

THE THAMES MURDERER



Chapter one

A Horrible Discovery

The sun was setting over London in red and orange flames that made the rows of old buildings blush and glow. It had been another hot day in one of the longest heat waves the city had seen in the last decade. Now the streets were busy with after-work traffic; the drivers were trying to make it home to their cool, shady lawns as quickly as possible. The alleys were filled with pedestrians who were looking forward to a pleasant supper in one of London's many restaurants, coffee shops or fast-food places. Others were walking their dogs along the River Thames, now that the temperature had cooled down a little. Jennifer Clearwater walked along the riverbank, dreaming about her trip to Bermuda. Was there anything she had forgotten to put on her list of "Things To Put In The Suitcase"? Jeans, T-shirts, shorts, sandals, Jeffrey's bathing trunks, her own bathing suit... oh yes, and that pretty little bikini she had recently bought at "Gray's". It had pink and white stripes. "You look like a candy cane - sweet enough to eat," Jeffrey had remarked dryly when she had shown off her new two-piece bathing suit to him.

She could hardly wait to get on that airplane with her husband, whom she still adored even after seven years of happy marriage. First she glanced at her watch, then she looked for Polly, their poodle, who had disappeared in the bushes by the water five minutes ago. "Polly," she called. "Polly, come on, we've got to go now!"

No sight nor sound of Polly.

"Polly!" Jennifer called again. "Polly, come back, will you? Where are you, POLLY?!"

Suddenly she heard a faint bark behind her. It seemed to come from the river's edge. She stopped and turned round, walked back a few steps and listened. Yes, that definitely was Polly's high-pitched bark. "Yap! Yap! Yap!" She sounded excited and upset.

Jennifer pushed the twigs aside and ducked right through the hedges along the river, until she saw the water shimmering in the last sun rays of the day. "Polly!" she cried. The poodle responded with a series of excited barks from somewhere round the next bend.

The young woman walked hastily round the bend and saw her dog growl at something that looked like a long white branch floating in the water. No, it had to be something like a thick white pole because blue fabric, maybe a flag or tent or something else, was attached to it. This was what Polly was growling at - or rather pulling at.

"Polly! Come here! Let go of it, will you? We've got to go!"

The dog let go of the blue fabric but did not move from her spot. Instead she started on another series of barks.

"Polly! Leave that thing alone, will you? Come on, be a good doggy! We've got to go home to Daddy!"

Jennifer moved closer to put Polly on the lead and saw something that looked like a mop of wet black hair.

Then she froze. Oh my God, she thought. OH NO. It can't be! It couldn't... could it?

It was. It was another one of the Thames Murderer's

victims. It was the body of a dead woman whose hair had got tangled in a bush. She was wearing a dress as blue as the sky.

Oh my God, Jennifer thought.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help! Murder! HELP!"

Then she grabbed Polly and ran back to civilisation to notify the police.

Shortly after six-thirty p.m. Inspector Hudson put down the receiver with a sigh. He had been expecting that phone call - in fact, he had been wondering for the past month or so when they would give up and assign him to the Thames Murder Case. Now he had both of them. And he didn't like it. No, sir, he didn't like it one bit.

Because he had secretly been following up on Scotland Yard's investigations and felt that the murders of two beautiful young women, found drifting in the river, were tricky cases. Nothing linked the victims to each other, as far as he knew. The murderer seemed to pick them randomly in lonely parks after dark. They seemed to have nothing in common, except that the second woman had been found exactly four weeks after the first one. About a week after the first murder, a note had been sent to Scotland Yard, mocking their failure to find the murderer and signed "Jack the Skipper". Along with the letter, he had also sent the belt that belonged to the victim's dress. When the body was examined, it was found that the first victim had been strangled with that very belt.

What a horrible case, James Hudson thought.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in," he called.

His secretary entered with a thick folder. "The Thames

Murder Case, sir - they just brought it over."

"Thanks, I've been waiting for that." Eagerly he took the heavy folder from her and leafed through it until he found the note the Yard had received one week after the first murder. It was handwritten in capital letters.

"Will that be all, sir?" she asked. "Because if you don't need me anymore, I would like to finish for the day. It's almost seven o'clock." "What? Oh - yes, thank you," he answered without paying attention. His thoughts were on the note. The secretary shrugged and left, shutting the door behind her.

"Still fumbling in the dark, aren't you?" the note read. "You shouldn't be - it was bright enough when I strangled the poor lamb with this pretty beige belt, haha!"

Despite his many years of experience a cold shiver ran down his spine. He sensed he was about to deal with a very smart and evil mind and wondered if "Jack the Skipper" would again send the murder weapon together with another note.

On his way home Hudson could not stop thinking about the mocking note. His many years of dealing with all kinds of criminals told him that there was a hidden meaning between the lines. The note was too short for someone who wasted words. Why did the sender point out that it had been "bright" when he had strangled the woman? And what did he want to say with the name "Skipper"? Was the man they were looking for a sailor?

The inspector was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost over-looked an old woman crossing the street. He frantically slammed on the brakes and smiled an apology to the little old lady who was furiously shaking her umbrella at him.

"Get a grip on yourself, old man!" he told himself while wiping the sweat off his forehead. "Don't get too caught up in the case. You have to keep cool to find the bastard!"

When James Hudson finally got home at nine o'clock, he found Miss Paddington - his loyal housekeeper, cook, budget manager and drill sergeant - in the kitchen. She was busy scraping something black and burned out of a baking tray. The whole house smelled as if it had been set on fire.

"Oh my," she said nervously when she saw the inspector. "I'm afraid I burned our supper."

"What is it?" he wanted to know. "Or rather - what WAS it?"

"Your favourite meal - my homemade pork pie," she mumbled without looking at him, scraping away furiously. "I'm so sorry but today just isn't my day! I didn't get any sleep last night. I tossed and turned and stayed awake all night - and today I'm completely useless!"

"You're never useless," Hudson replied politely, even though his stomach was growling hungrily, and right now he would have given anything for one of Miss Paddington's delicious pork pies.

"You're too kind, Inspector. But it's always the same when there is a full moon. I tried a cup of warm milk, and it didn't work. Then I even tried this special meditation that is supposed to make you tired no matter what. Oh yes, it made me tired alright! But I still couldn't fall asleep. Now I'm just a tired wreck."

"What did you just say?" the inspector asked absent-mindedly.

"I said I'm a tired wreck."

"No, I mean before that - did you say something about a 'full moon'?" "Oh yes, the full moon! We had a full moon last night. Didn't you notice?"

Indeed Hudson, whose body did not care whether the moon was full or not, hadn't noticed. But now he remembered something.

"So last night was rather bright, wasn't it?" he inquired.

Miss Paddington looked at him as if she thought that his question was not too bright. "Yes, of course, Inspector. There were no clouds in the sky."

Hudson forgot his hungry stomach when something dawned on him. "Why - of course!" he exclaimed. "Last night we had a full moon! That's what he meant with 'bright'! Miss Paddington, you're simply brilliant!"

The housekeeper was not too sure whether her beloved boss was still in his right mind or not. Could it be that the hot sun had scrambled his brains? Or perhaps the full moon had gotten to him? Maybe it affected people differently, so that some could not sleep (like her), while others could not think straight (like him)?

