

## MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXCESS

by Andy McDermott

Mali Kanthachai forced a lengthy yawn out of her system and tugged the creases from her lilac blouse before entering the airliner's first class cabin. The flight from Bangkok to London's Heathrow airport was a long one, twelve hours and fifty minutes with an hour still to go, but the rules for cabin crew working in first class were strict: they must appear smart and attentive at all times, always ready to serve the wealthy passengers.

All twelve of the private suites at the front of the Airbus A380's lower deck were occupied, and first class passengers could be notoriously demanding, but it had been a relatively easy shift for Mali and her crewmates. The Air Thailand flight had left Suvarnabhumi Airport after midnight, the difference in time zones meaning that touchdown at Heathrow would be at seven in the morning, so most of the passengers had slept through the majority of the journey. It was now time to rouse them, giving enough time to prepare individual breakfasts and allow everyone to shower before landing.

Some were already awake, she saw as she started down the port aisle. Each suite was enclosed by a two-metre-high partition, the aisle windows fitted with blinds, and two were already open to the world. Mali tried not to frown at the thought of the man inside one, who had never even closed his blinds during the flight. Mr Jarnow had been the big black fly in an otherwise agreeable shift, a grouchy workaholic who never said thank you and was making yet another Skype call on his laptop. The partition walls did not go all the way to the cabin ceiling – a security measure, to ensure that nobody could fully isolate themselves to do anything illegal or threatening to the aircraft – and she had earlier been forced to ask him to keep his voice down so as not to disturb the other passengers. His response had been far from friendly.

However, she had no such complaints about the man in the other open suite. She gently tapped on the glass. 'Good morning, Mr Gold,' she said as he slid back the door.

'Ah, good morning, Mali,' he replied with a warm, broad smile. She was sure from her regular patrols of the cabin that he hadn't slept for long, having intermittently heard the soft sounds of typing on a laptop from his suite, but it had certainly been enough; there wasn't a trace of tiredness on the blond-haired man's lean and handsome face. He was supposedly famous in his native Britain, and while the young stewardess hadn't heard of him before the flight she could easily believe it. Mr Gold had an effortless charm, which he had deployed by flirting shamelessly not just with her but the entire cabin crew, and even some of the passengers – ladies and gentlemen alike. 'I take it we're in the flight's final furlongs?'

She didn't quite understand the last word, but got its meaning. 'Yes, Mr Gold. We'll be landing in about an hour. Would you like your breakfast?'

'Oh, most certainly. You have my order?'

'Yes – the full English?'

He smiled again. 'Splendid. Oh, and as well as some coffee, may I trouble you for a glass of Dom Pérignon as an aperitif?'

The company rules also demanded that cabin crew not challenge or criticise first class passengers unless they were breaching the rules of flight, yet she somehow knew that not only would she get away with it in this case, but that he would be

almost disappointed if she didn't. 'Another one?' she said, the corners of her mouth curving slyly upwards. 'And it is only six o'clock in the morning.'

He had a riposte ready, as she'd expected. 'Ah, but I'm still on Bangkok time,' he said cheerfully, tapping the face of his Hublot watch. 'It's past lunchtime over there, so if anything I'm overdue for a refill.'

Mali knew that he had consumed well over a bottle of vintage champagne during the course of the flight, but he didn't appear in any way drunk or disruptive, so decided there was no reason not to indulge him. 'There are a few bottles left. I will open one for you.'

'Well, it would be a shame to waste them. Thank you.'

She smiled and bowed her head in acknowledgement before heading back down the aisle. Behind the first class section was a galley and service area. She opened one of the fridges. Funny – she thought there had been four of the black bottles left, but there were only three. One of the other stewardesses must have opened another while she was occupied with something else. She uncorked one with a loud *pop!* and poured a glass for Mr Gold, then after taking it to him returned to the task of rousing the other passengers.

Mr Jarnow was still talking to someone via Skype and did not appreciate being interrupted, but the rest of the travellers were more appreciative. Mr Lewis was a less disagreeable British businessman, and the elderly American couple on their second honeymoon, Charles and Evelyn Grogan, were delighted at the prospect of a gourmet breakfast. Even the shy and nervous young Mr Niratpattanasai's fear of flying seemed to have subsided.

Another five people were awoken, then Mali came to the last suite on the starboard side. Mr Perch had not been as troublesome as Mr Jarnow, but early in the flight he had made a nuisance of himself by standing outside Mr Gold's cabin and talking to him – the two clearly knew each other – over the partition. It soon became obvious that the latter had no interest in holding a conversation, so one of the other attendants had asked him to stop bothering Mr Gold. For a moment it seemed that Mr Perch was going to cause a scene, but then he returned to his suite without a word. When Mali served his dinner later, he seemed to have forgotten about the incident entirely.

The blinds were down. 'Mr Perch?' she said, tapping on the glass. No answer. 'Mr Perch, we'll be starting our descent soon. Would you like me to bring your breakfast?'

Still no reply. Mali hesitated before knocking again, more loudly. 'Mr Perch, are you all right?'

She listened for any sounds of movement over the constant background whine and hiss of the engines and air conditioning. Nothing. Becoming concerned that he had fallen ill, she tried the door. It was locked. Still getting no response on one final, insistent knock, she took out a little plastic master key and used it to release the lock. She opened the door.

Mr Perch was in his seat, a look of pained surprise frozen on his ashen face. His white shirt was stained with red, a large blotchy teardrop having oozed from a small hole directly over his heart.

Mali's shocked scream echoed around the cabin.

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Detective Sergeant John Brownlow checked with the white-overalled Crime Scene Manager that it was clear for him to enter, then made his way into the A380's first class cabin.

'Morning, sir,' called Detective Constable Rachel Meadows, her sharply-cut dark bob waving as she nodded to him from up the starboard aisle.

'Morning, Meadows.' Despite his best efforts, the middle-aged Brownlow was tending towards overweight and had to squeeze past another figure in white, peering into one of the open suites as he did so. 'Never been in first class before. Nice. So this is how the other half lives.'

'More like the half of the one per cent,' Meadows said with derision. 'I checked how much one of these cabins costs. Ten thousand pounds.'

Brownlow was both impressed and appalled. 'Ten grand? What is it, silk sheets and stewardesses feeding you peeled grapes?' He reached his young partner and looked into the suite she was standing outside. 'So, what have we got?'

'We've got one dead newspaper editor. Desmond Perch, age forty-six, in charge of the—'

'Yeah, I know who he is.' Perch was an outspoken figure in the British media, a tabloid editor whose paper rode high on a mixture of celebrity gossip, sport and populist campaigning against all of which its readership disapproved – which was most things, Brownlow reflected. The dead man looked older than he was, face deeply lined from caffeine-fuelled late nights at the office and with a very conservatively styled combover failing to cover encroaching baldness. A closer look at the wound. 'Shot?'

'Probably a .22, but we'll know for sure at the post mortem.'

Brownlow sighed. 'How the hell did someone get a gun onto a plane?'

'More to the point, how did the killer fire it without anyone noticing?'

'What? Nobody?'

'We've done a preliminary canvassing of the first class passengers and the cabin crew. No one saw or heard anything.' Meadows checked her notebook. 'The deceased was last seen alive at around 4am, our time. One of the flight attendants says she saw him go to the loo,' she nodded towards the rear of the cabin, 'then return to his suite. The body was discovered around 6:10.'

'So, at some point in a two-hour window, a man was shot in an enclosed space filled with people without anyone hearing a sound.' He shook his head. 'How many passengers does one of these things carry? Five hundred plus? That's a hell of a lot of suspects.'

'Not that many, actually. Check this out.' Meadows led the way to the front of the cabin. The two aisles met at the bottom of the stairs to the super-jumbo's upper deck. The entrance to the cockpit ahead of it was open. She pointed up at the ceiling. 'There's a CCTV camera there to watch the cockpit door, but it also covers the stairs. There's another camera back past the galley, so they can see if anyone messes around with the cabin hatches during the flight. The economy section starts behind it.' She gestured through the cockpit entrance. 'I talked to the airline's representative earlier – all the camera footage is recorded on a hard drive. Timecoded, too. They're couriering a copy over to the Yard.'

'Have you looked at it?'

'Yeah – the quality's not great, but it's enough to see who's coming or going. We'll obviously need to confirm by watching the full thing, but I had a gander in fast-forward. Between four and six-ten, nobody went up or down the stairs, and after

Perch came back from the loo nobody went any further back down the plane than the galley, and then only the cabin staff.'

'So the killer was someone in first class.' Brownlow ran his fingertips through his bristling salt-and-pepper hair. 'And the gun must be here too – it's not like they could toss it out of a window.' He noticed the young woman's expression. 'Let me guess. No sign of the gun?'

'Not yet. The Evidence Recovery Unit boys are searching the cabin. We're going to check the cases in the terminal once we've done full interviews with everyone in first class.'

'What about the economy and business passengers?'

'Everyone's being searched as a precaution. We found a couple of minor drugs and customs violations, but no gun so far. They haven't been allowed to collect their carry-on luggage yet.'

'Have it all checked, just in case. The CCTV might have missed someone moving between the cabins.'

Meadows gave him a grim smile. 'That's a lot of bags. Tough luck for passenger number five hundred.'

'Tougher luck for passenger 1A.' Brownlow gestured towards Perch's suite. 'But yes, we'll focus on the first class passengers, and the crew. How many in total?'

'Eleven passengers, three attendants – in the timeframe we're talking about, anyway. Some of the crew from the other parts of the plane probably came through first class during the flight.'

Brownlow nodded. 'Interview all the crew, but focus on the three first class stewardesses.'

'I think they prefer to be called flight attendants.'

'And I think Perch preferred to be called alive. Okay, let's get started.'

The two officers headed back through first class. More crime scene examiners were searching the cabin, cataloguing every item they found. Bins were carefully emptied, their plastic linings turned inside-out to make sure nothing remained stuck within. Brownlow glanced hopefully at the contents of one, but saw only discarded plastic and paper wrappings, tissues, toiletries and makeup – no gun.

They crossed through the galley. Meadows gave the empty champagne bottles lined up on a countertop an envious look. She wagged a finger to count them as she passed. 'Twelve passengers, and dah dah dah... *seventeen* bottles of bubbly. On one twelve-hour flight.'

Brownlow chuckled. 'Talk about murder on the Orient excess.'

The interviews with the first class passengers and cabin staff were conducted in a spartan meeting room inside the terminal building. The trio of flight attendants, all young women, were dealt with first, giving the two detectives an overview of the journey as well as insight into the interactions of the passengers. All three stories seemed to corroborate. Then came the passengers themselves.

Brownlow flicked back through his notes as he waited for the last of the eleven to be brought in. All were wealthy, but at ten grand a ticket that was hardly surprising. He mentally matched the stewardesses' descriptions to his own impressions.

Edward and Laura Frobisher: British, couple, ages 56 and 51. High court barrister and doctor respectively, returning from a holiday in Thailand. *Drank too much, and fell asleep quite early in the flight.* The wife read Perch's newspaper but claimed she'd had no idea that he was its editor; the husband had heard of him, but read the

*Telegraph*. Neither seemed shocked by the murder, but in their lines of work they would probably have dealt with death before.

Lew Perrault: Canadian, male, age 35. Executive of an internet company, travelling on business. *Chatty, if a little pushy. Fell asleep watching a movie on his laptop, so we turned it off and closed his blinds.* Claimed never to have heard of Perch, but knew of his paper's online operations. Had an attitude of cool detachment to the affair.

