and we'd all be permanently disconnected, like the telephone. On the other hand, if he stepped out into the street he'd be a walking target. And I doubted if Charon would miss a second time.

But McGuffin was obviously used to thinking on his feet. Suddenly he was out of the chair and over the other side of the room where Tim's raincoat was hanging on a hook. "I'll give you fifty pounds for the coat," McGuffin said.

"But you've already got a coat," Tim observed.

"I've got to get out of here without being seen."

McGuffin pulled off his own coat. Underneath he was wearing an off-white suit that had probably been white when he put it on. It didn't quite hide the gun, jutting out of a shoulder holster where most people carry a wallet. He put on the raincoat, folding the collar up so that it hid most of his face. Finally he produced fifty pounds out of nowhere and threw them down on the desk, five ten pound notes which were the best thing I'd seen all day. Tim wasn't going



to complain either. The coat had only cost him ten pounds in the Oxfam shop and even they had probably made enough profit out of it to buy another ox.

McGuffin took a deep breath. He hesitated for one last moment. And then he was gone. The door clicked shut behind him.

I got off the tray. "What do you think?" I asked.

Tim opened his eyes. The money was sitting right in front of him. "Fifty quid!" he exclaimed.

"I wonder who he was working for?"

"Forget it, Nick," Tim pocketed the money. "It's none of our business. I'm just glad we're not involved."

I picked up McGuffin's coat, meaning to hang it back on the hook. As I lifted it, something fell out of one of the pockets. It was

a key. There was a plastic tag attached to it and in bright red letters:

**Room 605, London International Hotel.**

I looked at the key. Tim looked at me. We were involved, all right.