

Bled Dry

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First published in 2017 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
420 Fifth Avenue, New York, 10018
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press
www.aucpress.com

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Exclusive distribution outside Egypt and North America by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.,
6 Salem Road, London, W4 2BU

Dar el Kutub No. 26266/16
ISBN 978 977 416 848 2

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hamdouchi, Abdelilah

Bled Dry / Abdelilah Hamdouchi.—Cairo: The American University in
Cairo Press, 2017.

p. cm.

ISBN 978 977 416 848 2

1. Murder—Morocco—Casablanca—Fiction

2. Police—Morocco—Casablanca—Fiction

3. Arabic Fiction

892.73

1 2 3 4 5 21 20 19 18 17

Designed by Adam el-Sehemy
Printed in the United States of America

1

NEZHA WASN'T YET TWENTY YEARS old, but she looked like a prostitute on the verge of early retirement. Layer after layer of makeup had transformed the softness and innocence of her face, giving her a severe pallor. Wrinkles from frequent all-nighters were carved deeply into her features. She had difficulty erasing the blue hue of her lips caused by all the smoking, and the whiteness of her teeth had given way to a strange yellowish color.

She sauntered down the sidewalk carrying her small handbag, and without a bra her breasts almost spilled out of her shirt. Her high heels caused her to wobble and walk crookedly. She was intentionally giving the impression that she was an easy catch. She stirred up the passing drivers so much that one car nearly hit another. An intoxicated driver slowed to cruise alongside her with his head out the window, telling her about the wild night he'd have in store for her. Even though Nezha tried to give the impression that she was enjoying all this attention, deep down she shuddered with fear as she walked alone down the sidewalk of a dangerous street that was empty of other pedestrians at this late hour.

She was, in fact, carrying out the terms of a pact she had agreed to in order to satisfy the vanity of an older man, who got off on watching this.

Hamadi pulled up in his Mercedes. He gave a subtle signal and she hurried toward him. She spoke to him, leaning her elbows on the base of the car's open window, and meanwhile thrusting out her ass as far as possible. Her movements were overly provocative. Inebriated drivers drooled, and not a single one protested that the Mercedes was blocking the street—until she got in.

Hamadi let out a triumphant laugh and turned toward Nezha, looking first at her makeup-caked face and then lowering his gaze to her bare thighs. He continued his boisterous and repulsive cackle while repeating all sorts of obscenities about how he wanted to force himself on top of her. She fired back with even more obscene language, detailing how she wanted to be pounded by him.

The dirty talk was all part of the game, but when Hamadi used this language it seemed out of place. He was close to sixty years old. His features projected a stern and serious disposition, accentuated by his thick black glasses. He was a shrewd banker who had climbed the rungs of the ladder and was now bank manager. A bruise—commonly adorning the foreheads of those who prayed frequently—was his stamp of piety. His depravities with a girl the age of his younger daughter did not suit him. Instead, they made him an object of scorn, even in Nezha's eyes. She thought he was revolting,

but nonetheless, she tried her best to provide him with some lewd new joke.

They had met when the bank refused to cash her check for a paltry sum. The check was for ninety dirhams, and the lowest amount the bank would cash was one hundred. A customer had given her the check after a blowjob in his car, while he was driving, that had barely lasted a minute. The bank teller knew the check would bounce, but Nezha complained about him anyway, as if he were the person responsible for cheating her. The teller transferred her to the manager, Hamadi. She had hoped that he would treat her with the respect and affection of the father she had lost, but since that day she became Hamadi's companion for his "day of depravity," always the first Saturday of each month.

The moment the parking attendant saw the Mercedes pull up, he found them a spot reserved for well-known patrons. Nezha got out of the car and waited for Hamadi to lock the door. Hamadi was of average height, and this evening he was dressed casually, looking like someone who had just changed out of his work clothes. He hid the wrinkles on his neck behind a colorful scarf, which gave him an effeminate look. As soon as he saw the bouncer Farqash he rushed to greet him, but Farqash fixed his bone-chilling gaze on Nezha as they entered. Farqash twitched his head threateningly in her direction, indicating that serious punishment was in store.