Sun Wai Hong: Chinese, male, age 49. Executive of a Chinese car company, trying to set up import deals in Singapore, Thailand and Europe. *Had an early dinner, then fell asleep soon after. We hardly saw him during the flight.* Didn't understand much English, but eventually claimed never to have heard of Perch or his newspaper. More bothered about his meeting being delayed than that someone had been murdered across the aisle from him.

Klet Ratanakul: Thai, male, age 57. Director of an electronics manufacturing firm, visiting Britain, France and Germany on business. *Lecherous, but kept his hands to himself, and slept through most of the flight.* Claimed never to have heard of Perch or his newspaper. Arrogant, kept talking about how much money he had until he was gently reminded that attempting to bribe a police officer was a serious offence in Britain.

Som Niratpattanasai: Thai, male, age 26. Son of a wealthy businessman, visiting England for a holiday. *Very nervous about flying, but otherwise sweet, polite and undemanding.* Claimed never to have heard of Perch or his newspaper. Seemed quite stunned by the whole business.

Peter Lewis: British, male, age 50. Owner of a machine tools manufacturing firm, returning from Thailand on business. *A nice man at first, but became a pest after a few drinks; we were glad when he fell asleep.* Claimed to have met Perch once before at a Conservative Association dinner and briefly chatted with him again in the airport lounge, but didn't speak to him during the flight. His company had been mentioned in the paper's business section a few times. Appeared to regard the murder more with disbelief than anything.

William Jarnow: British, male, age 47. Director of an industrial chemical supply firm, returning from Thailand on business. *A bad passenger: rude, demanding, and kept others awake with constant Skype calls until asked to stop.* Claimed never to have heard of Perch; didn't read 'tabloid rubbish'. As short-tempered with the police as he had been with the cabin crew.

Charles and Evelyn Grogan: American couple, ages 68 and 66, retired. On a world tour for their second honeymoon. *A friendly old couple, but very patronising. Tried to give us tips every time we brought them something.* Claimed to have heard of Perch's newspaper, but not the man himself. Regarded the murder as little more than an inconvenience on a par with a missing bag.

Just one more to go. Meadows irritably checked her watch. 'Where is this guy?' 'You know celebrities,' Brownlow replied with a small smile. 'He's probably doing his hair.'

Another minute passed, then finally there was a knock at the door. 'Come in,' snapped Meadows.

A uniformed constable entered. 'Mr Gold, sir,' he told Brownlow, ushering in another man.

The detectives gave each other a brief knowing look. The final interviewee almost certainly *had* been spending his waiting time working on his hair; his flowing coif, its colour matching his name, certainly didn't give away that he had just got off an

overnight flight. His clothes were equally immaculate, a sharply tailored blue suit in a style aiming ahead of the fashion curve over a forcefully contrasting red silk shirt and cravat. In the drab surroundings, he stood out as vibrantly as if he had turned his own personal colour setting up to eleven to compensate.

‘Take a seat, please,’ said Brownlow, gesturing to the chair across the table. The tall, slender man nodded politely to the constable and strode across the room. He examined the chair with a disdainful eye, then took a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and made a show of dusting the seat before smoothly lowering himself onto it. ‘I’m Detective Sergeant Brownlow; this is Detective Constable Meadows.’

‘Can I take your name, please?’ said Meadows.

The new arrival gave her a look of mock surprise. ‘You mean you don’t know?’

‘For the record,’ she added with impatience.

‘Of course. Leviticus Gold. Charmed to meet you both.’ His voice was smooth and mellifluous – and familiar, its owner being near-ubiquitous in the British media.

She was unimpressed by the presence of fame, however. ‘Your real name, I mean.’

‘Leviticus *is* my real name! My parents were tediously religious. I used to hate it, but at a certain point I realised it also had its advantages. It’s certainly not a name you forget, is it?’

Meadows wrote it down. ‘Your age?’

The faux expression was now one of mild outrage. ‘I suppose I’m going to have to give my real one rather than my official one on this occasion, aren’t I? Very well. Forty... nine.’ Both numbers seemed to be forced out of him.

‘And what do you do?’

Gold gave her a perfect white smile. ‘A little of everything. At the moment, I’m working on the second volume of my autobiography, co-writing a play in which I plan to star, researching my second novel, I’ll be guest-hosting *Have I Got News For You* in a couple of weeks, doing a little voiceover cameo work for a new Pixar film... everyday stuff.’

‘Everyday stuff,’ Brownlow echoed sarcastically. He scribbled some notes of his own. ‘What was the purpose of your visit to Thailand?’

‘Oh, to wallow in wanton debauchery in the fleshpots of Bangkok, of course.’

‘I’m being serious, Mr Gold.’

‘So am I. My visit was entirely for the purposes of decadent pleasure. But you can rest assured that I did nothing illegal. Well, nothing that was brought to charge, at least. The Royal Thai Police are most understanding.’ Another smile, which faded a little under his audience’s stony stares. ‘Speaking of which, shouldn’t they be investigating this affair? As I understand the Tokyo Convention of 1963, the country of registration has jurisdiction for crimes committed aboard an aircraft in flight.’

Brownlow raised an eyebrow. ‘You know a lot about it.’

‘I know a lot about a great many things. It helps when I go on *QI*. Some people apparently find it annoying. I can’t imagine why.’ He beamed at Meadows.

‘The Thai authorities have requested that we perform the initial investigation, since the victim was a British citizen,’ she said, unamused.

‘Ah, yes.’ The smile disappeared. ‘Desmond Perch.’

‘Did you know him?’ Brownlow asked.

‘Of course I knew him. Not socially, of course, if I could help it. Loathsome man. Perfectly suited to his horrid little chip-wrapper of a newspaper.’

‘So you disliked him?’

‘Good God, yes. And the feeling was mutual. There’s nothing a reactionary hates more than a libertine – and nothing a reactionary newspaper loves more than hating a

famous and successful libertine in print. It makes good copy, stirs up their readers' blood.'

Brownlow looked back at his notes. The stewardesses had been united in their praise of Gold's charming and generous nature during the journey – but had also mentioned an event that seemed relevant to the case. 'According to the cabin crew, you and Mr Perch had an argument during the flight. Is that correct?'

Gold gave a dismissive flick of one tanned hand. 'Hardly an argument. He was doing most of the talking, I ignored him for the most part.'

'What was it about?'

'His usual pot-stirring, threatening to print some nonsense about me.'

'He threatened you?' said Meadows.

'Not in any melodramatic sense – and certainly not in any sense that would provide motivation for murder, I assure you. The only assassinations I carry out are of character.' A hint of a smile, pleased with his own *bon mot*. 'Far less messy and troublesome. No, he said his muckrakers had dredged up some old story or other. I told him to go ahead and print whatever it might be; if it were a lie I would sue as usual, and if it were true I would assuredly be proud of whatever I might have done, again as usual. Then I closed the blinds on him. He kept on about it over the partition until the girls told him to stop bothering me. That was the last thought I gave him – well, until he was found dead the next morning. Poor Mali, that must have been a terrible shock.'

'Did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary in approximately the two hours before the body was found?' Brownlow asked.

Gold shook his head. 'I didn't leave my suite in that time – when I wasn't asleep, I was pecking away at my autobiography. So I didn't see anything, and certainly didn't hear a gunshot.'

'The weapon might have been silenced,' said Meadows.

'The correct term is "suppressed", and I know what a suppressed gun sounds like. They're still surprisingly loud. So again my answer is no, I didn't hear a gunshot. Just the usual sounds you hear on an aircraft.'

She frowned at him, but Brownlow spoke before she could reply. 'You're familiar with firearms?'

'I wouldn't call myself an expert, but I've used them,' replied Gold. 'I once visited a place in Nevada calling itself a "combat ranch" for one of my television shows. You pay them a few hundred dollars for the ammunition, and they let you blast away with anything in their arsenal. It's rather exhilarating, actually. And if you go to Russia and talk to the right people, you can shoot anything you want. I even got to blow up an old jeep with a rocket launcher. That wasn't for television, though. My hosts for the day were, shall we say, the kind of men who prefer to remain off-camera.'

Brownlow made another note. 'Right. Is there anything else you remember that might be helpful to us?'

'I'm afraid not. It's all fascinating, though. An actual locked-room mystery! Well, locked-fuselage, but close enough. Very Agatha Christie. You know, one of her novels was about a murder on a plane in flight. *Death In The Clouds*; 1935, I believe. Although her aircraft was rather smaller than an A380. Poirot didn't have over five hundred suspects to consider.'

'Actually, nor do we,' said Meadows. During the course of the interviews, the detectives had received a call from Scotland Yard; Meadows' initial assessment had been confirmed. 'Our investigation is concentrating on the first class cabin. We know

from the plane's CCTV footage that nobody entered or left it between the times Perch was last seen and his body was discovered.'

She had intended it to sound somewhat threatening, but Gold's response was one almost of enthusiasm. 'Really? Now that *is* exciting! That means I've actually spoken with the killer!'

Brownlow raised his eyebrows. 'What do you mean? Did you talk to everyone in first class?'

'Oh, yes, of course – either in the airport lounge, or during the flight when I happened to encounter them. I'm a naturally gregarious sort. But yes, I spoke to everyone at some point, even if only as an excuse to avoid dealing with Desmond Perch. I certainly wouldn't have given that obnoxious man in the cheap suit the time of day otherwise.'

'Which man?'

'He was across the aisle from me.' Gold's brow furrowed for a moment. 'What was his name... Jarrow? No, Jarnow.' Brownlow nodded. 'Horribly rude to the cabin staff, and wouldn't shut up with his tedious business calls throughout the entire flight. I now know far more about transporting liquefied gases than I ever thought possible.'

'Did anyone else talk to Mr Perch?'

'That old American couple, the Grogans, spoke to him, but then they insisted on foisting their life story on everyone they met. And one of the other British passengers had a chat with him in the lounge – Lewis, Peter Lewis.'

'You've got a good memory for names,' said Meadows.

'Remembering who you're talking to is the key to maintaining a good impression, Detective Constable Meadows,' Gold said with a grin. 'But if anyone else spoke to Perch, I didn't see them.'

Brownlow had another question. 'Did you notice anyone displaying any... unusual behaviour?'

'By which I'm sure you mean "suspicious" behaviour, but no. That rather attractive Thai lad with the moustache, Som, seemed very nervous, but I put that down to a simple fear of flying. He'd calmed down later on. Laura Frobisher was a bit on edge too, but a few glasses of 1996 Dom Pérignon sorted that out. Jarnow was in a bad mood, but that seems to be his natural state.' Gold leaned back thoughtfully. 'Remarkable. One of those people is a murderer. I wonder if I can work out which one?'

'You can leave that to the police, Mr Gold,' said Meadows with a scathing undertone. 'I'm sure this will all just make an amusing anecdote for your next autobiography, but to us it's a very serious business.'

Gold bristled. 'I'm sure it is, Detective Constable. But you don't appear to be making much progress, do you? You have a limited number of suspects in a confined area, but you've obviously found nothing incriminating like blood spatter or gunpowder residue,' he held up his hands, which had been tested with a swab before the passengers had been allowed to leave the plane, 'otherwise you wouldn't still be talking to me, and you haven't found the gun either.'

'You seem very sure of that,' said Brownlow, letting the implication hang in the air.

Now it was Gold's turn to sound caustic. 'One doesn't need to be a police detective to make deductions from things you can see from the waiting room's window. You still had a group of men in white coats going through the passengers' luggage when I was brought to you, and more of them bringing binbags full of evidence off the plane. If someone had found the gun, they would have burst in here to tell you by now.'

‘Well, if you solve the mystery between glasses of sherry at your gentlemen’s club, be sure to let us know,’ said Meadows, her tone now anything but under. ‘Us poor dumb coppers, we need all the help we can get.’

