

# PULSE

✦ ROBERT COOK ✦

A NATIONAL SECURITY THRILLER



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First Edition

*For PJ, the love of my life*



*The most worthy of granting forgiveness are  
those most capable of punishing.*

Ali ibn Abi Taleb, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammed



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## CHAPTER 1

# TANGIER, MOROCCO

**BUILT ON THE RUINS OF THE** Roman city of Tingis in northern Morocco, a few miles across salt water from the looming mass of Gibraltar, lies the Petit Socco, the little square, at the center of the city of Tangier. It was once the pulsing heart of the ancient walled medina, beating with sophisticated Tangerines who gathered at Café Socco and others with broad terraces to see and to be seen.

The sophisticates have moved on, but the idle remain along with a few struggling writers, who hope for inspiration in the fading shadows of Paul Bowles and Ernest Hemingway. Ancient backstreets are narrow and dark; their scents are of offal and sewage. A few small shops and cafés remain along them, many with empty shells gaping in disuse. The ancient city has been passed by, with attraction neither for tourists nor for affluent Moroccans.

In the Petit Socco's southwest corner was a former stable, converted to a café to serve the locals. The faint, lingering stench was of animals past, deep in the grout and the swept dirt floor. Its windows were mere gaps in the walls, open to the elements. Stained Chinese copies of Persian rugs hung on two interior walls.

At the center of the café, two local men were seated at a small wooden table. The distinctive, rancid smell in the room came from a hookah, a water pipe at the table's center, loaded with local tobacco and shared by the two. The table's cut was a little better than that of

the other furniture, and its occupants seemed by body language to be a cut above the other patrons. The shorter but larger of the two men had long, dark hair, tangled and dirty with a scruffy, dark beard; their body language said he was junior. He wore a green short-sleeved shirt. Huge arms stretched it at the sleeves; the vertical center vein on each bicep was prominent through the skin. One soiled leg was crossed over the other. His boots were scuffed and tied halfway. He was loud.

The second man was taller, smaller, older, and better dressed, with clean jeans and an ironed cotton shirt. His brown hair was well cut, and he wore brown laced-up oxfords.

Their Arabic accents were uniquely Tangerine, with speckles and threads of mangled French woven flawlessly into the patois. Speakers of classical Arabic often say, "Listening to a Tangerine speak Arabic is as listening to an Italian shoemaker speak Latin."

A young server hurried out with black ceramic mugs and set one in front of each man.

Another man walked into the room and took a small table in a dark corner of the small café, his back to the wall. He was dressed in the manner of a Moroccan city worker, with dark, loose pants and an off-white flowing shirt, open at the neck. It had just the vertical hint of a collar. The sleeves of the rough shirt were rolled to mid-forearm, exposing rough, gnarled hands below wide wrists. The forearms were huge, lumpy things wrapped in a tangled mass of distended veins climbing to rolled cuffs. His face was marked with a splash of tiny scars on the forehead, and an old, thin scar wandered down his cheek from a spot beside his left eye. A bump on the bridge of his nose suggested a fracture in the distant past.

He took a smartphone from his pocket. He held it in front of him in two hands, his thumbs dancing across the virtual keyboard. The thumbs were scarred and thick, with strange calluses at their ends, shaped perhaps to make typing easier. When the thumbs paused their dance, a few tiny black hairs showed, growing from their backs.

The server boy stopped beside his table. The man looked up and said in Bedouin-inflected Tangerine, "Tea. Two people." He slipped the phone into his pocket and glanced around to catalog the room. He liked to know who was where and a little more.

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He heard the younger, loud man, who was facing the stranger's table say, "Oh ho, Youssef, a stranger in our midst. Maybe he comes to horn in on our business."

The other man, Youssef, responded more quietly, then glanced over at his table. He did a slight double take at the sight of him, then looked away.

The stranger watched them and listened.

