

Paloma Azul

Richard Gill



Bolotti

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1 First blood

Judy Madden knew she was in trouble. Frozen fingers ready for keystrokes she would never execute. The mugger sat down opposite her and held the blade up to her nose.

She was late this morning on the 11:41 tube from Leytonstone. An empty carriage rattling westwards into central London. Next stop, Mile End. Judy was a young lawyer, well dressed in a neat business suit which complemented her dark shoulder-length hair and green eyes. She had been intently revising a corporate acquisition document.

Now it didn't matter.

The mugger swapped seats and squeezed up next to her, keeping the knife close to her left eye. He grabbed the laptop and briefcase, sliding her possessions into a striped laundry holdall. Her D&G handbag was wrestled off her, exploding its contents on to the carriage floor. He'd done this before and he enjoyed it.

'The rings, Tag Heuer, mobile, and necklace, love,' he hissed.

'The ring was my grandmother's!' Judy lied, handing over her Samsung.

'Too bad, lady.'

She fumbled with the necklace and surrendered it, leaving her diamond engagement ring till last. She glanced up at the emergency stop-handle, well out of reach.

He grabbed her wrist, and menaced her with the large serrated hunting knife. An eye, a nose or an ear? he thought to himself.

First blood.

Mr Knife smiled, revealing dirty teeth that had never seen dental floss...waxed or unwaxed. The nose hair wasn't too good either. He liked using his survivalist knife; it would cut nicely through cartilage. He might get to skin a whole deer with it one day.

'It's precious ring time!' he taunted, moistening his index finger provocatively in his ulcerous mouth.

'Move it...rich bitch!'

Judy blanched at his foul breath of bile, coffee, sulphur, and rotting gums, and attempted to lunge upwards at the red handle. He ripped the arm off her mauve bouclé jacket, revealing a white short-sleeve blouse, and pulled her back down into the window seat.

Judy would normally get off at Chancery Lane, walk east down High Holborn and into Fetter Lane.

But not today.

'The ring I said!'

Judy made a play of trying to twist the ring off, but Mr Knife knew this one. He tightened his grip on her wrist, digging his dirty nails into her skin. He lowered the sawtooth edge and sharply grazed it over her knuckles, drawing blood immediately.

That normally did it.

'No!' she screamed.

Thomas Bell slumbered in the late morning sunshine at the other end of the carriage, listening to music. A merciful late start to a Tuesday in the office. The door slam must be a ticket inspector working his way down the train. He relaxed with his eyes shut, deeply immersed in track five, 'Cocaine and Cognac', from Para Noya's third album.

Thomas Bell, outwardly a well-educated city worker, wore his profession's standard attire: dark suit, Italian shirt, silk tie, and expensive shoes plus laptop bag.

Judy's second scream bypassed his headphones.

Bell sat up immediately, fully alert.

The train slowed into Mile End. An empty platform.

'This is my stop,' said Judy, as if this constituted permission to go.

'Yeah, love, you stop here till we've got everything.'

Judy twisted off her priceless ring with bleeding fingers. To her horror, Mr Knife swallowed it, blood and all, poked his tongue out, and belched into her pretty face.

'What else you got?' he grinned, raising his eyebrows, tugging at her blouse.

'You've got everything!' she screamed.

Mr Knife was becoming agitated.

He was getting too far away from the safety of his home territory, the East End. He didn't want to go beyond Bethnal Green, but this bint was a plum.

Mr Knife noticed Thomas Bell standing there. The mugger assessed this good-looking city boy in shining armour, and released Judy's hand. He knew how to deal with people like this. Oh dear, the deer is here! First blood. Flesh, bone, and cartilage.

'Can I help you, pal?' he sneered.

Bell looked him over. Slipknot chic in a heavy leather jerkin, on a warm day. Hot shivers and the need to feed the habit, sweating body odour, flaking skin, and yellowing ferret eyes. Needle scratches and scabs told their own story. Steel toe-capped boots, shapeless tattoos up his calves, and greasy hair mostly hidden by a tight-fitting baseball cap.

The girl was beautiful and in big trouble. Definitely his type, though. Bell glanced down at her bloody left hand. 'This asshole really meant business; he would have to be careful.