Gold looked appalled. ‘Sherry? Good God, no. But I’ll tell you what – I think I *will* give you my help. I know the crime scene, and I know the suspects. It shouldn’t be too difficult to work out who killed Desmond Perch. I’m sure being a detective can’t be all that hard. After all, you both seem to have made a successful career of it.’

Brownlow and Meadows exchanged looks. ‘I think we’ve just been insulted, sir,’ said the latter.

‘I’m sure of it,’ Brownlow replied amiably.

‘Oh, good – so you *can* spot clues,’ said Gold, giving them another wide smile. ‘There’s hope yet. Now, is there anything else?’

‘I think we’ve got what we need – for the moment. We may contact you again with further questions in due course.’ Brownlow slid a business card across the table. ‘If you remember anything that maybe be of help with the case, call us.’

Gold gave the card a brief glance before slipping it into his pocket. ‘I’ll be sure to do that. May I go?’

‘You may.’ Brownlow nodded towards the door.

‘Thank you.’ Gold stood, tugging down his jacket before walking away. ‘Best of luck with the case.’

Meadows waited until he had left the room before speaking. ‘My God. I thought he was annoying just on TV. But now I’ve met him in real life...’

‘You don’t like him on TV?’ said Brownlow, stretching. ‘I thought he was pretty funny when he was on *Top Gear*.’

‘He’s smug, arrogant, a know-it-all toff—’

‘Is he a toff? I know he sounds posh, but I thought he came from Liverpool or somewhere.’

‘I wouldn’t know. But what did you make of him? From our point of view, I mean, not as a celebrity. Think he’s our man?’

Brownlow looked back at his notes. ‘He had the motive; he openly admitted to hating Perch, and to having had run-ins with him in the past, one right there on the plane. Means; he admitted having experience with guns. Opportunity... who knows? The stewardesses said they weren’t always watching the aisles at that time of night, so he might have had the chance to sneak around the cabin without anyone seeing.’

‘And shoot Perch in the chest without anyone hearing?’ Meadows was unconvinced. ‘Much as I don’t want to give him any credit, he was right about silenced – I mean, suppressed guns. They don’t go *ptchuf!* like in films. They’re still noisy, it’s just a different kind of noise. Somebody would have heard it.’

‘Yeah, I know. And where *is* the gun? How did the killer get it through the security at Bangkok, and how did they get rid of it without leaving first class? ERU must have stripped the cabin to the bones by now, and we still haven’t heard anything.’ He blew air out through his nostrils. ‘Maybe it really is an Agatha Christie story, like Gold said. *Murder On The Orient Express*.’

‘Or Excess.’

‘That was my joke. But all the suspects were in it together.’

Meadows made a face. ‘Thanks for giving the twist away, sir. I hadn’t seen it.’

‘Seriously? I thought everyone knew that. Like *The Mousetrap*. The killer is—’

She threw up her hands. ‘I was joking! Of course I’ve seen *Murder On The Orient Express*. I haven’t seen *The Mousetrap*, though.’

‘Saw it when I was a kid.’

‘Well, it *has* been running a very long time, sir.’

He shot her a thin smile. ‘Funny, Meadows. But in this case, maybe everybody in first class took one little piece of the gun and swallowed ’em.’

‘You really think so?’

‘Nope.’ He drummed his fingers on the table, then stood. ‘Come on. Let’s go and have another look at the crime scene. There must be *something* we’ve missed.’

Gold shook his head with amused dismay. ‘Sherry! Really.’

The constable led him through the terminal to the room where the first class luggage was being searched. The cases from the hold had by now been retrieved and matched to their owners’ carry-on baggage. The first passengers were summoned to open them, then had to stand back and watch as gloved officers examined every item within.

Gold looked on with interest. Even though all luggage going onto an airliner was x-rayed as a matter of course, most people still had an exaggerated expectation of privacy regarding its contents, and having their most personal possessions exposed to official – and public – scrutiny could be a humiliating experience. There was nothing in his own luggage that he was embarrassed about, even though a few items might raise the eyebrows of the more prudish – such as Desmond Perch, had he still been alive – but would any of his fellow travellers have their peccadilloes brought to light?

Ratanakul, the Thai businessman, had just unlocked his cases, and watched with evident annoyance as an officer trawled through what was inside. Neatly-packed clothes were tugged out and shaken, toiletries opened, individual items scrutinised. Irritation changed to discomfort when the officer found an opaque plastic bag. He unwrapped it, finding several thick bundles of high-denomination banknotes, a mixture of sterling and euros, inside. ‘Make sure you declare these at customs, sir,’ said the policeman, deadpan. ‘I’ll let them know to expect you.’

Gold smiled slightly. European Union nations had a 10,000 euro limit on the amount of cash that could be brought into the country undeclared, and the Thai was clearly well over it. The search concluded, Ratanakul angrily stuffed everything back into his cases and stormed away, to be replaced by the Grogans.

On the next desk, Jarnow was called to open his scuffed cases. His belongings were, to Gold’s eye, as cheap as his crumpled off-the-peg suit, but that didn’t stop the large man from complaining loudly as they were removed. ‘Hey! Careful with that. You’re supposed to be searching them, not destroying them.’ The officer treated him to a dismissive stare before continuing exactly as she had been. No gun was found, nor anything else suspicious. Muttering vague threats of legal action, Jarnow departed, Niratpattanasai taking his place.

Gold cast an approving eye over the long-haired man’s slim body, then heard his own name being called. The Grogans’ luggage had turned up nothing incriminating. ‘Hell of a thing,’ said the male half of the couple as Gold approached the desk. ‘A man murdered, ten feet from us. I don’t think we’ll be flying this airline again, huh?’

‘I know, I know,’ said his wife as she finished repacking her possessions.

‘Someone shoots him, and nobody hears nothing! How does that work?’

‘Ain’t no gun in the world that quiet,’ he agreed. ‘Know that for a fact. What do you think, Levy?’

‘It’s certainly a mystery to the police,’ Gold replied. ‘I hope it hasn’t ruined your holiday.’

‘Oh, it’d take more than a dead body to do that,’ said Evelyn. ‘Anyhoo, it’s been lovely to meet you, Levy – even if the flight was a little spoiled! We’ll be in England for five days. You said you were on TV, so will we see you on it while we’re here?’

‘Almost certainly,’ Gold said, beaming. ‘Or you could follow me on Twitter.’

‘Ah, we leave the Twitters to our grandkids,’ Charles said. ‘But we’ll watch out for you anyway. Nice to meet you.’

‘You too.’ He waved as the elderly couple walked away, then turned to the officer. ‘So, my turn to have my unmentionables rummaged through, then?’

The man struggled to conceal a smile. Pleased at having found a fan in the police, Gold grinned, then looked across at Niratpattanasai. The Thai was travelling light, with only one medium-sized suitcase accompanying his large carry-on bag. He still appeared in a state of mild shock about what had happened. ‘Hello, Som,’ said Gold. ‘Are you feeling all right?’

Niratpattanasai looked at him and blinked distractedly. ‘Hmm? Oh, yes, Mr Gold. Very well, thank you.’

‘Please! Call me Levy. Like the place you take the Chevy.’

‘The... Chevy?’

‘It’s a song – never mind. I can tell you all about it over a drink, if you’d like. Oh, speaking of drinks...’ The officer had just taken a long white box from Niratpattanasai’s carry-on bag, which he opened to reveal a black champagne bottle swaddled in tissue paper. He lifted the bottle out to make sure nothing else was hidden in the packaging, the wrapping sticking to it. ‘A ’96 Oenotheque! Good choice. I would say surely you must have had enough of that on the plane, but when it comes to vintage Dom I don’t believe there *is* such a thing as too much.’

‘It is for a... friend.’

‘You have a very lucky friend, Som.’ He was about to say more when the rustle of strained material from his own suitcase caught his attention. ‘Do please be careful with that,’ he told the officer. ‘It’s silk. I wouldn’t want to go on Graham Norton’s show with my chest hair poking out of a torn seam, would I?’

The man tried to hold in another smile. By the time Gold looked back at his fellow passenger the search of the Thai’s luggage was almost complete, the female officer returning a lilac item of clothing to the carry-on bag with a questioning expression. ‘For my friend,’ said Niratpattanasai, seeming faintly embarrassed.

‘So, about that drink,’ Gold said. ‘Perhaps we could meet at your hotel, and progress from there?’

‘I am not staying at a hotel,’ said Niratpattanasai with a shake of his head. ‘I am staying at an apartment in Woodside Park.’ There was a questioning uplift at the end of his words, suggesting that he was not familiar with the place.

‘With your friend? I see. Will you be spending your whole trip with her?’

He seemed momentarily puzzled by the question before answering. ‘Oh... yes, I will.’

‘Ah, young love,’ said Gold. ‘But should you change your mind, she’s more than welcome to come too.’

Niratpattanasai blushed. ‘Thank you, but we will be, ah... busy.’

Gold winked. ‘I’m so glad to hear it.’

‘It was very nice to meet you, though. Have a good day, Levy.’ He closed his luggage and headed away, Lewis being called up in his place. Gold glanced back to admire the sway of the young man’s hips as he walked away.

The check of the celebrity’s own belongings took somewhat longer, Gold having brought three Louis Vuitton suitcases of clothing as well as a carry-on bag. He tutted

as they were repacked with rather less care than they had originally been. While a couple of sexually suggestive souvenirs had raised the officer's eyebrows, nothing resembling a gun was found. 'Okay, Mr Gold, you're clear.'

'Words that are always welcome,' he replied, shutting the cases. 'I don't suppose there's a trolley around, is there?'

'Afraid not, sir. I think there are some in the corridor outside, though.'

'Well, I suppose I can carry my own luggage for fifty feet, if I must...' A final smile, then he gathered up his suitcases and headed for the door.

There were no trolleys near the exit, but he did spot a few some way down the terminal's wide corridor. However, his gaze was quickly distracted by the distinctively coloured uniforms of two of the flight attendants closer by. 'Ah, Mali,' he said, joining them. 'And Tola, how are you all?'

Mali was pleased to see him again, but looked down at his luggage with concern. 'Very well, thank you – but Mr Gold, you shouldn't carry all that! Please, let me help.'

'Nonsense! I wouldn't dream of it. We're off the plane, so you no longer have to wait on me. In fact,' his bright smile returned at full intensity, 'perhaps you'd like to join me for a drink?'

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Brownlow shook his head disconsolately as he flipped back through the coroner's report, hoping that some clue he had missed would jump out at him. 'I just don't get it. None of this makes any sense. We've got a more accurate time of death, but the CCTV shows that nobody left the first class cabin.' He glanced at his computer. A window showed the footage from the camera covering the exterior doors. The image was distorted, taken with a fisheye lens to cover the whole of the passage traversing the fuselage, and most of the galley was out of sight behind a partition wall, but it had still provided him with a clear enough view to see that the only people moving around the cabin at the approximate time of Perch's murder had been the stewardesses – and none had gone beyond the service section. 'So the gun has to be in there – but there's no sign of it.'

Meadows was already on her second coffee of the morning. 'The preliminary ballistics report doesn't make things any clearer, either,' she said, holding up several pages of printouts.

'I know. Perch died from a .22 hollowpoint bullet fired into his heart at close range, but... well, you read it. I'm starting to think the question we should be asking isn't "where's the gun?" but "*was* there a gun?" Nothing fits a normal gunshot wound. And then there's this.' He indicated a plastic evidence bag on the desk, a small object found in the editor's suite inside it. 'I'm pretty sure the tests'll confirm the blood traces on it are Perch's, and the hole in the top looks the right width to fit a .22 bullet... but what is it?'