Hudson took one look at her and explained hastily: "Today they assigned the Thames Murder Cases to me. That's why I came home so late tonight. And as it turned out, the murderer seems to always strike during a full moon, because a second victim was found early this evening."

"Oh my God, how horrible!" Miss Paddington was so shocked she dropped the cooking pot she had been scrubbing. This was news to her. The media had not been told yet, because Scotland Yard had to notify the victim's family before the sad news could be made public. "Yes, and I wouldn't even have noticed if it hadn't been

for your remark about the fall moon! Perhaps I should retire and let YOU handle the case!"

That was a very flattering compliment, and for a second Miss Paddington smiled happily. Then she remembered her blackened pork pie and frowned.

"But, sir - I can't even serve you a proper supper tonight! And there is not enough food in the house to prepare something else. You must be starving by now!"

He really was starving, but he didn't want to make her feel any worse than she already felt. "Tell you what," he said. "Let's go out for a meal. I'm paying for it. After all it was you who shed new light on the Thames Murder Cases, Dr Watson!"

Early next morning Inspector Hudson found the autopsy report on his desk. The medical examiner had thrown in a late night shift because the second murder case would be reported in today's newspapers and on the local TV stations. The public was already starting to get hysterical about the Thames Murder Cases, and Scotland Yard had to come up with quick results - or at least with some details for the London public.

He opened the report and read that this victim had also been strangled with a belt, or a similar object, as the strangulation marks on her neck showed. Then he looked at the photos of the victim. Her name was Sue Baker, and she had been a pretty young woman. The police had been able to identify her so quickly since the officers had discovered her handbag under a bush nearby. Nothing seemed to have been taken from the bag; her passport, her key chain and even her purse with a few bills and quite a lot of coins were all still there. She had been a waitress at the "Old Lion's Pub" and had taken home the tips received that evening. Since she had lived by herself,

no one but her cat had yet noticed her absence. When the police officers notified her old parents, who lived in a village close to London, late last night, it was such a shock to her mother that she just kept asking over and over, "What about Lizzy? What about poor Lizzy?" Her husband explained that Lizzy was the name of Sue's cat. The officers had to drive over to Sue's flat and fetch a very scared and hungry cat. After they had dropped the animal off at the parents' home, Sue's mother seemed to calm down a bit.

These are the tragedies behind the breaking news of a spectacular crime, Hudson thought. The personal tragedies usually don't make the news. However, they do make me care about my cases.

He silently vowed to himself that he would find the person who was responsible for the tragedy of Sue Baker's mother - and Lizzy, the cat.

"Just a moment." The young officer disappeared between the long shelves on which the evidence was kept in sealed plastic bags. A minute later he returned with three labelled packages.

"Here you go, sir." He handed the plastic bags over to Inspector Hudson. Inside were the two dresses the victims had been wearing last and the belt "Jack the Skipper" had sent with his note. The beige dress of the first victim clearly matched the belt the young woman had been strangled with. The inspector looked at the label inside the dress. It was a French designer he had never heard of. Clearly the dress had been expensive.

He took a photograph of the label.

Curiously he turned to the second dress. This one was of a deep blue. "Did it come with a belt!" he asked the young officer.

The officer shook his head. "No, sir, no belt came with that

piece of evidence."

Hudson glanced at the label. It was the same French designer. He whistled through his teeth.

"The same type of dress as the first one? That's strange," James Hudson murmured in surprise. "And a waitress in expensive French designer clothes? That's even stranger..."

"Yes, sir, isn't it?" the young officer agreed. "You'd think they don't earn enough money to make ends meet - and then go out and buy a French dress like that? Oh well, you never know with women -" But Hudson was no longer listening. He didn't know very much about women, but he DID know that the similarity of those two dresses was no coincidence. They were a lead. An important new lead in the Thames Murder Cases. They tied the two cases together. They were the connection he had been looking for.

Chapter two

Two Dresses in a Desert

The next person on Hudson's list was Elvira Elliot, his favourite insurance investigator. She also happened to be his favourite person; but that was something he would never admit to himself or anyone else.

"You're lucky," Elvira said as soon as he had identified himself on the phone. "I was just leaving my office."

"Then I am lucky indeed," James Hudson said, feeling stupid. Why did she always make him feel like a clumsy schoolboy? Perhaps Miss Paddington knew the answer to that question. But then again - better not ask her. She might think all the wrong things.

"Glad you see it that way, too," Elvira said in her sultry voice. She sounded amused.

Hudson noticed how hot it was in his office and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Well, I just have a short question," he said a touch too rudely.

"What is it, Inspector?" Whenever she called him by his title and not by his first name, it put him in a bad mood. He didn't know why and he didn't care to know why, either.

"Does the name 'Petit Fleur du Jardin' ring a bell?" he asked.

"'Petit fleur du jardin'? Did you just call me Tittle flower of the garden', Inspector? How sweet of you! I didn't know you could be

romantic," Elvira said in that sultry voice of hers. He just KNEW that she was being sarcastic.

"It's a French designer label," he explained, and again he felt like a fool.

"Ah yes, now I remember," Elvira replied. "Yes, that's a very expensive French dressmaker. You only get those dresses at 'Gray's'. I think they sell the whole summer collection there. I simply MUST get myself one soon! Should I get one in peach or in navy blue - what do you think, James?"

"Don't ask me," he said. Elvira would look good in any colour of the rainbow, he thought.

At least this time she had not called him by his title...

"Thanks for your help," he said gruffly.

"Any time, sir," she replied and hung up.

When Mrs Baker opened the door to let the Scotland Yard inspector in, she began to cry. "Poor Lizzy", she sobbed, "she hasn't been eating anything! It's not very nice of Sue to leave her cat alone for so long, is it?"

"She's still not quite herself," Mr Baker explained to Hudson, while he ushered the inspector into the living room.

Hudson sat down on an overstuffed sofa. Its cover was a mixed array of pink roses, white lilies and green ferns. Little flowers in a garden... it reminded him of the first question he had to ask the grieving parents.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "But I need to ask you if Sue recently bought a blue French designer dress."

Mr Baker shook his head, and his wife burst out in tears again. "A French dress? Aren't they expensive? I don't think so," the father said. "We raised our girl to be modest."

"She always bought cat food with the tips she got from the guests over at the pub," his wife sobbed. "She took such good care of Lizzy. That's why I can't understand why she hasn't come back for her cat yet..."

"Did Sue have a boyfriend? Was she seeing anyone?" the inspector continued.

"No," her father replied. "As far as we know, she only had a few girlfriends. Sometimes they would go out for a meal or a film. Sue didn't have any time for a man - she had to work most evenings anyway."

"Could she have met a man at the 'Old Lion's Pub'?" Hudson wanted to know. "Someone who might have bought her a blue French designer dress?"

Again Mr Baker shook his head. "I think she would have told us," he said sadly. "But she did not mention any special man in her life."

"She was such a pretty girl," his wife sobbed. "And she loved pretty clothes. But she didn't have the money for expensive dresses. She was saving most of her money for veterinary school. You see, she wanted to become a veterinarian because she loved animals so much."

Sue's father nodded proudly. "Yes, my little girl would have made a fine veterinarian." His voice broke.

Sue's mother shook her head and mumbled, "But now I'm no longer sure about that. Why did she leave her poor cat alone?"

That's not very nice of her, is it?"