*Fellows, I hope you're not going to make trouble. I'd rather not be visible right now.*

He held his left hand against his forehead and used his neck to push against the hand—hard—for thirty seconds or so. He then moved the hand to the left side of his head, then to the right, pushing hard against it. The dynamic-tension technique of the long gone Charles Atlas was still useful exercise for quick results. The neck began to swell from the extended effort.

"Maybe he'll buy us a drink or two, Youssef," he heard the younger man say and then laugh. "He seems to have a headache. Maybe I'll give him a bigger one."

Others in the café looked over at him, curious, then at the stranger.

Youssef swiveled in his chair and turned his head. He was smiling as he looked at the stranger.

The stranger fixed Youssef with a flat, unblinking stare. His neck was enormous, the thin shirt collar distended by bulging trapezius muscles. He extended his head suddenly from the neck, slowly blinked his eyes once; then brought his head back again, deep into the neck. His eyes never left the older man.

Youssef stared, transfixed for a moment. Then he turned his head and spoke to the other man, threw some money on the table, and started to stand. The younger man seemed outraged and glanced over at the stranger, ready to prove his leader too cautious. He stood and lumbered to the other table, his shoulders hunched to exaggerate his size and muscularity.

"So, my friend," he said, standing close to the table and facing the stranger. "You are away from home. You are not known here. My colleagues and I own this area for our business. First, you can buy me a drink, or I will hurt you." He dropped his left hand to the stranger's

right shoulder to control any sudden moves. He could punch with his right. “Then you can tell me why you are in our territory.”

An inner voice piped up from somewhere in the stranger’s head, just behind his left ear.

*“He doesn’t seem to be armed. Sloppy walk. Weight is on his heels.”*

In a fluid motion the stranger reached up with his right hand. The big man felt fingers sliding up his left arm to the inside of the crook of his elbow and the thumb in the small hollow near the end of the elbow’s bone. The stranger squeezed hard, digging with his thumb.

“Aargh!” the big man grunted as his elbow exploded in pain; the pain didn’t recede. The stranger came easily to his feet, guiding the big man slightly aside, still holding the elbow and maintaining pressure with his thumb. They walked side by side to the older man at the central table, who was watching them. The big man had a newly stumbling, hesitant gait.

Youssef stared into the wide-eyed face of his big companion, his face contorted by a grimace. A grunting, moaning sound came from his lips.

“You should go now,” the stranger said in a near whisper. He squeezed the elbow once again but much deeper. The big man went to his knees from the pain. He seemed woozy.

*“You should kill them both. Kill them now, laddie. Now, so they won’t bother you later.”*

The stranger released his grasp on the elbow and stepped back a pace. His flat, unblinking eyes were again on the smaller, older Youssef.

Youssef nodded and stood. He took the younger man by the arm, pulled him to his feet, and led him from the café.

The younger man stumbled as he tried to turn back. Youssef spoke to him urgently. “We don’t have a gun. We’d need one for him, or maybe two. He’s out of our league. If he proves troublesome, we’ll deal with him using more than two unarmed men. I saw that look when I was in prison. It means ‘I’ll kill you for the sport of it.’ Back off.”

They walked through the open entrance, arguing.

The stranger, whose name was Alejandro Mohammed Cuchulain, sat back in his chair, relieved that public violence had been avoided.

*‘Gila Monster’ is what my buddy, Brooks, calls that neck-stretching, hooded-eye look. He says it scares the civilians—seemed to do that pretty well here. Of course, I’ve practiced that look in front of a mirror a few*

*times. Sometimes with a little tongue flicker like a reptile, sensing, sometimes not. Flicker's good for Halloween.*

*"Nice to be with you again, laddie," Dain said in his mind.*

*"Dain. Welcome back. It's nice to know you're still watching and haven't jilted me."*

*Dain is my personal avatar, my schizophrenic fantasy or some such, who drove the shrinks crazy at the CIA's training spot, the Farm in Virginia. They seemed to need shrinks there for us CIA killers. Go figure.*

*Dain lives somewhere inside my head. He lived inside my father and his father before him. Dain is the Celtic voice of violence with a few centuries of experience. He helps out from time to time when things get ugly. He is alert for violence, if only because he seems to like it. Then again, violence provides the only time I feel a sparkle of inner harmony that is all of me; so it seems that I too like violence. Still, there is a time and a place to satisfy that need. Dain would rather not wait. His view is always immediate. He thinks it's safer that way.*

Cuchulain stood as another man, dressed more formally in an ironed shirt tucked into cotton trousers, walked to the table. They shook hands warmly with a slap on each other's right shoulder. A second cup of mint tea was poured from the samovar.

