

# *DEATH THREAT*

I knew it was going to be a bad Christmas when I walked past the charity shop and the manager ran out and tried to offer me charity. It seemed that everyone in Camden Town knew I was broke. Even the turkeys were laughing at me. On the last day of term, the teachers had a whip-round for me ... not that I really needed a whip, but I suppose it's the thought that counts. Christmas was just a few weeks away and the only money I had was a ten-pound book token that my parents had sent me from Australia. I tried to swap it for hard cash at my local bookshop, but the manager – a thin-faced woman in her forties – was completely heartless.

“I need to eat,” I explained.

“Then buy a cookery book.”

“I can't afford the ingredients!”

“I'm sorry. You can only use a book token to buy books.”

“What’s the point of buying books if I’m too faint to read?”

She smiled sadly at me. “Have you tried Philip Pullman?”

“No. Do you think he’d lend me some money?”

I couldn’t believe my parents had sent me a book token for Christmas, but then of course they had no idea about anything. My dad had moved them to Sydney a few years before – he was a door-to-door salesman, selling doors, and he must have been doing well because this year he’d printed his own Christmas card. HAVE AN A-DOOR-ABLE CHRISTMAS, it said on the cover. There was a picture of a kangaroo with a red hat on, looking out of an open door. I was still laughing as I ripped it to pieces. My parents had two new kids of their own now: Doreen and Dora. Two sisters I’d never met. That made me sad sometimes. They weren’t even two years old and they probably had more spare cash than me.

I was thinking about Australia as I walked home from the bookshop. My mum and dad had wanted to take me with them when they emigrated, and maybe it had been a mistake to slip off the plane before it took off. While it was taxiing down the runway, I was running away to find a taxi – and they hadn’t even noticed until they were thirty-five thousand

feet above France. Apparently my mum had hysterics. And my dad had my lunch.

I'm still not sure it was a smart decision. They say that London is like a village, and I certainly enjoyed living there. The only trouble was, I'd moved in with the village idiot. I'm talking, of course, about my big brother, Herbert Timothy Simple. But that wasn't what he called himself. He called himself Tim Diamond, Private Detective – and that's what it said in the Yellow Pages, along with the line: “No problem too problematic.” He'd written that himself.

Tim was the worst private detective in England. I mean ... he'd just spent two weeks working in a big department store in the West End. He was supposed to be looking out for shoplifters but I don't think he'd kept his eye on the ball. In fact, the ball was the first thing that got stolen. After that, things went from bad to worse. The store had twenty-three departments when he started but only sixteen when he left. He was fired, of course. The dummies in the window probably had a higher IQ than Tim. He was lucky he had me. I solved the crimes, Tim got the credit. That was how it worked. If you've read my other stories, you'll know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, go out and buy the books. If you like, I'll even sell you a ten-quid book token. You can have it for nine quid.

Anyway, right now Tim was out of work. And November had arrived like a bad dog, snapping at everyone in the street and sending them hurrying home. As usual, it wasn't going to snow – but the pipes were frozen, the puddles had iced over and you could see people's breath in the air.

They were playing a Christmas carol on the radio as I let myself in. Tim was sitting at his desk wrapped in a blanket, trying to open a tin of sardines that was so far past its sell-by date he'd probably have more luck selling it as an antique.

I threw myself into a chair. "Any news?" I asked. "I don't suppose anyone has offered you a job?"

"I just don't get it," Tim replied. "You'd think someone, somewhere would need a private detective. Why is no one hiring me?"

"Maybe it's because you're no good," I said.

"You might be right," Tim nodded sadly.

"There are police dogs that have solved more crimes than you."

"Yes," Tim agreed, "but at least I don't have fleas."

I got up and turned the radio off. Tim had managed to get the tin open and the room was suddenly filled with the smell of twenty-seven-year-old sardines. And it was just then that there was a knock on the door.

I looked at Tim. Tim looked at me. We had

a client and we also had a room that looked like a rubbish tip and smelled like the River Thames during the Great Plague.

“One minute!” Tim shouted.

In that one minute, we raced around like two people in a speeded up commercial for Fairy Liquid. Papers went into drawers. Plates went into the kitchen. The sardines went into the bin and the bin went out the window. Sixty seconds later, the office looked more like an office and Tim was sitting behind his desk with a straightened tie and a crooked smile. I took one last look around and opened the door.

A man walked in. I guessed he was in his forties: short and fat, smoking a cigar. The cigar was short and fat too. He was dressed in a nasty suit. The pattern was so loud you could almost hear it coming. He had black, greasy hair, thick lips and eyes that would have been nicer if they’d matched. His shoes had been polished until you could see your face in them – though with his face I wouldn’t have bothered. There was a gold signet ring on his finger. The way it squeezed the flesh, I doubted it would ever come off.

“You always keep your clients waiting outside?” he demanded as he came in and took a chair.

“We were filing,” Tim explained.

He looked around. “I don’t see no filing cabinets.” He spoke like an American but he

wasn't one. He was just someone who spent too much time on planes.

"We were filing our nails," I said.

He helped himself to one of Tim's business cards from the desk. "Are you Tim Diamond?"

"Yeah. That's me." Tim narrowed his eyes. He always does that when he's trying to look serious. Unfortunately it just makes him look short-sighted. "I'm a private eye."

"I know," the man growled. "That's why I'm here. My name is Jake Hammill and I want to hire you."

"You want to hire me?" Tim couldn't believe it. He leant forward. "So what can I do for you, Mr Camel?"