'Maybe it's how the killer got the bullet through security,' suggested Meadows, though with little conviction. 'A way to hide it from x-rays?'

He shook his head. 'The lab says it's some sort of plastic. It's strong, but the airport scanners would still be able to see if there was anything metal inside it.' He picked up the bag, staring at the item within. It was a cylinder of a hard, pale grey material around two inches long, the bloodied end somewhat bulbous. 'And look at it. It's exactly the kind of thing any half-awake security guard should instantly spot on

the scan and say “Excuse me, sir or madam, can you explain what this is?” Because, really, what *is* it?”

‘Well, it was a late-night flight. Maybe the airport staff *weren’t* awake.’

‘Maybe.’ Brownlow regarded the mysterious object for a long moment before returning the bag to the desk. ‘But I think we’ll be burning the midnight oil on this. The press is all over it, of course – especially Perch’s paper.’

‘Yeah, I saw the headlines on the way in this morning. And they’re loving the fact that Leviticus Gold was on the plane too.’

‘I just hope nobody starts implying that he was the killer. If we *do* end up nicking him for it, he’s halfway to winning a mistrial on the grounds that the press has biased every potential juror in the country against him...’ He broke off as his mobile phone rang. ‘Brownlow.’

‘Ah, good morning, Detective Sergeant,’ said a chirpy voice. ‘Leviticus Gold here.’

‘Speak of the devil,’ Brownlow muttered, getting a quizzical look from his subordinate.

‘Were you just talking about me?’ said Gold. ‘Oh, good. I’m sure you know the Oscar Wilde quote on that subject.’

‘What can I do for you, Mr Gold?’ said Brownlow, becoming impatient. ‘Have you remembered something that might help us with the case?’

‘Oh, much more than that. I’ve solved it for you.’ As Brownlow sat in momentary dumbfounded silence, he went on: ‘If you’d care to pop round to my flat, I’ll tell you how Desmond Perch was killed – and by whom.’

‘I can’t believe we’re actually going to talk to him,’ said Meadows with irritation as she got out of the car. ‘How do we know this isn’t some publicity stunt?’

‘He’s already in the papers often enough. I’m not sure how he could get any more publicity short of actually confessing to the murder,’ Brownlow pointed out. He looked up at the elegant Edwardian building outside which they had parked. ‘It’s a lot nicer round here than Ilford, I’ll give you that. Wonder how much it costs to live in a place like this?’

‘Mayfair? Way too much. I mean, it costs nearly five quid just to park in the street for an hour.’

‘Speaking of which, Meadows, it’s your turn to pay.’

‘Aw, sir!’

Brownlow smirked, then went to the building’s entrance as Meadows reluctantly took out her phone to pay the parking fee. He pushed one of the buttons on the entryphone. A short wait, then a woman’s strongly accented voice hesitantly said, ‘Hello?’

‘Is that Mr Gold’s flat?’

‘Ah... yes?’

‘We’re from the Metropolitan Police. Mr Gold asked us to come. Is he there?’

A pause, then: ‘Yes, he says come up.’

‘Thank you.’

Meadows joined him as the door buzzer rasped to admit them. ‘Sounds like he’s got company.’

‘Doesn’t surprise me. Like I said, he’s always in the papers.’

They entered and took a lift up to the fifth floor. Brownlow knocked at the door of flat 10. A young woman opened it. Mutual recognition; he with surprise, she with a

mixture of discomfort and embarrassment. Gold's guest was one of the Air Thailand cabin crew. 'Oh! Sergeant Brownlow,' she said. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning, Miss... Kanthachai, isn't it?' he replied.

'Yes, yes. Please come in.'

Mali showed the two detectives into the flat, leading them down a long hall into a large lounge. Tall windows overlooked a tree-lined mews, other expensive apartment buildings across it. A grand piano occupied one corner; a bar stocked with a large and varied selection of drinks another. The furniture was minimalist in style, maximalist in price.

Brownlow's gaze immediately went to the walls, which were covered with framed pictures of their host. It took him only a moment to realise that they were arranged chronologically. By one door was a picture of a teenaged Leviticus Gold against a mountainous backdrop, supporting a pair of skis with one arm while holding up a trophy in his other hand. Beside it was a slightly older Gold in a seat of an eight-man rowing boat, looking extremely pleased with himself; then a costumed and crowned Gold on stage holding up a skull as Hamlet; a blown-up newspaper cutting which Brownlow assumed was a glowing review of the same performance.

He turned, skipping forward through the man's life. Graduating with a backdrop of Oxbridge spires; standing with a group of then-young actors and comedians, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie amongst them; wearing helmet and goggles, about to parachute from a plane; two gold records flanking a blow-up of an album cover with vivid 1990s typography. Brownlow remembered that his daughter had owned it – and played it to death – about twenty years earlier. He imagined she would be more impressed than Meadows that he had met Leviticus Gold, even now.

A small gap followed, as if a picture had been removed, then came another blow-up, this of a novel's jacket with Gold's name far larger than the title; a weary but triumphant Gold on a hilltop overlooking an endless swathe of jungle; shaking hands with three different prime ministers; on the set of a chat show, beaming at the camera alongside Jonathan Ross and Tom Cruise...

Meadows snorted sarcastically. 'He certainly likes looking at himself, doesn't he?' They faced the most recent picture, a dinner-jacketed Gold sharing a smile with the Duchess of Cambridge. Past that final photo, the walls were empty. 'Wonder why they stop halfway around the room?'

'That, Detective Constable Meadows, is because the rest of the space is for things I haven't achieved yet,' said a familiar voice from behind them.

Brownlow and Meadows turned to see Gold enter the lounge. He wore a long dressing gown of purple silk brocade embroidered in golden thread, his shoulder-length hair somewhat unkempt compared to the day before. 'Morning, Mr Gold,' said Brownlow. 'It looks like you've already achieved plenty.'

'*Si non desint, quid vivat?* Or something along those lines; my Latin is rather rusty. I can remember up to *amamus, amatis, amant*, but beyond that...' He waved a hand towards the blank walls. 'But I hope to fill all that space before I depart this earth.'

'And what if you run out of room before then?'

'Well, then I'll just have to buy a bigger home! Anyway, so glad you could come. I thought my call might pique your interest.'

'If you've got information that affects the case, you should have told us immediately over the phone,' said Meadows sternly. 'Wasting police time, especially on a murder enquiry, is—'

Brownlow interrupted her in a more amiable, but still firm, tone. 'If you'd lived any further than ten minutes from Scotland Yard, I would have asked you to come in

and—’ He broke off as someone else came through the door by which Gold had entered – Tola Bamrung, another of the A380’s cabin crew. She gave the two police officers a sheepish look, prompting them to exchange glances of their own.

‘We should probably go,’ said Mali as Tola crossed the room to join her. Both young women were clearly awkward about being together in the light of day; whatever their plans for the previous night, they had obviously never expected to end up in a *ménage à trois* with an older man. ‘If that is all right with you, Mr Brownlow?’

‘Yes, that’s fine,’ said Brownlow. He tried to keep his expression neutral, caught between admiration and disapproval of Gold’s carnal excesses. ‘Just remember that we may still need to talk to you.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Both women collected their belongings. ‘Thank you for last night, Levy. It was...’ A coy, blushing smile, which she shared with Tola. ‘It was very exciting.’ Her companion nodded in agreement.

Gold beamed. ‘Thank you. I thoroughly enjoyed the evening too. You’re both absolutely wonderful.’ He kissed them both on the cheek. ‘Call me any time.’

The pair kissed him back, then he showed them out. ‘Lovely girls, both of them,’ he said as he returned to the lounge.

Meadows made little attempt to disguise that, unlike her superior, there was no admiration in her feelings. ‘Okay, now that you’ve got that little display out of the way, maybe you can tell us what you know about the murder of Desmond Perch?’

‘Oh, I don’t know for sure; it’s merely a supposition. Well, more than that, I suppose. Call it a deduction.’

Brownlow frowned. ‘But you don’t have any new evidence to give to us?’

‘Nothing I would call hard facts, I’m afraid. Can I get you something? Tea, coffee? Something stronger?’

‘No,’ snapped Meadows, anger rising. ‘Sir, he’s wasting our time – this is all just some ego trip for him, another picture for his wall. We should go – maybe after issuing him with a caution for messing us about.’

‘Before you fly off the handle, Detective Constable,’ said Gold, a new forcefulness entering his voice, ‘at least hear me out. Now,’ he indicated a glass-topped coffee table, on which were spread out the morning’s newspapers, ‘Perch’s murder obviously topped today’s headlines.’

‘You went out to get the papers dressed like *that*?’

Gold sniffed. ‘I have them all delivered every day. I need to know what’s being said about me, after all. Now, while I do feature quite prominently in some of the stories, at this stage none of them contain much detail beyond the basic facts that the police have issued via press statement. Therefore you, as investigating officers, have access to vastly more forensic information than any ordinary member of the public – or even a well-connected celebrity.’ A far from modest smile. ‘Correct?’

‘I’d say so,’ Brownlow agreed.

‘Now, at risk of sounding like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot—’

‘Or Jason King,’ Meadows muttered, with a pointed nod towards his ostentatious dressing gown.

Gold was not amused. ‘Very droll. But I’ve made four deductions about the murder that couldn’t possibly be known to anyone outside the police. If they’re correct, will you hear me out?’

Meadows’ only response was an impatient exhalation, but Brownlow nodded. ‘If you make it quick.’

‘Then I’ll be brief. Do take a seat.’

The two officers sat on a leather sofa. Gold remained standing, staring out of a window as if gathering his thoughts before turning on his heel to face them. 'Deduction number one,' he began, rattling the words out like machine-gun fire, 'there were no powder burns on the victim. Deduction number two: the bullet had no rifling marks or other features that could allow it to be matched to a particular weapon. Deduction number three: there were flakes or some other traces of a substance like acrylic or epoxy on the victim's clothing. And deduction number four: there was an unusual circular bruise around the entry wound. Now,' he concluded, taking in his guests' growing expressions of surprise, 'am I warm?'

'What brought you to those conclusions?' Brownlow said warily.

'Deduction, as I said. But would you like to hear more?'

Another exchange of glances. Brownlow nodded, with some reluctance. 'Yes.'

'Then I'll take that as a sign that I was correct.' He grinned, delight making his face seem almost boyish for a moment. 'My first deduction, the lack of powder burns – that was obvious. Nobody heard a gunshot, and as Mr Grogan remarked to me, no gun can be made completely silent. Since none of the passengers or crew were found to have any gunpowder residue upon them – if anyone did, they would have been arrested by now and you wouldn't be here – and no gun was found, then the only possible conclusion is that the bullet which killed Perch didn't *come* from a gun.'

Meadows gave him a humourless grin. 'So, are you saying the murderer killed Perch by pushing a bullet into him really hard?'

Gold gave her an almost pitying look. 'Considering your relative ages, I would have expected Detective Sergeant Brownlow to be the cynical one. I'll explain how the bullet was fired in a moment. But the fact that there was no gun led to my second deduction, that the bullet had no rifling marks. Am I correct so far?'

'Obviously I can't comment on an ongoing investigation,' said Brownlow in a measured tone, 'but... I'd certainly like to hear more.'

'Splendid! Then you shall.' Gold paced across the room as he continued, going to the window and gazing out at the sky before turning back to the two police officers. 'Once I realised that the bullet couldn't possibly have been fired from a gun, that made me wonder: what *could* have fired it? Bearing in mind that it had to be something that could have been taken through airport security as carry-on luggage without arousing suspicion. So it had to be either innocuous or disguised, even under an x-ray. Also, it couldn't use gunpowder or some other explosive to propel the bullet – too noisy. Which leaves either a physical means, like a spring, or some sort of compressed gas.'