The bar La Falaise was really a stop-off before heading out to the clubs, which didn't open their doors until

after midnight. The bar was located downtown, close to the famous café La Choppe. It had an unlit entrance on an alleyway that led to a side street, where there was a secret door to the bar that only the employees knew about. It was swarming with beautiful young girls, most of whom were sitting with old men. The unaccompanied women sat smoking, legs crossed, waiting for a customer who was looking for a good time. The criteria for admitting women to La Falaise were very strict and centered foremost on beauty and youth, and then on the amount of money each girl could pay the hideous Farqash.

Farqash was absolutely repulsive: he had a huge bald head, wide-set eyes, and a flat nose. His build was sturdy, and he always seemed ready for a fight. He was known for all manner of depravities: he was a pimp, a middleman, a crook, and a police informant. He had been imprisoned multiple times, and it was there—the rumor went—that he had begun dealing cocaine. The drug infested Casablanca, coming from Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in the north, where it was exchanged for hash.

This was the man who ruled over La Falaise. Every girl gave him a percentage of what she made from her customers, and had to pay even if she made nothing that night. She even had to pay for her own cigarettes and drinks. When leaving, she had to place a tip in the palm of his hand.

Farqash and Nezha had history together. Not long ago she had been his favorite—his spoiled lover, preferred over all the other women at the bar. But he had taken to another

girl who had recently entered the scene, and since then he had begun treating Nezha like garbage. Just a month ago he demanded that she pay him, like everyone else. He'd had his fill and was tired of her. Nezha kept putting off paying him, but yesterday he had given her one final deferment, and time was up tonight.

The law of La Falaise was firm: each girl was required to encourage her client to consume a specific amount of alcohol before leaving the bar. In addition, she was required to arrange their future rendezvous at La Falaise. If the girl wanted to continue working there, she had to follow these rules. If she ended up stealing customers away by suggesting a different meeting place, she would be kicked out of the bar and face one of two options: either Farqash would smash her face in himself, or he would instruct one of the many young street kids waiting in the alley outside to permanently disfigure her with a razor blade, so that no man would want anything to do with her ever again.

Farqash's new darling was really young. She had been plucked by one of the female scouts at the courtroom doors, moments after the judge ruled for divorce. This scout then sold her to Farqash for five hundred dirhams. In less than a week, Farqash had trained her to obey him and to master her new trade. As she was blessed with a winning combination—a tall and slender figure, a huge bosom, and an alluring face—he made her a barmaid. He also gave her a new name, Warda, instead of her Bedouin name, Hada. Despite having worked

at La Falaise for over a month now, she hadn't quite managed to give up her comical Bedouin habits, which seemed to really arouse the customers.

Warda leaned down to give Nezha a kiss on each cheek, and then gave Hamadi an enthusiastic kiss just beside his mouth, angering Nezha. This uncouth Bedouin girl had taken her place with Farqash and now she was attempting to steal Nezha's generous once-a-month customer! Warda brought them to their usual table in the corner and bowed respectfully. A minute later she returned with a cold beer, some snacks, and a pack of Marlboros for Nezha.

The bar was packed and full of commotion, contrary to what it looked like from the exterior. The floor was upholstered in dark-red moquette and the round tables were surrounded by chairs that had embroidered covers. The walls were covered with massive drapes, giving the impression that there were windows even though there weren't any. The bar counter in the center of the room was dimly lit with red lights that hung from the ceiling, like an island detached from the rest of the place. La Falaise's esteemed patrons were accompanied by beautiful half-naked girls. The regulars stood near the bar, an intimate meeting point where a newcomer would feel out of place and probably wouldn't last very long.

Saturday night was different from other nights, as a band took over the small stage and played popular songs, replacing the original lyrics with comical and vulgar insertions.



Hamadi was returning to his senses, as the effects of the whiskey he had consumed before meeting up with Nezha wore off. He averted his eyes from her as though he'd forgotten her altogether. She knew this state all too well. The sobriety affected him temporarily until the alcohol in the beer was able to snap him out of it again. She took advantage of this opportunity to head to the bathroom. As soon as she disappeared into the drunken crowd, Farqash grabbed her by the neck and dragged her into a dark corner of the bar. He wrapped his arms around her as if choking her—intent on squeezing her so hard she couldn't breathe.

“My money! Where is my money?”

She couldn't speak, as she was nearly suffocating. He loosened his hold just a bit, so she was able to open her mouth.

“Tomorrow, Farqash,” she said, her voice trembling. “Tomorrow you'll get it all.”