Her earnest green eyes pleaded with him to do something.

'Bella, you're late in today, aren't you?' he bluffed.

'You don't know her, you dumb asshole!'

'Come and sit with me,' smiled Bell.

'Piss off will yer, pretty boy?'

Mr Knife was right, he could piss off back to his seat or...

'Help me, David,' bleated Judy, playing along.

She tried to rise, but Mr Knife held her down and drew the holdall closer to himself.

'We're just having a little chat, okay?' he spat.

The hunting knife was the only weapon Bell could see. It surely had fish hooks, line, and a compass in the handle. This guy had happily sliced it across the girl's knuckles, so he would no doubt be more than delighted to split open Bell's scrotum with it. The girl just sat there looking pathetically paralysed with fear, nursing her injured hand.

'...looks like you dropped something,' said Bell.

Bell shrugged and made to walk off back to his seat, to Judy's instant dismay.

Mr Knife relaxed enough for Bell to aim a long punch, but Mr Knife was ready for him. He had anticipated well and was up on his feet in a flash, dodging the blow. He countered with a slash of the knife, missing Bell's gut by a few inches.

Bell landed his second punch on the side of Mr Knife's head who, in return, caught Bell with the butt of the knife, grazing his temple. Then, a violent scuffle up against the double doors. Mr Knife kneed Bell in the stomach, and landed another two blows to Bell's skull.

Bell countered with an elbow strike to the face, and the knife went skittering across the floor. Despite a decade of drug abuse, Mr Knife was still strong and had a lot of practice under his belt. This was his day job and he grappled Bell's neck into a sleeper grip, but failed to squeeze the carotid artery shut.

At least Bell knew that one.

Mr Knife's speciality was biting off a piece of ear or nose. Bell could smell the foul breath panting next to his face. Mr Knife released his grip and head-butted Bell just above the nose. Bell hit the deck. He could taste the sickening, metallic taste of the blow, but was able to protect himself from the heavy boots pounding mercilessly into his stomach and ribs.

The train slowed into Bethnal Green and came to a halt. Judy grabbed her chance, and the laundry holdall, frenziedly stabbing the 'open' button. The doors drew apart and she ran, as fast as her heels would take her, to the exit.

Mr K was taking deep breaths, beads of sweat on his grimy forehead. Before Bell could leap back into action, Mr Knife had retrieved his weapon and made it to the doors. He hawked up the contents of his lungs, prepared the oyster of taut phlegm into a ball with his furry tongue, and expelled it across at Bell. After a momentary lament for his lost swag, Mr Knife disappeared, hoody up, trying to work out how it had all gone wrong.

Don't hang around next time! Just cut 'em up and cut 'em good. Learn your lesson. Mr K gobbed some more on the tarmac platform, as the train pulled out.

Next stop, Liverpool Street.

Bell slowly pulled himself up on to a seat, gasping.

Hmm...that could have been better.

As a rookie MIX agent, still in training, Bell resolved to have his advanced unarmed-combat modules brought forward and intensified, with a special emphasis on street fighting and unholy tricks. However, to take a beating, no matter how unpleasant, was still a valuable lesson which contributed to his grounding.

Don't let it happen again!

Blood seeped down the side of his face. His tongue was also bleeding a little, and his face was swelling up nicely.

He'd live.

Status report: teeth, nose, eyes and testicles still intact...the delicate bits that were difficult to mend. He committed Mr K's face to memory, just in case there was a next time. Jesus, his ribs were on fire! Did he have a punctured lung?

He bent over in agony and retrieved a handful of her belongings, including Dior eye shadow, moisturiser, and some tweezers.

The Harvey Nicholls store card appeared to be in the name of 'J. Madden'.

Yeah, maybe not Bella, after all.

Bell emerged from Liverpool Street station, walking westwards down Sun Street. After Finsbury Square, he headed north on City Road towards Cyventure House, just beyond Old Street tube station.

He entered the offices of his employers, Charles Carrington, accountants and registered auditors. An ugly building, on ten floors, which might just as easily have been occupied by an overseas development agency or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Reception was starkly decorated in sterile whites, greys, chrome, and marble composite. The ex-military man on the desk, in a white shirt with blue epaulettes, glanced at Bell and continued to sift a pile of junk mail. A coffee table littered with trade magazines, topped by the Investor's Chronicle, stood next to a black leather sofa and a hollow glass sculpture, illuminated with crystalline balls.