Brownlow was forced to admit that he had a point. 'Neither of those would be quiet, though. The other people in the cabin would still hear it being fired.'

'They might,' agreed Gold. 'But they wouldn't think anything of it... if it were a sound they had already heard before!' On their confusion, he went on: 'Put yourself aboard that plane—'

'I wish I got paid that much.'

'Then you're in the wrong line of work, I'm afraid. But imagine yourself in the first class cabin. You have your own personal suite, with a number of lovely young flight attendants at your beck and call. The food and drink is all of the highest quality and has already been paid for in the price of your ticket, so is effectively free. Now, what is the first thing you're offered once you're settled in your suite?'

'A drink,' said Meadows after a moment.

'Precisely! What drink? Remember, you're in first class.'

'Champagne?'

Gold jabbed at the air with his index finger. ‘Exactly! Champagne. Every passenger in first class is plied with as much champagne as they can drink, within reason – in the case of this particular Air Thailand flight, 1996 Dom Pérignon. An excellent vintage, although at over two hundred and fifty pounds a bottle you’d certainly hope so.’

Meadows looked appalled. ‘Two hundred and fifty quid a bottle?’

‘Oh, that’s nothing. I have several vintages that cost more than that in my stock. And you could spend over six *thousand* pounds on some Doms – though admittedly the bottles are coated in white gold. Which is one way to encourage recycling.’

Brownlow had already followed Gold’s line of reasoning to its conclusion, and was distinctly dubious about where it led. ‘So you’re saying that the murder weapon... was a champagne bottle?’

Gold seemed mildly put out, yet also pleased, that the detective had reached the answer so quickly. ‘I am indeed. If there’s one loud and sudden sound that you can expect to pass completely unnoticed in the first-class cabin of an airliner, it’s the pop of a champagne cork. Twelve people, on a twelve-hour flight, will get through a lot of bubbly.’

‘We noticed,’ said Meadows, remembering the line of empty bottles. ‘But – are you seriously suggesting that Perch was killed by a champagne cork with a bullet in it? That’s ridiculous!’

Gold merely shrugged and crossed the room to the bar, opening a fridge behind it and taking out a bottle of champagne. He returned to the sofa and stood facing his guests as he peeled away the foil. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not vintage. I reserve those for special occasions.’ He began to unfasten the wire cage containing the cork.

‘Bit early for that, isn’t it?’ Brownlow said.

‘It’s never too early for champagne. I’d offer you some, but since you’re both on duty *and* have the unmistakable disdainful expression of Puritans I know you wouldn’t accept.’ He dropped the cage onto the coffee table with a clink and placed one thumb behind the head of the cork... then carefully tipped the bottle downwards, pointing it at Meadows.

She shifted uncomfortably. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Proving a point.’ His knuckle whitened as he applied more pressure.

‘Well, point it somewhere else!’

‘Why? It can’t possibly kill you; you said so yourself.’

‘Maybe not, but it’ll still hurt!’

Gold smiled. ‘Precisely. It will hurt.’ To her relief, he turned away and put down the bottle. ‘Now, the pressure inside a champagne bottle is around ninety pounds per square inch, or roughly three atmospheres. Which, as you say, is more than enough to hurt if the cork hits you. So what would happen if you increased that pressure?’

‘It’d hurt more?’ suggested Brownlow, a little facetiously.

‘Actually, no,’ said Gold, shaking his head. ‘The bottle would explode, because it’s not designed to withstand much more than it needs to. Which brings me on to my third deduction.’

‘The acrylic flakes?’

‘Ah, so it *was* acrylic! I thought that seemed more likely.’

Brownlow was irked that Gold had successfully pried information about the case out of him, but Meadows had an objection of her own. ‘So when exactly did you find the time to work all this out?’ A glance towards the hall after the departed flight attendants. ‘It looked like you’d been busy with something else last night.’

‘Oh, the girls were exhausted and fell asleep quite early – midnight or so. That gave me plenty of time to mull matters over. I’m a light sleeper, and I’m never far from a laptop or iPad. I did some research on ways that a bottle might be strengthened.’

‘And what did you find?’ asked Brownlow.

‘That there are numerous resins which could be poured into an empty bottle in liquid form and allowed to set, hugely increasing the bottle’s overall strength. A centrifuge could have been used to ensure an even coating, I suppose. I don’t know for sure,’ he added airily. ‘The specifics are for you to find out.’

‘I’m glad you’re leaving us something to do,’ Meadows remarked acidly.

‘Well, the police are funded by the taxpayer, and as a high-rate taxpayer I want to get my money’s-worth. Anyway, the bottle could certainly be strengthened enough to contain the sort of pressure that could fire a projectile with potentially lethal force. Then it would just be a matter of putting in a cork in the bottle.’

‘A cork would never hold that sort of pressure,’ she objected.

A patronising look. ‘This cork wouldn’t be made of wood, Detective Constable. No, it would have to be some sort of hard rubber.’

‘Or plastic,’ said Brownlow thoughtfully.

Gold raised an eyebrow. ‘Plastic? I should have thought of that. But then, I’m not an engineer. But whatever it’s made of, it’s not just a cork – it’s a sabot.’ He caught a brief flash of puzzlement on Meadows’ face. ‘Oh, come now, Detective Constable. Surely you know what a sabot is.’

‘Of course,’ she said, unconvincingly.

‘A sabot,’ said Brownlow, covering for her, ‘is something that you put around a bullet to make sure it’s properly sealed in the gun barrel. We’re not entirely uneducated at the Met.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it,’ Gold proclaimed with a grin. ‘But the murderer put the cork in the bottle... and then put the bullet in the cork. That’s how it got through airport security undetected.’ He picked up the discarded wire cage and showed it to them. The domed cap that had covered the top of the cork was still inside. ‘A small-calibre bullet is only about half an inch long, if that – the cartridge is most of the length of the round. Put a metal cap over it, probably made of lead so the densities are the same on the x-ray, and all the scanner operator at the airport will see is what they would expect to see – a perfectly ordinary champagne bottle.’

‘But one that’s now a weapon.’

‘Exactly.’ He picked up the bottle again and pointed it at Brownlow, stepping closer. ‘So the killer brings it to Perch’s suite, takes off the cage, pushes the cork – and *pop!* The sabot shoots out, tearing away flakes of the acrylic lining as it goes. Its broad end bounces off Perch’s chest, but the bullet inside it has sufficient momentum to keep going and penetrate his body. Hence my fourth deduction, the bruise around the entry wound. It’s the perfect murder. A man is shot dead while surrounded by people... but all anyone hears is something they’ve heard many times during the flight. The pop of a champagne cork.’

Brownlow was silent for a long moment. Then he took out his phone. ‘Who are you calling?’ Meadows asked.

‘The lab.’ He selected a number from the contacts list. ‘Paul? John Brownlow. Have you still got all the rubbish that was taken out of the first class cabin on the Perch murder case? Okay, great. Listen, I need you to check the champagne bottles – yeah, the black ones. Shine a light inside, and look if there’s something unusual about one of them. No, you’ll know if you see it.’

Meadows eyed him sceptically. ‘You actually believe all this?’

‘Can’t hurt to check.’ Before long, Brownlow received an answer. ‘Paul, hi. Yeah?’ His eyebrows rose. ‘Okay, check that it matches the flakes found on the victim. And give the bottle a complete workover – fingerprints, DNA, everything. I think we’ve found our murder weapon.’ He ended the call.

Gold’s face was a portrait of smug pride. ‘Do I take it that my theory is correct?’

‘It... looks that way,’ Brownlow was forced to admit. Meadows was dismayed. ‘Impossible as it sounds. So if we really have found the murder weapon, now we need to find the murderer.’

Meadows regarded Gold icily. ‘And I suppose you’ve worked out who that is too.’

‘Of course,’ he replied. ‘I never do things by half-measures. I can’t give you a motive, since I don’t know the connection between Perch and the killer and what inspired the latter to such an act – although I’d imagine that his paper’s editorial policy of bilious hatred played a part. But based on my observations of everyone in first class, passengers and crew alike, there’s only one suspect.’

Despite himself, Brownlow leaned forward expectantly. ‘And that is?’

Gold smiled. ‘I’ll give you the rest of my deductions first.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Meadows. ‘Another excuse for you to enjoy the sound of your own voice.’

He recoiled in mock offence. ‘I’m hurt! No, but surely you know the rules of the detective story: the murderer’s name is only revealed *after* the explanation has been given.’

‘This isn’t a story,’ snapped Brownlow. ‘This is a murder investigation, and if you’ve got information that can help us find the killer you need to give it to us.’

Gold’s expression became more serious. ‘Very well. Firstly, Detective Constable Meadows said that the plane’s CCTV system showed that nobody left the first class section, and that the only people seen moving around at the time of the murder were the cabin crew. But the champagne bottle was found in the galley area, correct?’

Brownlow nodded. ‘Therefore, the person who took the bottle into the galley is the murderer.’

Brownlow realised what that meant. ‘One of the stewardesses.’

Meadows took out her phone. ‘I’ll have them brought in.’

Gold raised a hand. ‘Don’t be so hasty,’ he said, to the detectives’ surprise. ‘When you watch the video, I’m sure you’ll see someone dressed as a stewardess take a bottle into the galley – and bring another one out, for reasons I’ll explain in a moment. But just because they’re dressed like a stewardess doesn’t mean they *are* a stewardess.’

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Brownlow.

‘Remember your Christie. In *Death In The Clouds*, the killer disguised himself as a steward. Why? Because nobody pays any attention to the cabin crew on an aircraft. The passengers see the uniform, not the person wearing it. And because of that, the killer had the perfect disguise. They could bring the fake champagne bottle on board in their luggage, change into an Air Thailand uniform in the privacy of their suite, then – at a time in the flight when the passengers would most likely be asleep and the cabin crew inattentive – quickly nip out and enter Perch’s suite.’

‘It was locked,’ Meadows pointed out.

‘If the killer could obtain a uniform, it wouldn’t be hard for them also to obtain a master key, or even make one. The locks are very simple; they’re designed to be opened from outside for security reasons, after all. So the killer goes into the suite. Perch may be awake, or not, it doesn’t matter. If he opens his eyes, he sees a

stewardess – and no racism intended, but the girls on the flight did all look quite similar at first glance. The airline has strict rules regarding hair length and style, makeup and so on.’

Brownlow saw where he was going. ‘And a stewardess would be the only person who could come into his suite unannounced without him throwing a fit and drawing attention.’

Gold nodded. ‘The killer only needed to keep him off-guard for a few seconds.’ He picked up the bottle again and advanced on Brownlow, slowly tilting it down until the cork was just a few inches from the policeman’s chest. ‘Just long enough to go... *pop!*’

‘Shot through the heart,’ said Brownlow.

‘But who’s to blame?’ added Meadows. All three shared a small smile.

‘I’m coming to that,’ said Gold, stepping back. ‘But having killed Perch, the killer leaves his suite, uses a master key to lock the door, then takes the empty bottle to the galley to conceal it in plain sight – amongst all the other empties. If any of the passengers glimpsed the killer passing, the assumption would be that it was one of the flight attendants. They’d have to be careful not to be seen by the cabin crew, but they obviously succeeded. Then, they take a real 1996 Oenothèque from the fridge, so that when the bottles are counted as part of the inevitable investigation the numbers match the manifest. After that, the killer goes back to their suite, puts the replacement bottle in their luggage, then changes clothes again and removes their makeup. Mission accomplished.’

‘Interesting theory,’ said Meadows after a moment. ‘Just one problem with it.’

‘Which is?’