"What a lovely choice of venue, Alex," the man said as he sat. "You look like a Bedouin thug seeking trouble. I actually saw Youssef Maki, the number-three Tangier drug lord with one of his muscle-bound goons walking out of this café as I walked in. You're lucky they didn't decide to have a little fun with a new thug on their turf."

"I'm a lucky guy, my dear Sino," Alex said. "Besides, I like places like this. I feel better when no one knows who I am or what I do. I'm Bedouin. I can better get to know my people here."

"Your people?" Sino ibn Nahir laughed. "You're an American, mostly. These are your adopted people at best."

"Even inherited perhaps. But they are mine, and I am theirs," Alex said. "I look like this because this is who I am much of the time. I'm not really a thug usually, just a Bedouin."

"Shall I call you Kufdani then or Alejandro Mohammed Cuchulain?"

"Alex will do as my name among us, as it has."

“No matter, I suppose,” Sino said. “On to the business at hand. The king and his retinue continue to be stunned by our progress in mass adult education and job training, using those fancy phones of yours to project lessons anywhere there is a light wall or a bed sheet. Literacy is up, and we got a big second job from Boeing, assembling wings for their 787 airliner. They were quite impressed with how quickly our people came to acceptable productivity.”

“Job training brings fast revenue, more taxes, and improving GDP numbers,” Alex said. “Moroccans are good with their hands and are hard workers. But mark my words Sino; it is education of the masses that will bring the king the stability he wants. We need to educate the young. Better education of the populace leads to better jobs that pay more. Once this process gets rolling, it will take on a life of its own. If the king orders more training phones from us, the process will accelerate.”

Alex raised his voice as Sino was distracted by a burst of loud noise from just across the room in an open courtyard. There was a group of roughly dressed local men sitting in a semicircle, most talking loudly. A few gambled with dice thrown against a wall. They drank from teacups, frequently refilled. Muslims don't drink alcohol publicly, after all.

Alex needed Sino's help, but didn't want to be obvious about it and had worked to find something mutually advantageous. He thought back to when they met. Life had a strange way of evolving.

Admiral Sino ibn Nahir, whom Alex called Sino, then a captain in the Royal Moroccan Navy, had attended the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, a few years back, at the request of the Kingdom of Morocco, and followed by an invitation from the US Departments of Defense and State.

Brooks Elliot was a student there as well in a slot arranged by a Colonel Mac MacMillan of the White House National Security Advisor staff. The admiral was Moroccan, Sunni Muslim, and an Arab—and consequently not often invited to participate in nonofficial War College social activity. Brooks F. T. Elliot IV was a navy reserve officer, a lieutenant commander who ordinarily would have been well down the pecking order in allocating coveted slots for the War College. Elliot was also a former Navy SEAL, a Rhodes Scholar, and the only son of the chairman of the Senate Armed Services

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Committee. His US Navy personnel file had a large red stamp on it, CI for “Congressional Influence.”

Few of the ambitious career navy officers attending were anxious to include him among their social activities. Mac had told Alex that Elliot wouldn't have been chosen for one of the few naval reserve slots at the War College if that red CI hadn't been on his folder and Mac hadn't given a hidden push, as Mac, that old CIA craftsman, sometimes did. Worse, Elliot had a sailing vessel, *Old Fashioned*, he moored nearby; it was worth more than most officers' homes. To sailors and naval officers, it was a fantasy boat with just the right numbers of features and gadgets—and it was well beyond any other student's budget.