The inspector rose. He did not want to bother the grieving parents any more for the time being. "Thank you so much," he said. "I'll do everything to find the person who did this to your daughter. I promise."

The first victim's name was Melanie Jordan. She had been a 28-year-old secretary. On the night she was murdered she had gone out with an old school friend. They had spent a pleasant but unspectacular evening in the city, and shortly after twelve she had said goodbye to her friend. The next morning a dock worker had found her on the banks of the River Thames - strangled and wearing that beige dress. Of course Hudson's colleagues had already interviewed her family, friends and co-workers. But there was a new question they had not asked yet simply because it had not come up before.

He made a few phone calls. "Did Melanie recently buy a beige French designer dress?" he asked one witness after another.

"Not that I know of," her best friend said.

"She couldn't afford expensive clothes," her mother said.

"She didn't wear a beige dress that night," her old school friend said. "Let me see - oh yes, she was dressed in jeans and a red cotton top. She had taken along a jacket, but she didn't put it on because the evening was so mild."

Looks like the man who killed the two women is also the man who bought those two dresses, Hudson thought. The same man who sent us the belt and calls himself "Jack the Skipper".

Again he wondered if there would be another note soon. And another murder after that.

On the outside "Gray's" was an unspectacular building in one of the narrow side streets found in West End. It had a fresh white coat of paint. The window frames and the beautiful old wooden door were painted blue. Only a small brass sign over the heavy door which read "Gray's Boutique" told the inspector that he was entering the right shop.

He stepped into another world. The high walls and the ceiling were as blue as the sky. The far wall was decorated with some abstract paintings. The floor was covered with white sand. There were three tall potted palm-trees in different corners. Dresses, skirts, blouses, trousers and jackets were arranged on hangers that hung from thick white ropes along the other three walls. A sandy-coloured wooden booth in the form of a pyramid was in the centre of the large sales room. Its shelves were filled with jumpers, T-shirts and accessories. An old brass cash register was sitting on a small wooden table in front of the pyramid.

Exotic music was coming from somewhere. Hudson looked round but he could not see any speakers. The music seemed to be coming from behind the potted palms.

A woman left the row of colourful blouses she had been admiring. "Don't you just love their desert theme?" she asked while passing him to look at the next row of colourful blouses.

"What? Oh yes, certainly," he said. "It's rather - creative!"

The only thing that's missing is a camel, he thought to himself.

A young shop assistant dressed in white shorts, a white top and white sandals came up to him. "May I help you, sir?" she asked. "Is there anything particular you're looking for?"

"No - I mean, yes - I'm looking for the manager." He showed her his badge. "Inspector James Hudson from Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard?" the young assistant asked shocked. "Why - what's wrong?"

"Would you please just get the shop manager?" Hudson said patiently.

"Oh yes, of course, sir." The flustered girl ran off.

The woman who had been inspecting her third row of blouses turned round. Still holding up a very pink blouse, she glanced at the inspector. "The Yard here at 'Gray's'? What are you looking for - an illegally imported camel?"

"Not really." Hudson shook his head. "But if I were you, I would stay away from that pink!"

Without so much as another glance she marched off to a row of pastel ensembles.

Half a minute later the flustered shop assistant returned with the flustered shop manager. "Emily Gray," she introduced herself nervously. "I'm the owner of the shop. How may I help you?"

"I need to ask you some questions in reference to an investigation," Hudson explained. "Is there a room where we could talk privately?" "Oh, of course! Please come along this way." Ms Gray led the inspector into her office and offered him a seat. Then she sat down and brushed back her long black hair.

"So what brings you here?" she asked businesslike. "Surely not our unique desert theme?"

The inspector studied her for a second. She was a good-

looking woman about forty, even though her features were a bit hard. But then it probably was hard work to keep a trendy boutique like this one successful year after year. Aloud he said, "No, of course not - although it certainly is impressive! But the reason for my stopping by are the two murder victims we found on the banks of the Thames. I'm sure you've heard about them?"

"Oh yes, I read in 'The Times' that they found another poor woman yesterday, didn't they? How horrible!" She shook her head in disbelief. "Who would do something like that?"

"That's what I'm here to find out. You see, the dresses the two women were wearing when they were found both have the label 'Petit Fleur du Jardin'. I understand you carry that label in your collection?"

"Petit Fleur du Jardin?" Emily Gray asked shocked. "Are you sure? Yes, we carry that label in this year's summer collection. But what does that have to do with she paused thoughtfully. "Oh my God, of course! Now I understand. 'Gray's' is the only place in all of London that sells 'Petit Fleur du Jardin' models! That's why it's been so successful here. But the fact that the victims purchased those dresses here doesn't tell you anything about their murderer yet, does it?"

Hudson shook his head. "No, that's exactly the point. They did not buy the dresses! These garments are completely unknown to the victims' families, friends or co-workers! It seems that the murderer has made them put on these dresses shortly before he killed them."

Ms Gray looked aghast. "My dresses? He made them put on my dresses? My beautiful 'Petit Fleur du Jardin' dresses? What a beast! How did he kill them? The papers didn't say anything about that."

Inspector Hudson was not going to say anything about that, either. The media had not been informed of the note by "Jack the Skipper" and the enclosed belt. This was information that only the police knew - and the culprit himself.

"That's not important now, Ms Gray," he said. "What's important is to know who bought those dresses at your shop. I need you to check your bookkeeping to make sure that no dresses were stolen. And I will also need two dresses of the exact colours the victims were wearing." Ms Gray said uncertainly, "I'm not sure if my sales personnel will actually remember the customer who bought those dresses. But I certainly can help you out with the sample dresses. What colours are they?"

"One is beige, and the other one is a kind of a brilliant dark blue." "Oh yes, I know which ones you are talking about. The unicoloured V-neck dresses with the ruffled skirt and the slim belt! Those sell really well - why, we must have sold at least ten of each. That's because they are very reasonably priced for one hundred percent of pure silk and such a flattering cut. Let me show you." She rose from her chair and walked to the door.

The inspector followed her back into the sales room, past the cash register. The woman who had been so interested in blouses was just paying for her newest treasure. Hudson noticed with a quick glance that she had not picked the pink blouse but one in a greyish green. She looked up and saw him look at her purchase.

"Very pretty," he nodded grinning. "It's definitely you!"

"Have you found the camel yet, Inspector?" she replied. "You may want to check out the dressing cabins!" Grabbing her shopping bag, she walked out the door.

All four shop assistants were completely dressed in white to

match the desert theme, but they could not remember a man buying the dresses in question.

"One or two women were accompanied by their husband or boyfriend," Mandy said. "But I can't remember selling those dresses to any male customer."

Jacqueline could not remember whom she had sold any of the dresses to, and Sandy could not even remember selling any dresses to anyone. But Bernadine remembered something. "Oh yes, there was this chap who came in a few months ago at the beginning of the summer season. I remember that because back then we still had these dresses in all colours. We had not sold very many yet."

"Yes, and?" the inspector asked impatiently. "Did he buy one or more dresses? What did he say he wanted them for? What did he look like?"

Bernadine shook her head. "No, he didn't buy any dress. But he kept going back to the blue ones. It's called Summer Sea. I showed him the dress in all colours, but he seemed to be particularly interested in the blue one. He even took it outside and held it into the daylight. But then he put it back and said his wife had better try it on first, since she was very particular about colours."