"Not Jay Camel. I'm Jake Hammill. You want me to spell it for you?"

"N-O," Tim said.

"I work in the music industry. As a matter of fact, I'm the manager of a woman who's a very famous pop singer."

Tim scowled. "If she's so famous, how come I've never heard of her?"

"I haven't told you her name yet."

"Maybe it would help if you did."

Hammill glanced at me. He was obviously suspicious. He turned back to Tim. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"I'm not going to tell you," Tim replied.

"All right." Hammill nodded. "Her name is Minerva."

I have to admit, I was surprised. Hammill looked pretty small-time to me, but Minerva was one of the biggest names in the business. She was a multimillionaire pop singer and a movie actress. I doubted there was anyone in the world who hadn't seen her videos. She was the woman with the golden voice and the silver-plated breasts. Her clothes were outrageous – like the rest of her lifestyle. She had been born in Greece but now she lived most of the time in New York. The fact that she was visiting London had made the front page of every newspaper ... even the *Financial Times*.

“The thing is,” Hammill said, “I’ve got a serious problem...” He twisted his signet ring nervously around his finger like he was trying to take it off. “Listen to me,” he went on. “Minerva has been invited over here for Christmas. Tomorrow she’s turning on the Christmas lights in Regent Street. And on Thursday at midday she’s opening the Santa Claus grotto at Harrods department store in Knightsbridge. There’s going to be a lot of press. A lot of TV. It’s great publicity. But this is the problem...” He drew a breath. “I think she’s in danger.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

“Well, yesterday she received an anonymous letter.”

“An anonymous letter!” Tim exclaimed. “Who from?”

Hammill scowled. "I don't know. It was anonymous. But it threatens her with death."

"So where is this letter, Mr Hubble?" Tim asked.

"It was sent to Minerva. She's got it. I'd like you to come and meet her at her hotel and she'll take you through it."

"She'll take me through the hotel?"

"No. She'll take you through the letter." He leant forward and already I could see the doubt in his face. "I have to say, Mr Diamond, I need to be sure you're the right man for this job. I wanted to go to the police, but Minerva's husband insisted that a private detective would be better. I understand you advertise in the Yellow Pages."

"Yeah," I muttered. "They match his teeth."

"I take it you know how to look after yourself," Hammill said.

Tim looked puzzled. "But I'm not ill!" he muttered.

Hammill rolled his eyes. Maybe I was imagining things but I could have sworn they went in opposite directions. "I'm not asking about your health," he said. "I need someone to stay close to Minerva while she's in London, and that may mean getting into a fight. So what I'm asking you is – do you know judo or karate?"

"Sure!" Tim nodded. "Judo, karate and



origami. When do you want me to start, Mr Rubble?”

It was obvious to me that Hammill was having second thoughts about Tim. And maybe third and fourth thoughts too. For a moment he bit his fingernail, deep in thought. Maybe he had plans to bite all the way down to the signet ring. Then he came to a decision. “All right,” he said. “Minerva is staying at the Porchester hotel, which is in Hyde Park. That’s highly confidential information by the way.”

“What do you mean?” Tim demanded. “Everyone knows that the Porchester hotel is in Hyde Park.”

“Sure. But nobody knows she’s staying there. Otherwise we’d have fans all over the place.”

“That would help with the ventilation...”

“Minerva likes her privacy. She’s booked in under the name of Mrs Smith. Room sixteen. I want you to visit her this evening. Say, seven o’clock?”

“Seven o’clock,” Tim said obediently.

“That’s right. I’ll let her take a look at you and if she thinks you’re up to it, you’re hired.”

Tim nodded. I knew what was coming next. He was sitting back in his chair with his feet resting on his desk, trying to look every inch the private detective. The fact that he had a hole in one of his shoes didn’t help. As far as he was concerned he was back in

business. And he was determined to prove it. “What about my fee?” he demanded.

“You’re not hired yet,” Hammill reminded him.

“OK, Mr Rabble. But I’d better let you know now, I’m not cheap. The only thing that goes cheap in this office is my budgerigar, and I don’t think your superstar wants a bodyguard with feathers.”

Hammill tried to make sense of this, decided it wasn’t worth trying and stood up. “I’ll see you this evening,” he said. One last twist of the ring. It wasn’t going anywhere, but he was. He walked out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

There was a moment’s silence.

I went over to the cupboard and searched through the CDs. I knew we’d have a Minerva recording somewhere and, sure enough, there it was – her third album, *Think Pink*. I looked at the face on the cover: the blonde hair, the green eyes, the lips that looked like they could suck in a horse. Not for the first time I wished we had a CD player, but Tim had pawned it months ago. Along with just about everything else. That was another sad thought. When I walked into the Camden Town pawn shop, I felt more at home than I did at home.

But maybe our luck was going to change. All Tim had to do was protect her for a couple of days and there’d be a handsome cheque at the

end of it. He might even end up taking a bullet for her. If so, I just hoped they'd pay him extra. And whatever happened, it might be fun to hang out with one of the biggest entertainers on the planet.

"I can't believe it!" I said. "We're going to meet Minerva!"

"It's even better than that," Tim replied. "She's opening the grotto at Harrods. Maybe we'll meet Father Christmas!"

I slid the CD back into the cupboard.

Minerva had just received a death threat and her husband had hired Tim Diamond. That was like getting her a knitted cardigan when what she really needed was a bullet-proof vest. Well, one thing was certain: this was going to be a Christmas to remember. I just wondered if Minerva would still be around to see in the New Year.