Brooks and Sino had become friends, if only for the lack of other opportunities in the Naval War College's social world. They sailed on some weekends, the two of them managing a deep hulled, forty-eight-foot sailboat together. From a casual acquaintance, their friendship became closer over time.

Alex, who was Brooks's best friend of many years, had met the now admiral some time ago on a weekend sail from Newport, Rhode Island, to Boston Harbor and back, where he acted as the Moroccan chef and chief bartender. Alex had slowly developed a friendship with Sino as the three of them sailed and talked in the difficult coastal waters.

Sino had been appointed defense minister of Morocco several years later. He was a royal cousin

Nowadays, Sino and Alex met in Tangier from time to time to discuss intelligence findings and to get Sino updated on what Alex knew from his Kufdani trading network about goings-on in the Middle East and on how the events might affect the Kingdom of Morocco.

Alex was the sole owner of Kufdani Industries, an old, huge trading organization based in Tangier. One of Alex's ancestors on his mother's side had founded it, and Alex had inherited it from Grandfather Kufdani. It had trading reach across the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Black Sea—and into southern Europe; various divisions handled specialty efforts in sectors such as agriculture and technology.

There was also a US component. Kufdani Industries was closely aligned with an independently owned hedge fund, Kufdani Capital in New York, which Alex had founded several years before.

Alex had proven useful to the Moroccan government in negotiating aid from the United States and international monetary authorities, as well as for his introduction of new educational technology that used recordings of the best teachers in many subjects, coupled with electronic student support. This technology was delivered to students at very low cost via a custom-designed smartphone, known as a Kphone.

Alex's role at Kufdani wasn't widely known in Tangier, since Achmed, a boyhood friend of Alex during his summers in Tangier, ran the operations of Kufdani and was its public face. Alex liked to move around society, listening. He was considered an authority on the history of Islam, based on his study of Islam in the College of Oriental Studies at Oxford University and since. He lectured frequently at universities across the Middle East and at conferences of Islamic scholars.

During their last meeting, Sino had asked Alex to consider what Kufdani could do to help solve the growing economic problems in Morocco. Within days, Alex took that opportunity to reply that he had an idea that could help the king solidify his voter base and cut Morocco's deficit, but the idea would be hugely controversial. He'd asked Sino to think about how to approach the king with such an idea, knowing that the question would reach the king's ear within the day.

"You got our king all excited with your talk of improving his voting reach," Sino said, "and on fixing our GDP somewhat on our way to Morocco becoming a power in the Arab world, of course. You pissed him off a bit with the mystery. So it's controversial. What?"

"It has to do with our Rif Mountains to the south and the Berbers there," Alex said. "We've looked into the opportunity more since we last met. A friend and I spent a few days there recently, looking around and talking to the locals."

"Those Berber outlaws in the Rif Mountains," Sino said. "They'd cut your throat for an extra ration of *kif*. They grow cannabis and sell it on the black market. I've been slashing and burning there for five years, and still it goes on."

"And how's that working for you?" Alex said. "Is our king pleased with your results? Are you?"

"He's really angry. I'm much more so. They have a half-assed farming

effort that still produces ten billion dollars in illegal trade, and I don't seem to be able to stop them."

"And you don't get a dirham in taxes for it. We really should be taxing farm income."

"Alex," Sino said, "don't irritate me by reminding me of the obvious. That's cruel. We're worried about a popular religious uprising along the lines of the so-called Arab Spring. If it happens in Morocco, it may start in the Rif Mountains, if only because they're so innately rebellious there. I dread the thought of sending more troops in there. It's all steep hills and valleys, easy to defend and nearly impossible to police. The Berbers seem as nimble as mountain goats; that makes things worse. But what does any of that have to do with the king's voting reach and helping our sorry GDP get better?"