"Did he look at the beige one as well?"

"You mean this one? Sahara Sand?" The girl frowned while she was trying to remember. "No. Actually he was only interested in the blue one and the green one. That one is called Cool Mint - but he was more interested in the blue one."

"What did he look like? Was he tall or short? Blond or dark? How old would you say he was? Did he wear glasses? How was he dressed?" the inspector wanted to know.

"He was - I don't know, normal, I guess. I mean he wasn't particularly good-looking."

"She only notices the good-looking ones," Jacqueline remarked. Hudson rolled his eyes. "Can you remember anything else about that man? Old or young? Anything?" he asked.

Bernadine was thinking hard. "He must have been about thirty or thirty-five at the most. Oh yes - he wore glasses with golden frames! And he was kind of dirty blond. He was neither tall nor short, kind of in between."

"Well, thank you, that's excellent," Hudson said. "Specially since that chap wasn't good-looking, I mean."

Jacqueline grinned at him, but Bernadine had not noticed his sarcasm. She was smiling happily.

Chapter three

A Dead Rose and Two Artists At noon the next day Ms Gray called Hudson. She told him that she had personally checked her records of the last months.

"Nothing, Inspector," she reported. "The only thing that is unaccounted for is an old dummy we don't use any more anyway."

"A dummy?" he asked. "Who would steal a dummy?"

"I have no idea. It had been collecting dust in the storage room, and then one day it was gone. Perhaps it walked off by itself."

"When did it disappear?" Hudson asked more out of habit than interest.

"Oh, about the time I came down with the flu. Let me see - that must have been round Easter," the shop owner stated. "Now I compared all sales to our inventory of clothes. Nothing is missing, not one single item that might have been stolen. All clothes were properly paid for."

"What about cheques and credit cards? How long do you keep records of those?" Hudson asked.

"Forever," she said. "They're still all there. But do you really think the murderer would have paid for those dresses with a cheque or credit card?"

"No, I don't," he replied truthfully. "But we have to

investigate every possible lead, you know."

"Yes, I understand that," the boutique owner said. "But this will be handled discreetly, won't it? I don't want the police to upset my customers - it might ruin the good reputation of my shop!"

"Of course we will be discreet about it," the inspector assured her. "I will personally see to that. So could you keep all your records handy, so that one of my men can pick them up this afternoon? You will get everything back as soon as we are finished with it - the two dresses as well."

She promised to have everything ready to be picked up in the afternoon. Just before she was about to hang up, the inspector said: "Oh, just one more question - who has keys to your shop and the storage area?" "Only myself. I am always the first person to get there and the last one to leave."

"Sounds just like my job," Hudson remarked. "Thank you so much. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Inspector." She hung up.

Well, this is one job I won't handle myself, Hudson thought. Sorting through bookkeeping records and dealing with figures is just not my cup of tea! Let me see - who will be the lucky one to take care of "Gray's" bookkeeping?

The heatwave had finally cooled off and was replaced by rain. The water was pouring down from the sky as if God Himself was taking a long, refreshing shower.

Hudson drove out of the city centre and past the Updike Shipyard by the river. He took the shortcut through the industrial area and then some side roads that finally led to the wealthy part of town where he lived. His house was small but exquisite and surrounded by a

large lawn and a rose garden, which was his housekeeper's great passion.

"It's raining cats and dogs!" Miss Paddington said as a sort of welcome when Hudson opened the front door.

"Who are you telling this? I feel like shaking myself like a wet poodle." He had to sneeze.

Miss Paddington hurried off to the kitchen and returned with a steaming cup of hot chocolate. "Here you go. Just what the doctor ordered."

He gratefully drank a few sips. His housekeeper always seemed to know what he needed at that moment. "Thank you," he said. "That's delicious." "It's made with real cocoa and a touch of cinnamon. My Aunt Libby taught me how to make it when I was a young girl."

"Well, God bless Aunt Libby's soul," the inspector said. "May she spoil all the angels in heaven with her hot chocolate!"

"Hope you don't catch a cold, Inspector. But to be honest - I'm glad we finally get some rain after all that sun."

"You're right. I was starting to feel as if I'm in Florida instead of in good old England!" Hudson said ironically.

"That's not what I mean. But the roses did not take very well to all that heat. And they are my first painting project. I'm working on a still life - a perfect single rose blossom in a glass vase. I'll call it 'Rose in Glass'."

"How fitting," the inspector remarked dryly.

"Yes, isn't it?" she said proudly. "But before I could finish,

all the blossoms died on me because of the hot weather."

"Then why don't you just call the painting 'Dead Rose in Glass'? Or you could call it 'Rose Dying in Glass'."

Miss Paddington did not like it when the inspector made jokes like that. "That's not funny, Inspector. You've had too many death investigations," she said curtly. "And being all by yourself doesn't help either, you know. Have you seen that nice lady lately? What's her name - Elvira?"

Having made her point, the housekeeper took his empty cup and left him by himself to think about that nice lady, Elvira.

Perhaps I should get a cat, he thought. They are just as complicated as women. And they have just as long claws. But you don't have to impress them with compliments.

Inspector Hudson was no longer thinking about cats. He was thinking about the stranger one of the shop assistants had mentioned. How to find the male customer who had shown such interest in the blue dress? Well, the only way to do that was through the media. The shop owner would probably not be too thrilled about that. But then it might even boost her business if the dresses were displayed attractively inside the store.

Oh, so what, he thought. We will even mention that desert theme. That should make her happy.

The young investigator who had to sort through "Gray's" bookkeeping records confirmed what the boutique owner had already told Hudson. Everything was totally correct. No dress could be missing from the inventory.

"We're still checking into the purchases that were made on credit card or by cheque, sir. So far the customers have been able to

show us what they bought at 'Gray's'. We're only waiting on three more customers who couldn't be reached yet. By the way", the young officer continued, "the woman who found the second victim - her name is Jennifer Clearwater - is among 'Gray's' customers. We are still waiting for the results there, because she and her husband are on holiday right now. But the amount she paid by credit card is less than the price they ask for one of those dresses. So it can't have been a dress she bought. The shop assistants think it was a bikini or something like that."

"So that's not a lead," the inspector said, shaking his head.

"Actually, so far every lead has turned into a dead end. Well, get back to me as soon as you have talked to the remaining customers. And thank you. You're doing a good job."

The young officer flushed with surprise. "Why, thank you, sir!" he said and hurried off to do an even better job.

Why is it so much easier to compliment a subordinate on a job well done than it is to pay a compliment to a beautiful woman? The inspector wondered.

"You always call when I'm in a hurry," Elvira said. "How do you always know when I'm getting ready to leave?"

"I don't," Hudson replied lamely. "Sorry to bother you again so soon. But we're not getting anywhere in the Thames Murder Cases. All we know is that the murderer must have bought the dresses at Gray's - or somewhere far away in another big city. This 'Petit Fleur du Jardin' stuff is only sold in a few very exclusive shops, as we found out. Therefore I need your help."

He sighed. He liked to call Elvira, but he hated to have to ask any favours of her.

She seemed to have heard his sigh, because her voice softened immediately. "How can I help you out? I don't know any more about those dresses than you already do."