‘There were only two women in first class – and they were both white, and over fifty. Even if he’d just woken up, Perch would have realised something was wrong right away. From what I’ve read about him, he was the kind of man who’d scream at you if you put the wrong amount of sugar in his coffee, so I doubt he would’ve stayed quiet about some random passenger invading his bedroom, even if they were dressed as a flight attendant.’

Gold’s knowing smirk returned. ‘*Kathoey*.’

Brownlow blinked. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘It’s a Thai term; the name of something commonly associated with the country, much as its rulers would prefer it were not.’ Seeing that both officers were still puzzled, he elaborated: ‘The most common English translation is “ladyboy”.’

Meadows smacked her lips. ‘Now I’ve heard it all. The killer was a ladyboy?’

‘Undoubtedly. And assuming that he – or she, as most of the *kathoey* I’ve known prefer to use the feminine pronoun – hasn’t already disposed of the evidence, you’ll find an outfit that either closely resembles or genuinely is an Air Thailand uniform and a bottle of Dom Pérignon 1996 in her belongings. I glimpsed the outfit – it’s a very distinctive shade of lilac – in her luggage when it was being searched at Heathrow, and I know the bottle was taken from the plane’s stock because the tissue paper in its presentation box had stuck to the glass. Condensation,’ Gold added, on Meadows’ sceptical look. ‘It was cold when it was taken from the fridge, and the moisture that condensed on the glass soaked the paper.’

‘So you’re claiming that the killer was a man disguised as a woman?’ said Brownlow.

‘Actually, the male persona was the real disguise. I’m sure that in Thailand she identified as a woman full-time.’

‘You seem to know a lot about ladyboys,’ Meadows said.

Gold grinned. ‘Some of the most delightful people I’ve ever met, of whatever gender, have been *kathoeys*. The best of both worlds, you might say. Oh, there’s that lemon-sucking Puritan face again!’ he continued, catching a twitch of her expression. ‘Broaden your horizons, Detective Constable. The sensual world is not a place of binary absolutes, whatever the tedious watchdogs of morality like the late Mr Perch would snarl. But yes; to apply some rather mundane labels, the killer was a male-to-female transsexual disguised as a man. I’m sure you can pick out the most likely possibility from the small pool of suspects.’

‘Som Niratpan – Niratpattanasai?’ said Brownlow, stumbling over the name. His host nodded. ‘You’d testify in court about what you just told us: seeing the clothes and the champagne bottle in his – her luggage?’

‘Yes,’ said Gold. ‘As much as I disliked Perch, the fact remains that he was murdered, and justice must be done, if only for his family’s sake. But Som is the only passenger who fits the bill. Young, small stature, slim build, hair long enough to be put into a style matching the cabin crew’s, very attractive even as a man—’

‘And a nice moustache too,’ added Meadows in a cutting tone. ‘Just what you need when you’re impersonating a woman.’

‘Fake, of course.’ He waved a hand at one of the pictures on the wall; a fully bearded Leviticus Gold from around ten years earlier. ‘I had that wretched thing glued on every morning for six weeks during the shooting of *Roads Less Travelled*. A simple moustache would be no trouble to apply. But as I was saying, Som also had a somewhat effeminate aura despite the role she had to play for the plan to work.’

‘That’s subjective,’ Brownlow pointed out.

Gold shook his head. ‘I found it impossible to miss. As any transvestite will tell you, and I know quite a few, there’s more to appearing feminine than just putting on a dress. Ingrained male mannerisms have to be overcome. But they *can* be overcome, with a lot of time and effort – and after all that mental expenditure, there is a great reluctance to give them up and revert back to “male mode”, even if only subconsciously. I imagine that Som is extremely convincing as a woman... which ironically made it harder for her to go back to being a man.’

Brownlow let out a disbelieving breath. ‘This all sounds insane. But... you know what? It fits the facts. What do you think, Meadows?’

She looked extremely unhappy. ‘I’d have to say that... yeah, it does, sir. Pretty much.’

‘Okay. Call the office, let them know that we need to pick up Som Niratpattanasai for further questioning.’ As Meadows made the call, Brownlow stood and addressed Gold. ‘If you’re right about this, then... thanks in advance. Just remember that if we *do* make an arrest, the case should be considered *sub judice* until you’re told otherwise. So don’t go bragging about it.’

‘I won’t tweet a word,’ Gold replied with a reassuring smile.

Meadows finished her conversation and stood. ‘All set, sir.’

‘Okay, let’s go,’ said Brownlow. ‘And again, thanks, Mr Gold.’

‘Call me Levy,’ said Gold with a smile. ‘All my friends do.’

‘Be seeing you, Mr Gold,’ Meadows told him pointedly.

He merely chuckled and offered his hand to Brownlow, who hesitated before shaking it. ‘You will keep me informed, won’t you?’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Brownlow told him.

‘Splendid. Good luck.’

Gold saw them out, then returned to the lounge. He eyed the champagne bottle. 'Well, I *have* taken off the foil,' he said to himself with amusement. 'Waste not, want not.'

The pop of the cork echoed around the room.

Some hours later, the last of the bottle's contents glugged into a slender champagne flute. Beside it was Gold's lunch; a large slab of smoked salmon with Brie, chopped Bibb lettuce and Brandywine tomato. Now fully dressed in a shirt of vibrant turquoise silk and tailored carnelian trousers, hair perfectly combed and styled, he regarded the meal with expectant relish and was about to pick up his fork when the entryphone buzzed. With a sigh of mild exasperation, he stood and went to answer it. 'Yes?'

'It's Detective Sergeant Brownlow, Mr Gold,' came the reply. Brownlow and Meadows stared sternly at him on the entryphone's CCTV screen. 'Let us in.'

'Back so soon? Do come up.' He pushed the button.

A minute later, there was a knock at the door. 'Come in!' Gold called, having returned to the table to start on his food. The two detectives entered. 'So,' he said, raising his glass in greeting, 'were my deductions correct? Did you find the uniform and champagne bottle in Som's flat?'

'We did,' said Brownlow flatly.

'Just as I thought! And what did Som have to say?'

'Not a great deal,' Meadows told him, voice cold.

Gold couldn't miss that the attitude of the two officers was considerably more grim than their previous visit. He took a sip from the glass, then rose. 'Is something the matter?'

'You could say that,' Brownlow said. 'Leviticus Gold, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Som Niratpattanasai, and conspiracy to murder Desmond Perch.' Gold's eyes widened in shock as the policeman took out a set of handcuffs. 'You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something you later rely on in court. Anything you say may be taken down and given in evidence...'

For once, Leviticus Gold was rendered utterly speechless.

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'Ah, Julius,' said Gold as his solicitor entered the harshly-lit cell in the bowels of New Scotland Yard. 'I'm very, *very* glad to see you.'

The tubby, grey-haired Julius Harcourt-Boles shook his hand, then brushed crumbs from his tie. 'I got your call in the middle of a late lunch, Levy. Rushed over as soon as I could. Hope they've treated you well?' He gave Meadows and Brownlow, who had followed him into the cell, a disdainful look.

'They didn't let me finish my own lunch, but apart from that I've been treated with moderate courtesy. I imagine that news of my arrest has already been leaked to the press, though.'

'Naturally. Had to push through a pack of camera-toting jackals to get inside. Shameful, shameful. You haven't said anything?'

'I told them I wouldn't answer questions until you arrived.'

'Good, good. I'll soon get this business sorted out. Have they explained the procedure?'

'I know how it goes.'

‘It turns out that Mr Gold already has prior experience of being arrested,’ said Meadows, with a distinct undertone of satisfaction. ‘And being convicted, for that matter.’

Gold waved a dismissive hand. ‘Youthful hijinks, nothing more – a prank that wasn’t taken in the spirit with which it was intended. Authority figures have no sense of humour.’ He fixed his eyes on her as he spoke. She scowled. ‘I was sentenced to thirty days at Her Majesty’s pleasure, but was released after just two weeks.’

‘Good behaviour?’ asked Brownlow.

‘Good God, no. Quite the opposite. If they’d kept me in there any longer, I would have been running the place like Fagin. It’s all in my autobiography.’

‘I think you’ll have plenty of time to write the second volume,’ said Meadows.

Harcourt-Boles huffed with irritation. ‘That’s enough of that, young lady. Right! Let’s get started. What’s this nonsense all about?’

The solicitor left the cell with the detectives to be briefed on the allegations against his client, before returning to the cell to discuss them with him in private. Finally, Gold was brought to an interview room, Harcourt-Boles accompanying him. Brownlow sat facing Gold across a table, the celebrity’s representative taking a chair in a corner. Meadows stood over her superior’s shoulder, glowering down at the suspect.

Brownlow switched on a tape recorder, declaring the date and time and the names of those present before beginning questioning. ‘Right, Mr Gold. I’m sure your solicitor told you the details of the charges against you, and the nature of the latest crime.’

‘Yes, he did,’ Gold replied sombrely. ‘You found Som strangled in a flat in Woodside Park. Appalling.’

Meadows leaned forward. ‘When we came to arrest you, you asked us if we’d found a flight attendant’s uniform and a champagne bottle in Niratpattanasai’s flat, which we had. Do you deny that?’

‘You don’t have to answer that, Levy,’ said Harcourt-Boles.

‘I have nothing to hide,’ Gold replied. The solicitor made an aggrieved noise deep in his throat, but did not speak. ‘No, I don’t deny it.’ Brownlow wrote down a note.

Meadows’ expression became predatory. ‘And how did you know that Niratpattanasai was staying in a flat and not at a hotel?’

‘Because he told me, of course,’ stated Gold, as if it were perfectly obvious. ‘I’ll use the masculine pronoun in this case, as he was in male mode at the time. But I was correct in my assumption that Som was *kathoey*, wasn’t I?’

‘It looks that way,’ said Brownlow. ‘The victim was wearing makeup and women’s clothing. And like you said earlier, looked very convincingly feminine.’

‘*Sans* moustache, then?’ The policeman nodded. ‘Fake, as I thought. But to continue, after our luggage was searched, I asked if he might be interested in joining me for a drink. He politely declined, saying that he was going to meet the friend with whom he was staying in Woodside Park.’

‘And you didn’t see him again after that?’

‘No. I actually met up with Mali and Tola soon afterwards, and spent the rest of the day with them. And indeed the night. I’m sure they’ll confirm that.’

‘Actually,’ said Meadows, with the air of a chess player watching an adversary step into a trap, ‘we’ve also arrested Mali Kanthachai in connection with the murder.’

Gold was shocked. ‘What? What on earth for? You can’t possibly think she has any connection to this!’

‘Let’s discuss *your* connection to this first,’ said Brownlow. ‘You deny any further contact with the victim after leaving the airport?’

‘Absolutely I deny it!’

‘So can you account for your movements for the rest of the day?’

‘Certainly. I went with Mali and Tola to their hotel, the Heathrow Holiday Inn Express – Air Thailand don’t treat their cabin crew to the same level of luxury as their first class passengers, sadly. But once they’d dropped off their luggage and got changed, I took them as my guests for lunch at the Groucho, where we stayed until around three. After that I took them on a walking tour of Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, then we took a cab for a spot of sightseeing – Trafalgar Square, Buckingham Palace, Westminster and so on. Following that, we had an excellent dinner at Hix around six-thirty, had a few more drinks in the club downstairs, then went back to my flat at nine or so. Where we stayed until you arrived in the morning.’

‘And you can prove all this?’ demanded Meadows.

‘I always keep all my restaurant and taxi receipts,’ Gold replied, almost cheerily. ‘One never knows if something worthy of an anecdote may happen – in which case it counts as part of my work, and I can claim the cost back against my taxes. Feel free to check the times of payment with my credit card company. Oh,’ he added, ‘and if you like, I can provide you with a quite lengthy list of famous friends with whom I chatted at both venues. I’m sure they’ll corroborate my story.’