Bell stepped into the body mass scanner, then pressed his left eye against the state-of-the-art, iris-recognition machine. The glass airlock hissed open and he took a lift to the third floor.

To the outside world, Charles Carrington was a specialist London accountancy practice. It supposedly had a select group of clients in the music, property and leisure sectors. CC, nicknamed 'Carbon Copy', had a respected presence in the City, its bland website bulked up with press releases on recent financial directives.

Cyventure was Charles Carrington's management consultancy arm. The work was sexier and you got to travel more, working in places like the Seychelles, Bermuda, and the British Virgin Islands. Places you could jet off to, and mix international tax planning with sun and cocktails.

London is a hotspot for dirty money, corporate fraud, and money laundering. The only law not being broken was that of supply and demand. Accountancy was a lucrative and dangerous profession.

Charles Carrington was no ordinary firm of accountants. It was a front for MIX, a branch of British military intelligence so hush-hush that no one knew it existed.

MI5 and MI6 had gradually become compromised with exposés, ex-spy memoirs, and kiss-and-tell leaks.

Both intelligence agencies had their own websites, and well-known London buildings which came under mortar attack from time to time. They openly advertised for operatives in the national press, as if you were joining a national supermarket chain on a management training scheme.

Nothing was really covert anymore.

The time had come to form a new organisation, which would be truly clandestine.

MIX had an unlimited budget and a global brief. It was the new instrument of state to excise persistent security cysts on the UK's exposed arse, in absolute secrecy.

It drew on the best expertise and equipment, supplied by allies and foes alike from around the world, to train its agents to the highest level of spycraft. It had a particularly generous arrangement with the US Central Intelligence Agency, who were knee-deep in advanced military technology.

An accountant can go anywhere in the world, with a briefcase and a calculator, without arousing suspicion. Audit review, systems analysis or due diligence work? No problem, this way please. The perfect cover for highly trained agents to carry out dangerous missions.

In order to make the pretence absolutely watertight, all operatives had to be thoroughly trained as real accountants, learning all the principles of accounting, alongside those of spycraft, explosives, weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and advanced military training. The entire set-up had to be plausibly accurate right down to the finest detail, so that their cover would never be blown, even under torture.

Bean counters with balls.

The lift doors opened on to a hot desking area, and private office suites furnished in creams and limed oak. It looked like

the interior of any one of the top twenty accountancy practices based in the City.

Bell headed for the kitchen and rest area, complete with pool table. Blood was still busy oozing, necessitating immediate attention for his swollen face. He almost broke the first aid cabinet off the wall, spilling bandages and antiseptic cream everywhere.

I need ice, ice, ice.

He raided the fridge and tended to the blood, bruises and swelling with ice cubes in paper towels. His stomach, ribs and head still hurt like hell and he looked like shit, but he'd recover. A visit to the medical officer was borderline; we'll just see how we get on.

Bell was still mastering the basics, in the first phase of his career, drummed in with intensive training. He would have to get to grips with the advanced topics in due course.

Aged twenty-seven with a degree in Economics and English, he was sporty, six foot tall, slim but muscular, with short dark hair. Judy had remembered the clear blue eyes and ready smile, just as Bell had filed away the features of Mr K.

Every week since he had started had been a typical week. The grinding repetition of spycraft, bookkeeping fundamentals and MIX operational guidelines.

He fixed himself a strong cup of tea and sat down at his desk, switching on his computer. He spread some papers out and started clicking. He hoped he'd be in good enough shape for intermediate aikido, part of his unarmed combat module, that afternoon.

2pm. Bell pressed minus three and descended seven floors into the basement of Cyventure House.

He entered the dojo.

Danny Wilson stood there relaxed and warmed up, ready to give a two-hour martial arts training session. He wiped his ears with the towel wrapped around his neck and grinned at Bell.

‘Allo mate, fit then?’

‘All set,’ replied Bell.