“If you don't give me my money tomorrow, I will slaughter you. I'll decapitate you.”

He scowled at her and pressed hard on her cheeks. Then he rammed his tongue deep into her throat and spat in her mouth. She was disgusted by him and rushed to the sink to vomit.

Nezha returned and found that Hamadi had consumed two beers, one after the other, in record time. She sat in front of him. The clamor and dim lighting, not to mention her

skill in hiding her feelings, meant he didn't notice the anger written on her face. Insults and abuse didn't affect her for more than a few passing moments. She had become used to all kinds of curses, humiliations, and degradations. What she really feared was a punch knocking out some teeth, a razor disfiguring her face, or gang rape. Except for those scenarios, nothing else mattered much. She had learned that returning home safely at the end of the night was the best that girls like her could hope for.

She let out a high-pitched squeal when Hamadi reached under the table and caressed her thighs, pushing his fingers between them. She giggled and drew his hand even closer, acting as if she enjoyed his fondling. This was exactly what Hamadi loved about her: this brazenness that a man couldn't find with his wife. A prostitute searches for pleasure and embraces it.

He pulled off his scarf, revealing his ruddy, wrinkled neck with flabby layers of skin. He pulled Nezha close and whipped the scarf around her ass. She began to dance for him alone in their dark corner to the lyrics "What will he do? They brought him love at three in the morning." The singer switched the word *love* in the song to a dirty word for sex. Hamadi couldn't resist this: Nezha writhing in front of him above his lap, leaning over him so her hair touched him. He smacked her on the ass and let out a loud bellow. This was the declaration that the alcohol was taking over, and that the real excitement had just begun.

*

The evening in Casablanca doesn't really begin until after midnight, and after midnight anything goes. Where would Hamadi decide to end their evening? They left La Falaise after one in the morning. In the car, Nezha tried to be more seductive, caressing his temple with her palm and distracting him as he drove.

"Where are you taking me, Daddy?" she said flirtatiously, as she blew cigarette smoke in his face.

He looked her over with a lecherous smile and grabbed her chest. "Hopefully to hell!" he responded.

The car took off into the street and Nezha knew that they weren't heading toward Ain Diab, as she had hoped. Ain Diab was full of nightclubs frequented by Gulfies, strip clubs blaring pop music patronized by wealthy businessmen and power brokers, and whorehouses that stayed open into the wee hours of the morning with raucous parties that became the talk of the town the next day. Rather, he would force her to take a nauseating trip around the streets that occupied the most beautiful stretches of the city in the daytime, but that by night became exhibition grounds for the sale of sex.

The car had just pulled into the first street when two young men emerged from behind the trees, exposing their erect penises to the johns, who slowed their pace. An adolescent boy with a thin moustache approached their car, showing off his goods, letting it be known that he would have sex with men or women, no problem. Then another approached

from Hamadi's side. The car had barely passed the two men who had emerged from the trees when a row of transvestites emerged in their tight women's clothing, hair cut like girls', and their faces smeared heavily with makeup. They were sauntering around flirtatiously, winking at passersby, snapping their chewing gum, and blowing air kisses to drivers.

Only a few steps away from the gays and transvestites were the "open-air" prostitutes, who would have sex in that very spot for a small sum—no more than fifty dirhams. You would just head into the wooded area nearby, take off your pants, and finish off the job on all fours, like a wild dog, without a condom or any other protection. If one of the prostitutes asked you to wear a condom, that usually meant she had HIV. They stood there, legs swollen from fatigue, only a few feet separating one from the other, while stoned young men stood by to watch over them and take a cut of the profits. This type of prostitute was at the bottom of the barrel. Most of them were over forty and were either divorced or widowed, but still had families to support. If no one chose them that evening and the night passed without any business, they would transition to begging at daybreak. Or they would give a quick blowjob in an alley for twenty dirhams.

This was the sex market that began every night at midnight and lasted until daybreak. Competition intensified on the first Saturday of the month, when men's pockets were flush with their wages. Hamadi loved taking an excursion through this dissolute marketplace. It really turned him on. But he cut

the tour short and their trip abruptly ended at Hotel Scheherazade, crushing Nezha's hopes of heading to one of the nightclubs in Ain Diab.