"But you socialize with the kind of people who buy clothes like that. People who can afford those prices, I mean. We're probably looking for someone with money - some clown who can go out and buy two very expensive dresses just for the thrill. And the kill, so to speak." "Nice wordplay, James," Elvira said. "But a sad subject."

"That's how I feel, too. I have to find the bastard before he strikes again!"

"What makes you think he will strike again?"

The inspector could not tell her about the pattern he was beginning to see - the full moon and the same type of dress. "Let's just call it an instinct. I have a feeling he will kill again. And soon."

"Tell you what. I will see what I can find out. I will ask all my friends in high places a few discreet questions - without mentioning you, of course. By the way, how did you like the paintings?"

"What paintings?" He had no idea what she was talking about.

"The paintings in 'Gray's' boutique. O.U. Gray's paintings. Didn't you see them? Three of them are hanging on one of the walls. They bear his artist's initials O.U.G." "O.U. Gray's paintings? Who is O.U. Gray? Ms Gray's husband?" he asked in confusion. "But she said she was divorced." "O.U. Gray is her twin brother," Elvira explained patiently. "He is a very talented local artist, very 'in' at the moment. Does abstracts. He has developed his own soft, flowing style. So his pictures always look as if they were taken under water. Some critics

already call him a genius."

The inspector, who could not tell the difference between a rose in a glass from an abstract rose under water, was surprised. Ms Gray had not mentioned that she had a brother. So there was another man around who could have somehow taken those dresses!

"Elvira?"

"What, oh James?" she asked in her sultry voice that made him want to call her more often.

"You know what? You just gave me an important new lead! O.U. Gray! I had no idea about the man! Thank you - thank you so much!"

"You're quite welcome. But now I've got to run."

She wanted to hang up on him, but he stopped her just in time. "One more thing," he said.

"What is it?"

"Tha-that peachy dress you were thinking of buying? I saw it in the shop," he stuttered. "And you would look great in it."

"Are you sure now?" she sounded amused.

"No, I mean yes - I mean b-beautiful. I really wanted to say that you would look beautiful in that peach-coloured dress. Like a beautiful peach!"

"You mean like a 'petit peche du jardin'?" she chuckled.

"Well, I didn't mean it as a joke," he said stiffly.

"James, that was the sweetest compliment I ever heard. No one has ever called me a 'beautiful peach' Now I will definitely have to

buy it. It's all your fault if I spend half of my monthly income on that peachy dress! Have a nice day!"

They rang off.

He had done it. He had paid her the sweetest compliment she had ever heard. James Hudson leaned back in his office chair, doing nothing but savour the moment.

O.U. Gray had the same black hair, blue eyes and features as his twin sister Emily, but his face was softer and he seemed younger than her. He was dressed casually in jeans and a black jersey shirt.

Now he is a man that young Bernadine probably considers good looking, James Hudson thought. But he doesn't look as if he could run a successful business the way his sister does.

"Come on in, Inspector." Gray led Hudson into his living room. "Do you care for a cup of Orange Pekoe or a glass of lemonade?" He pointed at a glass jug.

"No, thank you. I won't take up much of your time. I just have a few questions."

Gray poured himself a glass of freshly made lemonade. He took a sip of the pale yellow liquid. "So what brings the famous Scotland Yard Inspector Hudson here to my modest home?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it modest," Hudson replied, looking round the huge room with the high ceiling. The walls, the marble floor and the leather furniture were all white. A few white decorative vases were placed here and there. Even the photo books on the coffee table had white covers. The only splash of colour in the room was a great big rug in the centre of the room. All colours of the rainbow were woven into its beautiful pattern.

Pointing at it, the inspector remarked, "That's a nice piece. It looks like an Indian pattern." "It is," Gray nodded. "I bought it at an Indian reservation in Arizona. It is handmade, and the colours are all natural. No chemicals at all."

"Very beautiful," Hudson commented. "But I don't see any paintings on the walls. I heard you're an artist who has made quite a name of himself."

Gray put down his glass and smiled. "Who told you that? That's a bit of an exaggeration, I'd say. I'm just using my own watercolour technique, that's all. And I don't like to display my own art in my own living room. It's like bringing your work home if you know what I mean."

Either he really is too modest - or he thinks so highly of himself that he does not want anyone to know what he really thinks of his own art, Hudson thought. But the man seemed nice and easygoing enough.

"Well, I'm sure you didn't come here to discuss artwork, did you? So what brought you here, Inspector?"

"I'm investigating into the Thames Murder Cases," Hudson replied. "I need to ask you what you did three nights ago - Sunday night between eleven p.m. and three a.m. on Monday morning."

Gray looked genuinely shocked. "That sounds as if - as if you suspect ME of killing those poor women! But that's totally absurd, Inspector! What did I do to be suspected of such a horrible act?"

"I didn't say we suspect you or anyone else, for that matter," the inspector said calmly. "I just have to eliminate all persons who could have anything to do with the two crimes. So what

did you do during the time in question?"

Frowning, Gray stared at the white ceiling. "Let me see," he said thoughtfully. "When did you say it was - Sunday night? What did I do that night? Oh yes - it was really hot that day, and so I spent the whole day by the pool at my sister's house. After supper I went home. That was about ten o'clock. Then I worked a bit on a painting and watched a late film on television. An American film; it was called 'The Magic Touch'. After that I went to sleep. That was about 3:30 a.m."

"So you were by yourself? Or can anyone verify what you just told me?"

Gray shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. I was by myself. But that's absurd, Inspector! I can tell you what happened in the film "That won't do. You could have taped it on a video recorder and watched it later, you see? That's not an alibi."

Gray jumped up and walked over to the window. He was clearly irritated and upset. "I have nothing to do with those horrible murders!" he exclaimed. "Had I known that some woman would get killed Sunday night and that I would be suspected, I would have made sure to get myself a watertight alibi!" He stared out of the window and suddenly turned round. "But wait - my neighbour! She may have seen me paint in my studio! Ask her if she saw me through the curtains. And I always listen to pop music while I paint. Sunday night I put on some music. I kept the window open, because it was still so hot in the flat. I believe she also kept her window open, so she may have seen me paint and heard me sing along to the music."

The inspector got up. "Yes, I'll do that. She may be your alibi. Say, do you have any keys to your sister's boutique?"

"No, sir. Why should she give me a spare key? I have

nothing to do with her business. Unfortunately I'm not good with money and figures. I never developed the left side of my brain, I guess." He smiled and shrugged. "My mother always wanted me to become a businessman. Now I paint abstract watercolours. Oh well, you can't please them all, can you?" "No, you can't," the inspector said. "Well, thank you so much for your time, Mr Gray. We'll see what your neighbour has to say. What's her name?"

"Mrs Kennedy, I believe. I don't know her very well; we just say hello when we meet downstairs. She is an old lady living by herself."

The old lady did remember seeing Gray through the white cotton curtains of his window. "Yes, sir, he was sitting there painting all right when I was watering my balcony flowers before going to bed at half past eleven. In that heat you have to water them twice a day, you know? And the young gentleman over there was concentrating on his painting, singing. Mind you, he wasn't being loud, he has very good manners. You could barely hear him. He's really well-educated. And in addition, he is good-looking, too. I wonder why he hasn't married by now. Of course most young women have a job these days, but that isn't what they're really after, is it? I think they still want to get married, deep down in their hearts, I mean..."