Brownlow mulled that over. ‘And what about after midnight?’

‘After midnight?’

‘You told us this morning that your guests went to sleep around midnight, but that you stayed awake. That would give you plenty of time to get to Woodside Park, kill Mr Niratpattanasai, and get back before morning. Is there anyone who can confirm your whereabouts then?’

‘Levy,’ said Harcourt-Boles in a warning tone.

Gold waved him down. ‘Other than Mali and Tola? I would say no. However,’ he added on Meadows’ look of triumph, ‘I’m sure that if you call my building’s management company, they’ll provide you with the CCTV footage from the security cameras covering the front and rear exits, and the garage. And the lift. And the stairwell. Now, unless you’re suggesting that I used a rope ladder to climb down from my fifth-floor window, I think you’ll find there’s no way I could have left the building unseen.’

‘We’ll do that,’ said Meadows. ‘We can have a warrant before the end of the afternoon.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Harcourt-Boles, levering himself to his feet, ‘but unless you have any actual evidence against my client, I insist that he be released at once. This whole thing is quite preposterous. Leviticus Gold is one of the most well-known personalities in the country, and a man who has *legal* ways of dealing with the depredations of the tabloid press, rather than resorting to murder. To suggest that he is involved in a double homicide is absolutely ridiculous.’

‘I’ll present our case, then,’ Brownlow said. ‘Firstly, motive. Despite what your client told us, that he wasn’t bothered by what Perch’s newspaper printed about him, he issued several libel suits against it.’

The solicitor made an impatient sound. ‘I’m well aware of that, Detective Sergeant. I was the one who issued them on his behalf! Do get to the point.’

‘We also ran a Lexis search,’ Meadows added: the media database. ‘In the past year alone, the paper ran a hundred and twenty-six stories mentioning Leviticus Gold

– almost all of them negative in tone. I think it's fair to say that Desmond Perch really disliked you, Mr Gold. You might even call it a campaign against you.'

'There are limits to what a person can take,' said Brownlow. 'So you decided that enough was enough, and arranged to kill him.'

'If I were emotionally affected by what the press said about me,' Gold scoffed, 'I would probably have killed *myself* by now. It's unfortunately the price of fame in this country. Tabloid journalists are a dreary, embittered lot, and think anyone who dares to raise their head above the mire of mediocrity deserves to be cut down to size for the baying amusement of their readers. The best way to fight them is to keep on doing that which angers them so much, without fear or shame. Rather than devise an outrageous method of murder – one that you wouldn't even have discovered if I hadn't worked it out for you, I might add!'

Meadows shook her head. 'You couldn't resist telling us. It was so clever, maybe even *too* clever, you couldn't stand the idea that nobody would ever know about it. Your ego couldn't take being ignored.'

'Ah, so you're saying that having devised the perfect crime, I then tried to throw suspicion off myself by telling the police exactly how I did it? Really! That's logic worthy of a Batman villain.'

'You arranged to kill Perch,' Brownlow pressed on, 'by using Som Niratpattanasai as your accomplice. You seduced him in Thailand, maybe promising a civil partnership so that he could get UK citizenship, and convinced him to commit the actual murder so that you'd have an alibi. The statements from the cabin crew and the other passengers said that Niratpattanasai was very nervous at the start of the flight, but almost numbed at the end. We found a blister pack of diazepam – Valium – in his luggage at the flat, with one pill missing. He took it right after the murder to cover his shock. But that wasn't enough for you to be sure that he wouldn't talk, so you then asphyxiated him – her, at that stage – to make certain.'

Gold's only response was a disbelieving shake of his head. 'Utter rubbish,' snapped Harcourt-Boles. 'Worthless conjecture and supposition that would be laughed out of court the moment it was presented. Evidence, Sergeant, evidence! Where is your evidence?'

'Right here.' He reached into a briefcase he had brought with him and took out a folder, opening it to reveal several large photographs. 'Do you recognise these?'

Gold flicked through the pictures with interest. 'Well, of course I do. That's a copy of my autobiography, one of my albums, the magazine for which I write a column...'

'They were all found in the flat where Niratpattanasai was killed,' said Meadows. 'It seems that he was quite keen on you.'

'And that is evidence of my client's guilt how, exactly?' objected the solicitor. 'They could have been bought from any branch of WH Smith in the country by the real killer and planted at the flat.'

'And why would someone do that?' asked Brownlow.

'Well, it's obvious, isn't it?' said Gold impatiently. 'Som was indeed working in collusion with someone else on the plane – almost certainly another first class passenger. They knew I was on the plane, perhaps even saw me talking with Som at Heathrow, and realised they could not only eliminate the loose link in their vendetta against Desmond Perch, but also implicate me as Som's killer in the process.'

Meadows reached into the briefcase and took out a plastic evidence bag. 'Then how do you explain... *this*?' With a victorious flourish, she placed it on the table between the two men. 'It was also found in the flat – and it has fingerprints on it. Mali Kanthachai's – and yours!'

Gold stared at the plastic-sheathed champagne glass for a long moment... then, to the consternation of the officers, began to laugh. 'So that's what happened to it,' he finally said. 'I'd wondered where it went.'

Brownlow was anything but amused. 'This places you at the scene of the crime, Mr Gold. I'd suggest that you start taking this very seriously.'

'Oh, I am, Detective Sergeant,' he replied. 'But before you haul me off to the Old Bailey for trial, may I point something out to you?'

'Go ahead.'

'Would you be so kind as to turn the glass so you can see its base? Don't worry, I won't touch it. I wouldn't want to be accused of tampering with your evidence.'

Warily, Brownlow did so. 'Now,' Gold went on, 'you'll notice a glassmaker's mark beneath the bottom of the stem. It's a stylised pheasant – specifically a Siamese fireback. Which is...' He paused, as if waiting for an answer to a quiz question. 'Surely one of you must have played a pub trivia game at some point? No? Well, I'll enlighten you – it's the national bird of Thailand. And you'll find that glasses exactly like this are used in the first class section of Air Thailand flights. May I ask if this glass matched any of the others in the flat?'

'We... haven't checked,' Brownlow reluctantly admitted.

'Might I suggest that you do? I saw the logo often enough through the bottom of my glass during the flight. The last time was when Mali served me a drink shortly before she discovered Perch's body. When she screamed, I left my suite to see what had happened, as did several of the other passengers. When I went back, the glass had gone. I didn't give it much thought, for self-evident reasons. I assumed that one of the girls had cleared it up in preparation for landing. But it's obvious what happened to it.'

Meadows eyed him. 'Which is what?'

'The real killer, Som's collaborator, took it. An opportunistic move in the confusion after the body was found, but they thought it would be enough to throw the police off the trail. Successfully, as it turns out.'

Brownlow regarded Gold for a long moment, assessing him. At last, he looked up at Meadows. 'Check with the lab – see if the glasses that were taken off the plane match this one. And talk to whoever checked the first class luggage at Heathrow and see if they remember seeing a champagne glass in anyone's bag.' She hesitated; he snapped, 'Now, Meadows!'

'Yes, sir.' With an almost disappointed look back at Gold, she left the room.

Harcourt-Boles stood beside his client and put both his fat hands on the edge of the table, leaning towards the remaining detective. 'Now, Sergeant,' he rumbled, 'are you going to release my client?'

'And poor Mali as well,' added Gold. 'She must be absolutely distraught. Not only did she discover the first body, but to wrongfully arrested for a second crime... Do you know who's representing her, Julian?'

Harcourt-Boles shook his head. 'Some duty solicitor. I don't know who.'

'Would you make yourself available to her? I'll meet the costs.'

He nodded. 'I'll see to it. Now, Sergeant Brownlow, do you have any further evidence against Mr Gold? By which I mean the non-circumstantial kind, of course. Fingerprints at the murder scene, DNA traces, eyewitness accounts, anything at all?'

'Not at this stage,' Brownlow was forced to admit.

'Then I insist that you release him immediately. And prepare yourself for a suit of wrongful arrest, while you're about it.'

Gold waved a hand. 'No need for that, Julian. They're just doing their job, after all. But yes, I would like to get out of here. I feel naked without my cravat. And my shoelaces.' He tugged at his collar, from where his silk neckcloth had been removed when he was searched on arrival.

'Let's wait until DS Meadows reports back, shall we?' said Brownlow.

She returned fifteen minutes later, looking flustered. 'The glass does match the ones on the plane, sir,' she said. 'And there weren't any others like it in the flat. Collins thinks she remembers seeing a champagne glass in someone's luggage, but she's not sure whose.'

'It narrows down the possibilities, though,' Brownlow mused. 'She only checked half the passengers.'

'And I can narrow it down still more.' The two police officers looked at Gold in surprise. He was smiling, but there was no smugness to it; more a helpful sincerity. 'Detective Constable Meadows, you said earlier that you did a Lexis search to find stories in Perch's newspaper about me. I believe that if you do another search with a slight change of parameters, you'll find the real killer...'

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William Jarnow brought the tumbler of whisky to his lips, but stopped slightly short, his eyes fixed – as they had been so often that day – on the tabloid newspaper on the table. Three pictures took up most of the front page; largest was a portrait of the paper's late editor, Desmond Perch, with smaller insets of an Air Thailand A380 airliner and Leviticus Gold. In contrast to the solemn gravitas of the main image, the celebrity, caught by the paparazzi, had a drunken smirk.

The liquid inside the glass rippled as his hand suddenly began to shake. He had still not quite got over the shock of what he had done – what he'd *had* to do, he reminded himself forcefully. The look of uncomprehending fear and pain – as much from the betrayal as physical – on Som's face as he had pulled the belt tightly around her neck was burned into his mind. But he'd had to do it, he'd *had* to do it...

Weakness! That was what Som represented. Weakness on the young Thai's part, for crying and quivering with guilt at what she had done when Jarnow came to the flat. And the weakness of Jarnow himself, his hidden fascination with the idea of a man who looked and acted like a beautiful, exotic woman turning first into desire and then full-blown lust when presented with *kathoey* in the flesh. He had never thought of himself as gay, but this wasn't the same thing at all, was it? But once released, he had been unable to put the genie back in the bottle, no matter how hard he tried. On every successive business trip to Thailand, he had always ended up seeking out Som, however often he told himself that *this* time he would control his urges.

But while Som had been more happy to see him each time, more intimate as she sought to move on from simple sex to a real relationship, Jarnow had told himself that their encounters were purely for pleasure. He was halfway round the world, and had licence to do what he pleased without anyone at home ever finding out. After all, he was a married man! But what happened in Thailand stayed in Thailand, right?

Until that one night in the bar.

He had been with Som and some of her friends in a corner booth. Beautiful girls, drinks, kisses and wandering hands – and then the click and flash of a camera, and the horrible plunge of his stomach as he recognised the smirking face behind the lens. One of Perch's reporters. The man had interviewed him only the previous day about his soon-to-go-public company's future plans and business dealings in Thailand.

With the snap of the shutter, the story had just jumped from the business section into the front half of the tabloid. And Jarnow had even given him a quote that could be misused, about the warmth and friendliness of the Thai people...

He had begged the reporter to delete the photo. Then tried to bribe, and finally threatened. But each escalation only made the man more arrogant and smug. For a moment, Jarnow even considered attacking him and taking his camera – but he was not alone, three of his friends arriving as backup when they saw the altercation. Humiliated, quivering with anger and disgrace, Jarnow was forced to back down.

He had phoned the newspaper the following day in the hope of persuading someone that the story was not worth publishing, only to find that the reporter had already submitted it. Whether it was printed or not was up to the editor – Desmond Perch.