From the outside, Hotel Scheherazade seemed like a respectable establishment, but it was really a dressed-up brothel. It was located on a narrow street downtown, surrounded by bars and cafés. However, it was rare that a tourist would stay there, since the dimly lit sign bearing the hotel's name was barely visible. The girls who hung around the neighborhood were hunting for customers they could bring back to the hotel. The proprietor was a reformed drug dealer who was able to launder money through the hotel. He enjoyed police protection and had made shady deals with the authorities so they would turn a blind eye. After all, it was illegal for a couple to share a hotel room without providing their marriage license.

The big problem for men like Hamadi, who relished their rare nights out on the town, was where to hide away with their girls. Most of the hotel's repeat clientele were serial adulterers, addicted to cheating on their wives. The bulk of them were respected officials, teachers, and other government employees. The way things worked at the hotel was that a customer paid for two rooms: one for himself, and a separate one for the girl with him. Of course, once inside, they met up in the same room. Added to the room charge was a fixed price for "special patrons"—an extra charge so the police would turn a blind eye.

Nezha was one of the familiar faces at the hotel. When she approached the reception with Hamadi—both of them stumbling drunkenly—the doorman quickly greeted them, knowing a generous tip awaited him. Though he was yawning at this late hour, he cheerfully opened the door. There wasn't really any furniture in the seedy lobby, just a single tattered couch that the doorman slept on, and a chair with a broken leg that looked completely uninviting to sit on. It was clear that the lobby was not designed to welcome any sort of normal guest.

As they approached, the concierge tossed his newspaper aside and pretended to be serious. "Is this man with you?" he asked Nezha, as if he'd never met her.

Nezha glanced at herself in the broken mirror on the wall and fixed her short skirt. "I don't know him. I've never seen him before," she replied.

She lit a cigarette and blew smoke in the concierge's face. He was young, with stern features. He was overdoing his questioning, as if his job, and the hotel, were respectable. He had run through the formalities of this check-in procedure many a time, and being vigilant demanded that he treat all guests as if they were new arrivals. He placed one key in front of Nezha and a second in front of Hamadi. This part of the night always embarrassed Hamadi. Preferring not to say anything, Hamadi gave the concierge a conspiratorial smile, and then placed the money for the two rooms in front of him, along with an overly generous tip.

The room they shared was lit with a single dull lamp that belonged in a basement, not a hotel room. There was a sagging bed in the middle of the room that had clearly been hastily straightened out. A single long pillow without a cover was perched on the bed, on top of a stained bedsheet. There was no way that sheet was getting clean, no matter what laundry detergent was used. The bathroom emitted a strong smell of something in between bleach and urine. A filthy curtain covered a tightly locked window that looked like it hadn't been opened in years.

Nezha sat down on the edge of the slightly damp bed. As she stretched out on her back a cockroach shot out from under the bed and climbed the curtain. Nezha hitched her dress up higher to reveal her beautiful ivory thighs. Her soft white skin exuded the youthfulness of her tight twenty-year-old body. Quite the opposite of her face, ruined by all the smoking, late nights, alcohol, and makeup. Hamadi studied her for a while, attempting to dismiss whatever was troubling him. Something didn't feel right this time, and it was spoiling his mood. He looked at his watch. It was two thirty. He gazed at Nezha, but wasn't turned on at all. She sensed his boredom and began shifting around on the bed, posing in different erotic positions, copying what she had seen in pornos.

Nezha's antics didn't do much for Hamadi. What got him going was moaning coming from the bed in the room next door. There were shrieks, gasps, delirious laughter, and other sex noises. In a heartbeat he stripped off his clothes and lay

back on the bed. That was really all he had to do, since Nezha was determined that tonight she would help him reach a new horizon of pleasure. She was hoping to fulfill his desires twofold, in hopes that he would be more generous, so she could pay Farqash. Merely the thought of Farqash filled her with dread; she remembered his vile spit in the back of her throat. She refocused, trying to lose herself in lust with Hamadi. This customer could be her savior with his generosity.

She straddled him and began to dance above him, whipping him with her hair and driving him crazy. She started massaging his ruddy, flabby skin, and he moaned as she sucked him off. Every movement she made reflected her total absorption in the task, and Hamadi felt he was going to pass out from pleasure. They were naked on the bed as she embraced him, drew him in, licked him, and teased him with her tongue. She kissed him passionately all over his body, doing everything in her power to keep him erect. Hamadi's weakness was that his interest would wane halfway through.