Inspector Hudson hastily thanked her and fled the scene.

The final results of the check-up on "Gray's" customers who had paid by cheque or credit card did not offer any new clues, either. All the purchases of dresses, blouses, skirts and bikinis matched up.

"I couldn't find anything that looks suspicious, sir," the young investigator reported to Hudson. "Only two women bought one of those blue dresses on credit card - and both still have their dress and

the belt that comes with it, as they showed me. One woman bought a beige dress and paid with a cheque. But she still has the complete garment as well, and she just bought it two weeks ago."

"Then that was after the first murder," the inspector murmured and shook his head. "This is leading us nowhere. But thank you anyhow."

Thursday morning the "London Times" ran a short article on the male customer who had shown such interest in the blue "Petit Fleur du Jardin" dress a few months before. The article only said that he may be an important witness to the two crimes and should report to Scotland Yard immediately. The paper also printed two pictures. One displayed the blue dress on a hanger next to one of the potted palm-trees; the other one showed the sales room, pyramid and all.

"The reporter even mentioned our desert theme," Ms Gray said happily when she called the inspector in the afternoon. "Our sales have doubled since this morning! Now everyone is keen on buying 'Petit Fleur du Jardin' dresses - specially the blue ones. Thank you for making sure that the press presented 'Gray's' so nicely!"

But the man with the special interest in the "Summer Sea" model did not step forward. Perhaps he was on holiday. Perhaps he did not read the papers.

Or perhaps he was the murderer.

Chapter four

Inspector Hudson Receives a Letter

Then Sue Baker's father called to report that his wife had remembered something about a "secret admirer" their daughter had mentioned to her.

"A secret admirer?" Hudson asked.

"Yes, sir. My wife is feeling a bit better - of course she isn't over the loss of our daughter yet. But at least she can now accept the fact that Sue is gone," Mr Baker said. "And she just remembered that Sue had said something about a man showing a lot of interest in her."

The inspector was all ears. "Did she say who he was? Did she give a name?"

"No, she just said that he was in a difficult position and did not want her to talk about him. She shouldn't tell anyone before he had sorted out his problems. My wife got the impression that he might be married. Sue only mentioned him because her mother found a pearl necklace in her room while cleaning it. So she asked Sue where she got those pearls, and after a bit of questioning Sue told her."

"Can your wife remember anything else Sue might have mentioned? Like where she met this man, how long she had known him, things like that?"

Hudson heard Sue's father sigh sadly. "No, Inspector. Believe me, I would tell you if I knew. The murderer of my daughter must be punished for what he did to her!"

"Yes, sir," Hudson said with great respect for the grieving father. "I feel the same way."

None of Sue's girlfriends knew anything about a secret admirer. Neither did the two other waitresses at the "Old Lion's Pub".

"A secret admirer who gave her real pearls? How thrilling!" the waitress from Jamaica said. "I wish I had a secret admirer like that, too! Then I'd quit this place in no time! Would you like a glass of 'Pale Ale'? It's our special brand."

The inspector shook his head. "Thank you, but I never drink alcohol while I'm working."

The pretty waitress glanced at Hudson. "What about after you're done working?" she asked sweetly. "It's on the house."

Smiling, Hudson had to decline her offer.

The other waitress, who was from Newcastle and had to work on her day off to replace Sue, shrugged. "If I were you, I'd ask Paul about that secret admirer stuff," she said in a tired voice. "He was keen on her, and he happens to be married. Aren't all secret admirers simply married chaps? Plus he's making a lot of money from this place - not that we see a lot of it, though."

"So Paul is the owner of this pub?" James Hudson inquired. He looked appraisingly at the noble wooden floor and wall panelling. It looked like real cherry wood.

"Yes, Inspector. You can find him in his office. It's right back there, next to the kitchen."

The man who opened the door to his office looked distressed. "Yes?" he asked.

Inspector Hudson introduced himself and flashed his badge. "Are you the owner of this pub?" he asked.

"Yes, so what!"

"I understand Sue Baker worked here," Hudson said. "Therefore I must ask you a few questions."

Paul Wynfield frowned. He was about thirty-five and had blue eyes and thick brown hair. He had rough features and a tiger's head tattooed on his upper arm. Bernadine would probably have found him a "good-looking boxer sort of chap", James thought.

"But your men were already here on Monday, asking all kinds of questions! So why are you snooping round here now as well? Didn't I read in the papers about you? Aren't you the chap the Yard always puts in charge when a case is hopeless?"

"If you want to put it that way - then I'm the one," Hudson replied calmly.

"So why aren't you out there finding the one who did that to Sue?" Paul Wynfield asked outraged.

"That's exactly what I'm doing, sir," Hudson said. "I need to ask you if you might have given her a pearl necklace. Some man she called her 'secret admirer ' gave her said necklace, and it was more than likely a married man with a high income - like yourself."

Wynfield pushed his chair back and rose. "What is this - an interrogation? Are you suspecting me of having killed poor Sue? Me?!"

With a few quick strides he walked over to the small window and turned his back on the inspector. "Why on earth should I go and kill Sue? I liked her! Everyone liked her! She couldn't hurt a

fly! Why would anybody do something like this to her?"

His voice broke. To the inspector's surprise the tall man with the broad shoulders started to cry. His back still turned on Hudson, he sobbed, "Sue and I - I mean, there was nothing between us - I have a wife and children, you know. But I really liked her a lot - well, yes, I did give her those pearls. I would have liked to give her a lot more, but, oh well.

He got a hold on himself, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and turned round. "Inspector", he said pleadingly, "you must believe me! I could never have killed her."

"I want to believe you," Hudson responded. Even though the man had known Sue and might have had a motive to kill her, that still did not explain the murder of the first victim. Unless he happened to have known her, too. But still Hudson had to check if Paul Wynfield had an alibi. It was simple police procedure.

"Just tell me where you were last Sunday night between eleven and three o'clock the following morning. Just so we can eliminate you as a possible suspect."

"At home. Ask my wife," the pub owner answered. "I closed up here and left about eleven fifteen, as usual. Then I drove straight home."

"When did you get home?"

"About half an hour later. Driving home takes about that long."

"And your wife was home? Can she confirm that you arrived home round quarter to twelve?"

Wynfield nodded. "Of course she can confirm that. She was

still awake when I got home."

Not the best of alibis, the inspector thought. A wife can confirm anything if she does not want to send her husband off to prison. Moreover, if the pub owner had been quick, he could have given Sue a lift and strangled her inside his car. Then he could have dressed and dumped her body by the river, which was only a few minutes' drive away from the pub. He would still have made it home without losing enough time for anyone to notice.

"Can anyone else confirm your times? Did anyone see you leave the pub or arrive home? Any neighbours?"

Wynfield frowned and shook his head. "No, not that I remember." Hudson thanked him and left. He was lost in thoughts. The man did not have much of an alibi, but he also did not have much of a motive. Also, there did not seem to be any connection between him and the first woman who had got killed over five weeks ago.

"So, Inspector - did you find the secret admirer you were looking for?" the waitress from Newcastle called after him on his way out. When he turned round, she was wiping down a table, smiling knowingly at him.

Of course Mrs Wynfield was able to confirm that her husband had come home about eleven forty-five on Sunday night and had not left the house until the next morning at seven.