Through some fluke, Perch was between meetings and deigned to take the call when Jarnow pleaded to speak with him. But merely being asked not to publish the story only served to inflame the editor's temper. His company's imminent share offering made Jarnow a figure of public interest – and potential stockholders had a right to know about the behaviour of its director. Could a married man who secretly cavorted with Thai ladyboys, and threatened to assault the intrepid reporter who exposed him, be trusted to run a company in an honest manner? No, the story would be printed. And Perch made it clear that Jarnow himself had assured it by daring to challenge the freedom of the press. Discussion closed.

And when Jarnow returned to England, his life was ruined.

That had been over a year ago. But now, after his divorce, his ostracism by his 'friends', the company's calamitous public offering and his bitter expulsion from its board, and using up most of his remaining savings... he'd had his revenge.

He finally gulped down the whisky in a single mouthful, clapping the empty glass down on the table beside the newspaper and staring again at the man dominating the front page.

On learning that Perch was due to attend a media conference in Bangkok, he saw his chance for vengeance. The promise of a new life in England – and selected examples of the paper's institutional hatred of transsexuals and foreigners – had eventually persuaded Som to help him, after considerable charming, cajoling and even bullying. The murder weapon, the champagne bottle, had been surprisingly easy to make, his years of experience in the manufacture and transport of pressurised containers being put to unexpected but highly satisfying use. Then, once aboard the plane, his constant faked Skype calls – headphones disguising that there was nobody on the other end of the line – and demands on the stewardesses had kept the first class cabin's occupants distracted, and gave him an alibi, while Som dealt with Perch.

It was the perfect murder.

Best of all, there had even been a scapegoat on the flight. Leviticus Gold had flirted with Som, establishing a connection between them, and had a well-known dislike of Perch and his newspaper. Stealing his champagne glass in the confusion after Perch's body had been discovered and planting it and a few hurried-purchased works of Gold's at the flat had successfully pointed the police in the wrong direction. The celebrity's arrest had already been on the news.

There was nothing that could lead back to him, Jarnow was sure. All the arrangements to rent the flat had been made from Thailand, the money sent through Som's account rather than his own, and he had been extremely careful not to leave any fingerprints or other traces. He'd had his revenge – and got away with it...

The doorbell rang.

He jumped at the unexpected sound, then stood as the bell rang again, more insistently. Who was it? He wasn't expecting anyone...

Jarnow went to the door – and again felt a sickening sensation of falling in the pit of his stomach as he saw who was outside.

'Evening, Mr Jarnow,' said Brownlow. 'Can we talk to you, please?'

Jarnow battled to keep his expression blank. 'What about?'

'It's about the murder of Desmond Perch,' added Meadows, standing beside her superior. There was someone else behind them, but his back was turned.

'I told you everything I knew at the airport. I haven't remembered anything else.'

'We also need to talk to you about the murder of Som Niratpattanasai,' Brownlow went on.

Fear squeezed the businessman's heart. 'I... don't know who that is.'

'Oh, but you do,' said the third figure – turning sharply to reveal a very familiar face. Leviticus Gold held up a black champagne bottle. 'After all, you gave him, or should I say her, this. Surely you remember?'

Jarnow stared at the bottle in shock – then darted back with surprising speed for his size and slammed the door.

Brownlow was just as quick, one foot whipping forward against the jamb to stop the door from closing. But even with his sturdy, thick-soled shoe, the force of the impact was enough to make him yelp in pain. He staggered backwards as the door bounced open again.

Meadows rushed through it to chase Jarnow. 'Stop!' she yelled. The big man ignored her and charged through a side door at the end of the hall. She followed – only to reel back with a shriek as Jarnow hurled a chair at her, knocking her to the floor.

Brownlow hobbled quickly down the hall to her. 'Rachel! Are you okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' she gasped, scrambling back to her feet. The crash of a door being thrown open reached them. Meadows kicked the chair aside, and both officers raced after their suspect.

Jarnow was already out in the back garden. He had snatched up his car keys from a counter on his way through the kitchen, and scrambled over the wall into the neighbouring garden. A path ran alongside the far side of the house. He ran to it, hearing Meadows shout after him, and made an adrenaline-fuelled sprint to the street.

His car was just a few spaces away. He thumbed the remote. Lights flashed in response. He ran to the Vectra and grabbed the door handle—

'Excuse me!' said a voice behind him.

Jarnow looked around—

*Pop!*

He screeched and clapped a hand to his face as a champagne cork hit him in the eye. 'Oh, so sorry,' said Gold with a sardonic smile, shaking froth from his hand. 'You didn't think I'd brought the actual murder weapon, did you? The police need it as evidence – this is from my own stock. But I think it was well worth two hundred and fifty pounds just for that.'

Hand still covering his wounded eye, Jarnow rounded on the tall man. 'I'll tear your bloody head off, you poncy little fu—'

A blur of movement from his blind side – and he was slammed against the car as Meadows tackled him, his head cracking against the window. Before he could recover, she had grabbed him in a judo hold and thrown him to the ground, pinning one arm up behind his back. 'Oh, well done!' proclaimed Gold. 'Do you need any help?' Meadows gave him an irritated look as she grappled with her prisoner.

Brownlow jogged up behind her, his overcoat flapping. ‘William Jarnow!’ he shouted as he took out his handcuffs. ‘You’re under arrest for the murder of Som Niratpattanasai, and conspiracy to murder Desmond Perch. You do not have to say anything...’

As the detective continued to read Jarnow his rights, Gold regarded the scene with satisfaction – then, to the surprise of both officers, reached inside his jacket and took a slender champagne flute from a pocket. ‘What?’ he asked, feigning bafflement at their reaction, as he poured himself a glass of vintage Dom Pérignon. ‘It would be an awful shame to waste it. And I think this definitely counts as a special occasion...’

As Brownlow secured the cuffs around Jarnow’s wrists with a metallic rasp, Gold raised the glass. ‘Cheers!’

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The following morning, Gold stretched out on a sofa in his lounge, a tabloid newspaper in one hand and a phone in the other. ‘I assume you’ve seen this morning’s front page, Julian,’ he said, with relaxed pleasure. The reply from the other end of the line was in the affirmative. ‘Well, this is a textbook example of what happens when you rush to the presses without waiting to check if your so-called prime suspect has been released without charge and left Scotland Yard by the back door, isn’t it?’ He read out the headline. ‘“Gold Fingered: Celebrity Arrested For In-Flight Murder”’. And would you say that the way the actual story is worded implies that I’m guilty?’ He listened to the answer from Harcourt-Boles. ‘Oh, I’m so glad you thought it did more than merely imply. Libellous, you say? Marvellous. Yes, issue a writ, by all means. And how was Miss Kanthachai after her release? Good, I’m relieved. I must give her a call and make sure she’s all right.’

He looked round at a buzz from the entryphone. ‘Oh, excuse me, Julian,’ he said as he stood, ‘there’s someone at the door. Yes, let me know how they respond. I’m sure they’ll be willing to settle this out of court as quickly as possible. Ciao.’

The entryphone’s screen revealed two now-familiar faces. ‘Ah, Detective Sergeant Brownlow,’ he said a minute or so later as he let them in, ‘and Detective Constable Meadows. To what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘Mr Gold—’ began Brownlow.

‘Levy, please! I don’t hold grudges.’

‘Thanks.’ Gold led them into the lounge. ‘Anyway, you could call this a sort of courtesy visit to let you know what’s happened. We just came from the crown court. Jarnow pleaded guilty right off the bat to the murder and conspiracy charges. We thought he was going to be a tough nut to crack when we questioned him last night, but when we showed him the photos of Niratpattanasai’s body in the flat, he just broke down. I suppose he cared more about her – than he realised.’

‘I suspect that poor Som was the only person who still had any feelings for him,’ said Gold, shaking his head. ‘And he killed her nevertheless.’

‘He confirmed that everything happened just the way you’d thought,’ Meadows told him. ‘The champagne bottle, Niratpattanasai posing as a flight attendant, the whole thing. There’s one thing you didn’t explain, though.’

‘What would that be?’

‘When we did the Lexis search on the other passengers, both Jarnow and another businessman, Mr Lewis, came up as having had articles written about them in Perch’s paper. How did you already know it was Jarnow?’

‘Oh, that was simple,’ he replied with a smile. ‘Lewis was wearing a suit by Gieves and Hawkes of Saville Row. I recognised the cut at once.’

‘And Jarnow was wearing...?’

‘Some shabby high street off-the-peg affair. I wouldn’t even pretend to know from which chain. His other clothes, and even his suitcases, were equally cheap. A man so parsimonious would never consider spending ten thousand pounds on a first class suite just to have access to in-flight wi-fi, when he could have got it at a fraction of the cost by travelling business class.’

She nodded. ‘I see. I guess you really *do* know about a lot of things.’

A look of sly amusement spread across Gold’s face. ‘That almost sounded like an apology, Detective Constable Meadows. Are you saying that I’m not quite as worthless and unbearable as you first thought?’

Her own smile was better hidden, but discernible. ‘Not quite.’

He grinned. ‘Excellent. Then there’s still a chance for me to win you round in time.’

Brownlow raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you mean, “in time”?’

‘Don’t you see?’ he proclaimed. ‘I think I may have found my new calling – more pictures for my wall.’ He nodded towards the last of the framed pictures. ‘I’ll certainly be adding today’s front page – accompanied by a copy of the cheque Perch’s rag will be sending me as an out-of-court settlement for libel. But I’ll also add the headlines about Jarnow’s conviction, which will be far more satisfying. Being a detective is a career path I’d never considered before, but I think I did rather well for a first attempt, don’t you?’

Brownlow and Meadows exchanged looks; his of bewilderment, hers of muted horror. ‘What career?’ she asked.

Gold took a long breath. ‘The thing is, when I told you I went to Bangkok looking for pleasure, that was the truth... but not the whole truth. I was looking for *purpose*.’ On their confusion, he elaborated: ‘This may sound a very odd thing to say, but success can be astonishingly tedious! Once you’ve climbed a mountain once, there’s a hugely diminished return in doing so again. Why do you think I’ve done so many different things? And while you’ll no doubt consider this appallingly egotistical, everything I’ve achieved so far in my life has been done so with relative ease. I need *challenge*. I need to pit my wits against people who have more incentive to outsmart me than scoring points on a comedy panel show – to have real consequences for failure. Consequences like the guilty going unpunished.’

‘So...’ Brownlow slowly asked, ‘are you saying that you want to join the police?’

He laughed. ‘Oh, good God, no! For a start, there’s far too much sobriety required. And a bobby’s helmet would ruin my hair. But should you happen to encounter another case that seems impossible, then I’ll be more than happy to act as a consultant.’

If Meadows’ expression as described by Gold the previous day had been like sucking a lemon, she now appeared to have a mouthful of battery acid. ‘That’s... very generous,’ said Brownlow carefully, before she could blurt out anything more heartfelt. ‘But I think we’re more than capable of handling our own investigations.’

‘I thought you might say that,’ Gold replied with a smile. ‘But the offer remains open. Who knows? You may want to take me up on it sometime.’

‘We’ll bear it in mind,’ Brownlow said, trying to hold in his sarcasm. ‘But anyway, we just wanted to thank you for your help.’

‘Oh, don’t mention it.’

‘I’m sure *you* will,’ Meadows muttered. One corner of Gold’s mouth creased upwards.

‘Anyway, we’ll be going,’ said Brownlow. ‘Goodbye, Mr Gold.’

Their host picked up a glass of champagne as if to toast them with it. ‘See you soon,’ he said, beaming.