As sensei, Danny was stripped to the waist in black silk shell-suit trousers, with a red sash wound three times around his waist. An interior mock-up of the Blind Beggar pub stood at the far end. Danny's barrel-like torso sported a myriad of distorted tattoos that would make a Yakuza blush. He was a forty-seven-year-old hardened criminal and ex-gangland enforcer.

A copy of the one hundred deadliest karate moves lay on one of the benches. The double ear-clap, which would burst both eardrums, was Danny's favourite. Bell changed into a similar outfit to his teacher, but with a white sash.

‘Been in the wars 'ave we, son?’

Danny gently cupped Bell's face and studied the patched-up injuries.

‘Look's like someone's been taking liberties, my old china.’

‘It's just a scratch.’

‘Tut, tut. You've been slapped good and proper. Was there a young lady involved?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Thought so. Looks like I need to teach you everything I know. It'll take a little time but we'll go easy on you today. Are you still up for it?’

‘Sure. I hate being scratched,’ grinned Bell.

A while later, as they finished their session and towelled off, Bell pointed at the fourteen-inch, angry red scar slicing across Danny's muscled back, made by a carpet knife.

'How did you get that?'

'Not at a West Ham home game, that's for sure!' replied Danny, laughing.

'...In a pub in Romford, two years ago. I got slashed by this geezer who said I'd been eyeing up his bird. Maybe just like you, my young friend.

So, I walk over to the ice bucket standing on the bar, take out the ice pick and put it straight through the side of his face. Kind of acupuncture for beginners, if you know what I mean. That would've been fine, just to be done for affray or ABH, but this guy catches a bug in hospital, and gets eaten alive by the Ebola virus...'

Danny took a moment to look at his watch.

The rest of the Romford story would have to wait till next time.

Friday. An exhausting week.

After a lunchtime drink in the Artillery Arms in Bunhill Row, Bell ambled back through the warm haze of London traffic fumes. He slumped back in his chair, and thought about going home for the weekend, heading due south to Brighton.

He idly turned the plastic Harvey Nicks store card in his hand, admiring Bella's signature on the reverse.

J. Madden.

Julia...Jane...Joanne or Jasmine?

He ran his finger repeatedly over the raised gold letters. He thought back to the vision of her, pressed up against the train

window, pathetic and vulnerable in her ripped jacket, her green eyes looking into his. On a whim, he decided to locate her and headed for the fifth floor.

He sat at a semi-circular desk on a plush, leather swivel chair and stared at the forty-inch flat screen. A cable as fat as a baby's arm led from a grey distribution box on the floor.

The air-conditioning in this small, quiet room cooled him, his white shirt quickly separating from his skin. He had authorisation-level six access to both Aurora and Echelon.

Aurora is Britain's internal citizen database which links together data stored by government departments, supermarkets, credit card providers, banks, CCTV archives, hospitals, telephone companies, and others. It provides a three-dimensional data life profile on anyone living in the UK.

Echelon, on the other hand, is the US National Security Agency's global spy system which captures and analyses virtually every phone call, text, email, and telex message sent anywhere in the world. It is controlled by America's NSA, its National Security Agency, in conjunction with the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, through a series of intercept stations which trap satellite, microwave, cellular, and fibre-optic communications traffic.

Bell clicked on Aurora.

The cursor tripped across the screen and came to a halt, blinking impatiently over 'Data source'. He changed the dropdown selection to 'Store cards'. The system processed the sixteen-digit number in seconds and a mass of information appeared.

Judy Rachel Madden.

Judy!...he should have guessed.

Address in Wimborne Minster, Dorset.

Part of the address must be missing, no street name or anything. No London address given. Date of birth...January...age...twenty-five. Other store and credit cards were listed. Bell ascended to a higher menu level, and multiple page tabs appeared. He clicked on 'HMRC' and browsed her tax returns and income.

Employer: Falcon & Falcon, corporate lawyers, Fetter Lane, London, EC4. Mergers and acquisitions. Other tabs: NHS, directorships, shareholdings, bank accounts, terrestrial, and mobile phone numbers. He had it all now.

Finally, a high-resolution UKPA digital photo of a beautiful girl centred the screen. It had been taken two years ago. Her hair had been longer then. He sat back for a moment and admired Judy's enchanting eyes.

A chance meeting, perhaps?