"I'm just a business guy," Alex said. "Kufdani Industries doesn't get involved much in politics, but some business things leap out at me when I look at the Rif Mountains and the Berbers there, in their little bounded and contained community. It's mostly business that can help improve the king's voting reach and the Moroccan economy. There are, of course, some politics involved. We've reckoned a way that may generate up to fifty billion dollars in trade that you can tax and we can exploit for profit. The farmers will get paid and be happy to vote for the king."

"Sounds like a fairy tale to me," Sino said. "What?"

"Give up on ripping out hectares of *kif* and replant the area you've destroyed."

"Replant it with what?"

"Replant with *kif*, of course," Alex said. "Let's call it '*kif*' rather than 'cannabis' or 'marijuana.' That's what the Berbers call it and what they know how to grow. But now we will offer them better farming methods, fertilizer from our potash stocks in the south of Morocco, training for their farmers, education for their people, and loans for their farming equipment. We know the market for *kif* is huge and lucrative, so the investment is solid."

"Are you crazy? Grow *kif* for profit?" Sino said. "We'd be thrown out of the Arab League. American leaders would stop all aid to Morocco and maybe attack us the way they did the Afghans to stop their poppy

production, even if that attack failed. I hope you didn't get the king all hot and bothered over a stupid idea like this."

"*L'audace, encore l'audace, et toujours l'audace*, my friend," Alex said. "It's audacity, always audacity, that will win the day. We Moroccans, of course, would only grow medical *kif* for the treatment of those suffering pain or other medical issues such as headaches. We would package it under government supervision and sell it after it has been taxed once or maybe twice. It's a medical service for society, from which there is a substantial sum as an incentive for us to grow and package it well. Call it twenty billion dollars in new trade for Morocco, growing perhaps to fifty billion dollars over a few years. And not coincidentally, happy farmers are farmers who vote to support the status quo."

"Audacity is indeed what would be required," Sino said. "I can see my execution in the future if I handle this idea poorly. I've known you long enough to be assured that you have figured most of this out and have designed in it a way for Kufdani to make a tidy profit. Tell me more, my stoner, my criminal."

"Here are the easy numbers for us Moroccans," Alex said. "We have a 160-billion-dollar GDP running a 23 percent deficit or so. Our public debt to GDP is over 50 percent. With audacity in place, we will generate an additional 20 billion dollars in trade early on, say over five years or so, with the jobs and increased local business that will inevitably arise. There is nothing wrong with this picture."

"Education of the masses is the secret," Alex said, "and it shouldn't take more than a generation to make an impact. The king will make a big deal of free education for the Berbers using those fancy Kphones you will procure from us for them to use and pay for them with Berber taxes. As with elsewhere in Morocco, Kufdani Industries will administer the education process for a fee. Kufdani will, of course, offer our services in the clearing and replanting of fields in the Rif Mountains. We may provide equipment for a share of the crop and education on farming best practices as a community service. Kufdani has an established trading organization that could distribute the product internationally and protect it from thieves."

Sino snorted. "One must assume that the profits would be enormous for Kufdani."

“One can but hope,” Alex said with a grin. “But if so, we’ll pay taxes to the king on the profits, and our employees will pay taxes on their earnings. The shopkeepers will pay taxes on what our employees spend with them. That’s the way economies grow. We’ll keep the region under control and promote the king’s political agenda within reason. Most important, we’ll ensure that the education of the masses there proceeds smoothly and broadly. It is that education process that will make the king’s voting population the one he seeks.”

“And how are we supposed to sell this narcotic travesty to the world, if I can sell the idea to the king?”

“I think we are out in front of the power curve for selling the idea of becoming a legal *kif* provider,” Alex said. “Jamaica will soon legitimize its *ganja* farming and sell it to tourists. Uruguay has voted and passed legalization of marijuana production for medicinal purposes. Several states in America have done the same, and at least two have approved use of marijuana for recreational use as well. In Colorado, one of the recreational *kif* states, tax incomes are far higher than predicted. We must move quickly if we are to be the primary *kif* dealer to Europe. Purely medicinal *kif*, of course, at least for now.”