"What's all this about, anyhow?" she asked upset. "Why should he have anything to do with the murder of one of his waitresses?"

"Just a routine check, Madam," the inspector answered discreetly. After all he did not want to be responsible for the break-up of a marriage.

Friday afternoon the mysterious stranger who had been so interested in the blue dress rang up Scotland Yard. The call was transferred over to Hudson's line.

After Hudson had taken down the caller's name and address, he asked the man, "So you are the male customer who was looking at the blue dresses at 'Gray's Boutique' a few months ago?"

"Yes, I think so," the man, whose name was Mr Graham, said nervously. "Even though I have no idea what this is all about. But I did go to 'Gray's' a few months ago to find something for my wife's birthday. And I saw a blue dress I thought she might like. But she is very particular about colours, and so I ended up putting it back. I'm glad I did! She just bought herself an olive blouse at 'Gray's'. I never would have picked that colour for her, but that's my wife!"

"An olive blouse?" the inspector asked. He dimly remembered the woman who had been looking at the rows of blouses when he had stopped by "Gray's" early this week.

"Yes. She calls it olive, but I would say it's a sickly greenish grey."

"I may have met your wife when I was at the boutique this week," Hudson said astonished.

"That's possible, sir. Usually she ends up buying pink stuff, but when she came home from her last shopping tour, she said one of those blokes from Scotland Yard had walked in. He had had nothing better to do than tell her not to buy that pink blouse she had picked out."

Flustered, Hudson apologized, "I'm sorry if I have offended your wife, Mr Graham. I just thought that pink was a touch too pink. But of course it was none of my business."

"Well, I'm glad you told her, Inspector!" Graham replied. "She actually looks surprisingly good in that olive blouse and is very pleased with it. She said that inspector from Scotland Yard may have been rude, but that he had a good eye for colours!"

The letter arrived on Saturday. It was addressed to "Scotland Yard, London". There was neither a street address nor a postal code on the envelope.

Hudson's home phone rang the minute he was starting on the breakfast Miss Paddington had prepared for him after letting him sleep in. The Yard called him in to take a look at the package bearing "Jack the Skipper's" handwriting. He glanced at the tempting scrambled eggs with fried sausages and tomatoes, the steaming toast and the fresh biscuits and sighed. Then he hurried over to his office. The envelope was already waiting for him on his desk.

The inspector took one look at the small package and knew what was inside. The printed letters and the incomplete address told him enough. "The arrogance," he murmured while opening it carefully. "The arrogance of not bothering to even write a full address! He considers himself to be too important for that. He knows we were waiting for his second letter and expects us to recognize it immediately cautiously he took out a folded sheet with the help of tweezers, and we do! We do exactly what he expects us to do."

Scotland Yard had indeed been waiting for a second note from "Jack the Skipper", and the secretary who handled all incoming letters had been alerted to be on the lookout for an envelope just like this one. So she had sent it on to Inspector Hudson before even opening it.

He unfolded the piece of paper and read the printed text: "Hello, Inspector Hudson! I heard they put you in charge of my case.

If you really are as competent as they say, then why haven't you knocked on my door yet? The second lamb choked on this blue belt (just check the marks on her pretty neck if you don't believe me!). The next little lamb won't die in colour - but rather in a bad mood... Love and Kisses, Jack the Skipper."

Sure enough the blue belt that matched the second victim's dress was in the envelope as well. The inspector did not touch it. The crime scene experts had to examine it for traces first. If they were lucky, they might get the murderer's fingerprint or some traces from the clothes he had been wearing that night.

Hudson put down the letter and stared at it. How did "Jack the Skipper" know who had been assigned to the case? That fact had not yet been made public. The public did not know. But the murderer did. So what did that mean?

It could only mean one thing: "Jack the Skipper" was either one of the men Hudson had already interviewed, or he had been told by someone that the famous inspector was going round, asking a lot of questions.

Chapter five

Tomatoes and Other Clues

Unfortunately, like the first note and belt, the second note and the blue belt offered no fingerprints. Of course there was plenty of trace evidence on the belt - tiny bits of dirt, plants and sand, traces that matched those found on the dresses. This was to be expected, since the victim had been found outside on the ground. Two single hairs were found on the belt, but they only matched the victim's own long dark hair. The inspector was interested in a tiny fibre, however. He whistled to himself. It was a dark blue cotton-polyester blend and most likely came from a T-shirt. Identical fibres had been found on both dresses. So the sender of the belt had to have been at both crime scenes.

Well, that's a start, he thought. If we find the T-shirt that matches that fibre, then we may have a piece of evidence that will hold up in court.

But first he had to find the person who had been wearing that blue T-shirt.

Inspector Hudson decided to take a closer look at the only two possible suspects he had so far. Both had an alibi, even though Wynfield's was shaky, yet it still was an alibi. But Hudson was pressed for time because "Jack the Skipper" had already mentioned a third victim who "won't die in colour - but rather in a bad mood". What on earth did he mean by that?

And why did he write "in colour"? Did he mean the colour of the dresses he had made them wear? Even though Mrs Graham

thought Hudson to have an eye for colours, he did not think of beige as being a real colour.

Monday morning Hudson would have his men check into O.U. Gray's background, and into Paul Wynfield's as well. If it was true that the murderer always struck during full moon, then James Hudson had three more weeks to find him. But for now there wasn't much he could do over the weekend. He wondered if Miss Paddington could warm up that delicious breakfast he had abandoned over an hour ago.

"Of course I can," she said when he got home. "I'll warm up the biscuits and scramble some fresh eggs for you. But then I'll have to hurry off to my painting class."

The inspector followed her into the kitchen.

"Still the 'Rose in Glass'?" he asked. "Or did you have to bury that project?"

Scrambling up two eggs, she said, "The poor rose died on me. But it was too difficult for a first still life, anyhow. Now I'm painting tomatoes instead. They're red and round and rather easy to paint. I'll call the painting 'Tomatoes in Bowl'"

"Sounds tasty." the inspector commented dryly.

The background checks took several days. The first piece of information about O.U. Gray's background came unofficially - and from Elvira Elliot.

"O.U. Gray is the grandson of James Updike, the founder of the Updike Shipyard," she reported to Hudson. "His full name is Oscar Updike Gray. That's because his mother's last name is his middle name. It is said in certain circles that he was supposed to take over the Updike family business, but that he just couldn't manage that. Apparently that was a great disappointment to his grandfather and his

mother. His mother doesn't think much of his art, but she is very proud of his twin sister's successful business."

"The Updike Shipyard, you said? That's very interesting," Hudson said, whistling through his teeth. "And you found out all that in such short time? So when are you going to join us here at the Yard? We could use an investigative talent like yours!"

"Never," Elvira answered. But she was smiling. He could hear her smile on the telephone right before she rang off.

So O.U. Gray was connected to a shipyard. Could that be the meaning of "Skipper"? But he had not become a skipper - to the great disappointment of his grandfather and his mother.

Did killing make him feel like less of a disappointment? Like a winner? As if he was in control of his life? As if he was the skipper his family had wanted him to become?

James Hudson had to wait on the results of the two background checks. Two of his character features that made him such a valuable member of Scotland Yard were his thoroughness and his impatience. He simply did not like to sit and wait.

So he decided to find out more about the first victim's past. Could there be any connection between the two victims after all?