“I am starting to like this idea, so I must be as crazy as you,” Sino said. “What does the estimable Commander Elliot say about it? He’s the Oxford-trained economist. A Rhodes Scholar yet and finding himself in the drug trade!”

“Sino, it was Elliot’s idea, or at least that’s what I’ll tell the police if we get caught,” Alex said, grinning. “Once Uruguay got started with the effort to legalize medicinal *kif* production, Elliot and I started talking about the Rif. Our situation there was summarized not long ago in an article in *The Economist*. The numbers are pretty compelling, if you do your homework. As far as providing better education and training there, beyond the ripple effect of the *kif* profits, there is also enormous evidence that educating the populace leads to a happier people. Happy people seldom revolt.”

“Run the Rif numbers by me,” Sino said. “I’m going to have to make a pretty compelling case to the king if I want to keep my job, even if I don’t lose my head. Being a royal cousin has its limits.”

Alex smiled and said, “OK, first there were 137,000 hectares of *kif*

planted in the Rif. You destroyed 90,000 hectares of that by burning. That burning won't hurt the soil for the farmers; in fact, it may enhance it. It looks like the illegal farming generates six kilos of *kif* per hectare. With decent farming practices and support, we're confident that we can raise that number to ten kilos per hectare, which turns the trade volume from an illegal, tax-free ten billion dollars to maybe seventeen billion dollars taxable. Then we triple production as the replanted 90,000 hectares come online. The Berbers will get a better price in a managed farming environment. It's all written down. I'll send a copy to you by e-mail."

"I assume your e-mail will allow it to be forwarded and printed," Sino said. "The last e-mail you sent wouldn't allow that. I was afraid to give it to our computer specialists to decode for fear that my computer would blow up."

Alex laughed. "That e-mail was confidential between us, and you promised that you wouldn't forward or print it, so I ensured that. This one will be fine for forwarding and printing as a file, but it will have no mention of its authors."

"It's nice to be back in Tangier to see the people rather than the politicians in our capital," Sino said, leaning his chair back a bit against the wall. "Marrakech gets tiresome with its politics. Do you have any more information about the source of the student beatings that have been in the infernal news?"

"There have been several beatings of teachers here," Alex said. "And class attendance is beginning to fall a little with the warnings on violation of Sharia law that accompany the violence. The beatings are from several gangs, but we haven't found yet who pays them or gives them direction. One of the gangs is in the courtyard just across the room. I've been watching them for a while. They come here often."

"And here we are in harm's way," Sino said. "I think I'd rather not start trouble right now. What would you have me do about them?"

"Nothing in particular," Alex said. "I just want you to be aware that radical Islam is interfering with our ability to train our taxpayers for better-paying jobs and our children for a better life. Religion is also becoming more of a problem in Tangier. We are hearing that Iran's Quds Force is organizing the Shiites here for a more concentrated demonstration or

even perhaps an attack of some sort. Quds is becoming a pain, with their international troublemaking.”

A murmur and scattered applause outside the café in its courtyard again distracted Sino, and he turned his head slightly to observe it. There was a young man, a boy really, doing acrobatic tricks for a small crowd to rhythmic sounds from a small boom box playing traditional Moroccan music. Near him was a girl, who was a year or two younger, with a hat she held out for donations as she moved around the periphery of the crowd.

The boy was in front of the apparent leader of the group in the café when he fell to the ground on his back, then snapped to his feet with a sudden push from hands behind his neck. He then leaped into the air and did a forward somersault with his knees tight to his chest, releasing them just in time to allow him to land on the balls of his feet. Then he repeated the move with a back flip. Upon landing, his legs split to allow them to be flat on the floor with his palms down. He pushed his weight up, and his legs swung suddenly at speed in a circle under one raised hand and then under the other. Finally he pushed himself into a handstand, where he balanced first on one hand and then on the other as his sister moved around the crowd, shaking the money in the hat to get a few more coins.

“That boy’s one hell of an athlete,” Sino said.

“I’ll say!” Alex said. “I’ve seen Olympic gymnasts who would have trouble with that routine. There’s an American dance style called ‘break dancing’ that’s close, but this kid is really good.”

Just then a large, bearded man at the front edge of the crowd and in front of the boy in his handstand, reached out and shoved him. The boy landed on the dirt floor and slid a little on his left shoulder, ripping the flimsy cloth of his shirt sleeve. As the boy snapped to his feet, the man grabbed the young girl by the arm and pulled her to him and onto his lap. He snatched the hat from the girl’s hand, spilling some coins to the floor.

“We have more money for drinks,” he shouted, holding the hat above his head. “And I may have found a new wife. She looks to be about the right age to bear a few more sons for me. I just need to break her in a bit.”

The crowd roared with laughter and applause as the girl struggled to reach the hat holding the rest of the money. When she failed, she leaned forward and bit the man on the bicep. With a roar of pain and anger, he cuffed the girl on the side of her head. The hat spilled more money to the floor. He bent and pulled his arm back, a closed fist ready to punch her.

She fell roughly to the floor as her brother reached her and punched the man's face. The man snarled as he drove his fist into the boy's left eye once, then again. He lurched to his feet and pushed the boy to the floor, then kicked him in the stomach. The boy rolled quickly away, but the man moved with him and kicked him again, this time in the right kidney just above the beltline. He dropped onto the boy's chest and put his knees on the boy's shoulders, then pulled a knife from his waistband.

"I think a notch in your nose would be a good thing. Beggars should not attack their betters, and their whores should not bite. I'll sample a free portion of her wares as well, I think. She will like having a real man."

*"The one in the green headgear, laddie. Gun on his left."* Dain was still somewhere inside Alex's head, keeping his usual eye on the potential for violence.

"The skinny one, three to the right of the leader, has a small-caliber pistol in his left waistband, butt forward, in case you're armed," Alex said quietly to Sino. "I saw a suspicious bulge on your left calf as you walked in."

Alex came to his feet and dropped a five-hundred-dirham note on the table for the waiter. His face was transforming itself. The skin at the edge of his eyes was swelling, hooding them and highlighting the faint knife scar that furrowed through the wrinkled skin beside his left eye to his left cheek. The tiny scars on his forehead became more obvious as his face darkened. The sound of his breath whistling through his nose was becoming obvious.

"Stop," Alex said loudly as he walked toward them. "You have bested a young boy and beaten the girl child who is his companion. You seem to have stolen their money, or at least tried to. It should be enough. Crawl around the floor and pick it up; then go back to your home, to your pigsty."

## PULSE

“And if I cut you instead?” the burly man said as he came to his feet lightly, holding his knife low and against his body, blade up. “You stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. I think I’ll cut it off.”

With a roar the man came for Alex, slicing up with the knife in his right hand, while his other hand poked at Alex’s eyes as a feint and distraction.

Alex let his body open as his right heel slid back and behind him. His left hand grabbed the right wrist as it reached for him. Alex pulled the knife hand up and forward to turn the man, then drove his right hand under the extended knife arm, powered first from his straightening legs, then from his twisting body, and finally from his extending arm. Alex’s target was six inches past the throat and Adam’s apple of the bulky man, but his flat, extended knuckles were stopped short with an audible crunch as the windpipe broke and collapsed. With the follow-through from the neck blow tilting the man back on his heels, Alex swung his left foot under the ankles of his assailant and up, sweeping the heavy body in the air for a second. As the man landed hard, Alex spun toward the men still seated. They were gape mouthed and still. The fight had lasted less than five seconds.

The skinny man stood, reaching to his waistband. “You will die as a godless pig. You gave no warning!”

The hilt of a slim throwing knife appeared, buried in the man’s throat, as Alex extended his arm in follow-through from throwing the blade that always hung just behind his neck.

A third man rushed Alex from his blind side, apparent only at the edge of his peripheral vision. Somehow, while barely glancing at his new assailant, Alex stopped the man with the heel of his left hand to the face just above the lips. Alex’s hand spanned the man’s face. With a thumb on the right eye socket and three fingers on the man’s left eye socket, he squeezed the face between his hand, with a burst of energy dispatched from his core, his ki, and accompanied by a loud grunt.