He rang up Melinda Jordan's former colleagues and friends. He asked a lot of questions about her habits, interests and activities. She had liked the cinema, musicals and reading books. She had loved to travel - mostly to Italy and Spain for her summer holidays. She had enjoyed cooking pasta and dancing salsa. Really nothing out of the ordinary. But then he struck gold.

About six years ago Melanie Jordan had worked at the "Pale Ale Brewery", a small brewery in the South of London. She had

been in charge of the customers' orders. She had quit that job when a larger firm had made her a better-paying job offer as a secretary.

But for two years Melanie had handled all orders - including those of the "Old Lion's Pub".

When Paul Wynfield was shown photos of Melanie Jordan, he denied having known her. He said over and over again that he always ordered his barrels of "Pale Ale" over the telephone.

But his waitress from Newcastle told a different story. "That's not true, but don't tell him I said so, Inspector. I've been working here for ten years - too long, if you ask me. And Paul used to go everywhere in person. Now he's getting lazy, but a few years ago he didn't believe in making phone calls. 'I get the best results if I deal with people directly,' he would always say."

Melanie's former colleagues confirmed what the waitress had said. It used to be Wynfield's habit to come into their office, chat a little with everyone - specially the ladies - and order five or six barrels of ale.

"How well did he know Melanie Jordan?" Inspector Hudson asked the clerk who had had her desk right across from Melanie's desk. The woman shrugged. "I couldn't tell you that," she said. "I mean Melanie and I weren't close friends or anything like that. When Paul came over, he talked to me and flirted with her. He always paid her a compliment on her dress or her hair or the way she smiled. But I don't know if they ever went out on a date."

The background check on Wynfield revealed that he had been married for twelve years. So he had already been married at the time Melanie Jordan had been working for "Pale Ale". But the inspector was more interested in another detail about the pub owner's past: Before Wynfield had opened his pub, he had had several

different jobs, including working as a cook on a ship.

"Uh oh - so he was a sailor," Hudson murmured, whistling through his teeth. "It doesn't look too good for you, Paul. Could you be our 'Skipper' after all?"

O.U. Gray's past, however, only revealed that he was regularly suffering from bouts of depression. There had been a few times when he had got so depressed that he had had to be hospitalized for a few weeks.

Funny - the man seemed so relaxed and easygoing, Hudson thought. Could he be hiding a different personality behind his friendly exterior? The person who could answer that question best was Miss Paddington. You could not hide anything from her. He decided to take her to "Gray's Boutique" soon to have a look at O. U. G.'s paintings.

But a depression does not make a murderer yet, and Paul Wynfield had just become Suspect Number One on the inspector's list. Here was a former connection to a ship, and he had lied about the fact that he had personally known the first victim.

When the owner of the "Old Lion's Pub" was confronted with the statements made by Melanie's former colleague, he broke down and confessed.

"Yes, yes, I did know her," he confessed. "She used to work at the brewery some years ago. But that doesn't mean that I killed her, does it, Inspector?"

"Then why did you lie to me?" Hudson asked. "Now things look even worse for you."

Wynfield averted his eyes. "I don't know. I read about Melanie's murder in the papers and was shocked. Then - four weeks later - my own waitress is strangled the same way Melanie was. It's a

coincidence, but it makes me look as if I killed them both."

Wynfield gave the same alibi for the night Melanie Jordan was killed - that he had been home with his wife. Of course she confirmed his alibi again. A search warrant of Wynfield's home did not shed any new light on the matter. No dark blue T-shirt was found that might have matched the fibres on the victims' clothes. No receipts from "Gray's" for any dresses bought there.

It could be a mere coincidence that Wynfield had known both women personally and that he had been a sailor in the past. It looked suspicious but it was not enough to charge him with murder.

All Hudson could do was tell Paul Wynfield not to leave the City of London.

And wait for the next murder to happen.

Miss Paddington liked the idea of being hired as a police psychologist - even if it was just for a day.

"But of course I'll go there with you and take a look at the paintings," she declared. She was sitting on the terrace; her painting utensils were scattered everywhere. "Let me just clean up here first."

For the next five minutes she was busy putting away her paints and brushes. When she picked up a white canvas with nothing but two red dots on it, the inspector asked curiously, "Are those two red dots the 'Tomatoes in Bowl'?"

"Well, I'm not finished yet. I just started on my first still life", she said a bit offended, adding, "and anyhow - they are not red. That colour is called 'vermilion'."

"They look nice," James Hudson said hastily. "They have a very pretty colour. Actually they look very juicy."

"You think so?" the housekeeper asked happily. "I'll put them into an ultramarine bowl. That's 'blue' for laymen."

"Ultramarine? It sounds like the ocean," Hudson commented.

"It is like the ocean - it is a brilliant sea blue. Look, this is the bowl I will paint." When Miss Paddington brought him a bowl as blue as the dress the second victim had worn, something clicked in Hudson's mind.

"What other names do you professional painters have for colours?" he wanted to know.

"Well, beige is 'ochre'"

Oh my God, Hudson thought. "O" for ochre and for Oscar - "U" for ultramarine and Updike - and the "bad mood" for - for Gray! O.U. Gray. The colours the victims wore stood for the murderer's initials! And he is planning to kill a third woman. I bet she would have worn a grey dress, Hudson thought, rushing to the phone.

O.U. Gray had played his evil game with Scotland Yard long enough. He had been laughing to himself, dressing his victims in colours that for him, the artist, spelled out his name and his mood: a grey mood was a bout of depression. He who had become a painter instead of a "skipper" wanted to become immortal by killing three women as an "act of art".

"Yes, that is likely." Miss Paddington nodded when Hudson told her his theory of the murderer's motive, after he had telephonically ordered that Gray's flat be searched for certain items. "If he feels like a failure, he will compensate for that by doing something the world will really notice."

But the inspector had already grabbed his car keys to rush

to his office.

In O.U. Gray's flat the officers found not only Gray himself, but also a painter's rag which used to be a dark blue T-shirt, a tape recorder with his voice singing a pop song and a dummy, wearing a wig with short dark hair. Through the white curtains it looked like the artist himself was sitting on a chair, painting.

When asked, his sister admitted that her brother had managed the shop for two days in spring, while she had been ill with the flu. That was when he had taken three dresses and rang up the bill, putting the correct amount of money into the cash register.

When Hudson called Elvira Elliot that evening to tell her the good news, she was shocked. "O.U. Gray is the Thames Murderer? I can't believe it! A murderer? Why would he go round and kill women? Why, his new series of three paintings, the 'Moonshine Serenade', was just bought for a lot of money by a New York gallery!"

"The 'Moonshine Serenade'?" the inspector asked.

"Yes, the three pictures at 'Gray's Boutique'. That's the title he gave them. Why do you ask?" Elvira wanted to know.

Now he could tell her. "Because he killed the two women during a full moon. And he announced a third murder - he most likely planned it for the night of the next full moon."

Elvira's shiver was almost audible. "Now I don't think I will buy that peachy dress after all," she said. "It would seem like a bad omen."

Hudson had to agree. "Yes," he said and cleared his throat. "It's a shame, though. I know you would have looked lovely in that dress - but then you always do, anyway."

"Thank you, James," she said gracefully in that sultry voice of hers.

- THE END -

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