“Hee-umph!”

As the thin bone around the eye sockets collapsed inwardly, blood shot from the man’s face across Alex’s wrist and partway up his forearm. Alex released his grip to allow the man to fall to the dirt floor.

Alex extended a bloody, dripping finger, with a piece of drooping,

yellow gore clinging to it, toward the silent crowd. It moved to point at each of them as he spoke.

“Your kind is not welcome here,” he said. “You make trouble for honest workers and their children. You have been warned,” Alex said to the group.

There was a sudden uneasy silence in the room as each avoided staring at the extended finger, dripping blood more slowly to the floor.

“You,” Alex said as he pointed at the boy, who still sat on the floor, gape mouthed. “Bring the girl and come with me. Leave the money behind.”

After a moment the boy scrambled lightly to his feet, turned to the girl, and nodded. She grabbed the hat and a few coins near it, then ran to take her brother’s hand.

Sino rose swiftly from his chair and led the way as they left the café. Then he turned away from the entrance and walked to a dusty Range Rover with darkened windows. It sat idling just outside the walls of the medina. Sino opened the back door, then the front, and sat in the passenger seat. He reached to an ankle holster for a compact Beretta 9mm pistol below his left calf, then looked behind his small group to the exit of the café.

Alex pointed to the inside of the car. The boy and girl scrambled inside, followed by Alex. The driver pulled away from the wall as Alex pulled the door shut.

“I was warned about you, Alex,” Sino said, shaking his head. “Commander Elliot told me that you have a penchant for violence. It seems he was right. Tell me what just happened and why I was needed to be there alone. I could have brought a battalion of special troops.”

“I didn’t plan for violence, and what does Commander Elliot know?” Alex said. “I just wanted you to see one of the groups causing trouble for education and discuss plans with you for the Rif, as the king asked.”

“I’d rather ask them some questions than be in the middle of a brawl. At least we should have gotten photos of them.”

“I’ll send you photos. I have some from my phone. You should look them up and question them about what other people are interfering in the king’s work. Drop us here. We’ll make our way.”

Sino raised an eyebrow and gave directions to the driver. They slowed

to a stop. "I assume you'll look after the children," he said. "You never cease to surprise me."

"I'll look after them, I suppose. I couldn't very well leave them there." Alex opened the door and got out. He beckoned the children to come with him. After a moment they scrambled from the car and stood by him, wide eyed. The girl clutched the hat with the remaining money to her chest.

The boy glanced down the street, deciding whether to try to grab his sister and run. The Range Rover pulled away and accelerated down the narrow street.

"Now is the time to run if you'd like," Alex said to the boy. "But if you come with me, I'll feed you and protect you, at least for a while." He turned and began to walk down the street. After a moment and a glance at each other, they ran to him. The girl's tiny hand disappeared in the gnarled, bloodstained paw beside her.

A short walk later, Alex glanced up and down the street at the passersby, then turned into an old shop that advertised antique maps in its front window.

An old man sat at the rear of the room by a corner table. There was a threadbare, ragged blanket on the table. The man's right hand was under it, holding an antique, side-by-side, eight-gauge shotgun loaded with number-two shot, with its butt against a beam to absorb recoil. Both hammers were back.

"Peace be unto you," the old man said to Alex and nodded to the children. "You bring young company. A first."

"And peace be unto you," Alex said. "They may stay with us for a while." He walked to a cabinet on the back wall and moved a book on its top. The cabinet swung away, revealing a tunnel. There were lights along its way. The walls were smooth.

"Come," he said to the children and entered the tunnel. They hurried to him and walked into a man-made tunnel, lit with bright lights. After a few hundred feet, there was an alcove carved into the tunnel wall with an electric golf cart in it and an electric charger attached. After a moment's explanation by Alex to the children of what it was, he unplugged the charger. They all got in the cart and drove away.