She had slept with all types of men, and in the process had liberated herself from feelings of shame, disgust, or superiority. Nezha undertook her work with complete professionalism, and even took satisfaction in doing it well.

Hamadi was overwhelmed, and began moaning and speaking deliriously. Unable to process anything, he simply let out a shriek, like a calf being slaughtered.

Nezha lay beside him, still sweating. He turned toward her and began showering her with compliments. To his weary

eyes she seemed so full of life. He was seized by an intense jealousy when he thought about her doing the same thing, with the same vigor, with other men. She lay there, thinking about opening up and telling him everything—divulging the details of her problems with Farqash. She thought about bringing up even more intimate things—her mother’s illness and brother’s unemployment—as a way to tug on his heartstrings, in hopes that he would be more generous with her than last time. But if she started along this path she knew he would withdraw from her, and retreat into a deep slumber.

She lit a cigarette and exhaled the smoke as she listened to the far-off moans, creaking beds, and other exclamations of love from the other rooms. She found consolation in taking deep drags from her cigarette and blowing out the smoke. This old man, after a long night, saw nothing but a cheap body he craved for an evening, and that was it.

For the first time ever she imagined her fingers sneaking toward his wallet, which was peeking out of the pocket of the pants tossed on the chair. If she found the cash to free her from her problems she would steal it. She hesitated, and just as she started to creep off the bed she heard the sounds of boots climbing the stairs. She heard knocking on one door after another and voices in the hallway yelled “Police! Police!” Had they come to arrest her just because she’d *thought* about stealing?

Nezha held her breath. Hamadi opened his eyes, his thoughts racing, and he began scanning the room. They both froze, still naked, waiting for what was to come.

There were two light knocks on the door, as if room service were making an inquiry.

“This is Detective Hanash. Open the door,” said a calm voice.

Shaking, his legs barely able to support him, Hamadi hastily got dressed. He zipped up his fly, on the verge of collapsing.

2

DETECTIVE HANASH WAS IN HIS fifties, and only a few years from retirement. Everything about him suggested a man who had spent a lifetime interrogating criminals, studying murderers, and unraveling clues to crimes. This was how he got the nickname “Hanash,” which meant “snake.” His real name was Mohamed Bineesa. He would change character by “shedding his skin” and then “strike” his prey. Those who met Detective Hanash for the first time immediately got a sense of his strange personality, and those who had met him on multiple occasions tended to find him quite unpleasant. He was tall and slender, but had a smallish head that was always tilted toward his left shoulder. He had beady eyes without eyelashes that cast a confrontational expression. With a furrowed brow, he would stare sharply at his interlocutor with a suspicious and probing glare, as if he were searching for an accusation to pin on him. He had acquired this behavior from the excessive amount of time he spent with criminals. Even in his personal life he was incapable of relinquishing these mannerisms. He always seemed distracted

and preoccupied by his thoughts. He never expressed interest in what others said. Nonetheless, everyone attested to his intelligence and total devotion to his work.

After so many years together, his wife, Naeema, had become a carbon copy of him—she was headstrong and extremely suspicious. Her demeanor never changed, no matter how much makeup she put on. She had dreamed of being blonde, but she was a brunette with darker skin. She had a deep, hoarse voice, and words seemed to rattle around in her throat. Despite these attributes, Hanash considered himself lucky. She was the ideal wife for someone in his profession.

In addition to being a skilled housewife, Naeema had learned a tremendous amount from her husband—in particular, his investigative techniques. She was aware of everything that transpired in the neighborhood; nothing got by her. Her speech was circuitous, and she would never reveal her true intentions. When chatting with someone her eyes would shift instinctively, as if any opinion she didn't share was dead wrong, or as if the speaker was lying. She considered even the most trifling family details crucial, and she had loyal informants—starting with the maid. She could thread together a scattered story from loose ends. She would trim any unnecessary details until she formed a crystal-clear picture. She would extract lively stories from her neighbors' chatter and gossip and then report them to her husband when he returned at night. He would feign interest to humor her, acting as if everything she told him was crucial to his own work. Sometimes he

would even jot down something she said to make her feel like her intel was vital. She didn't really care if he believed her or considered her a gossip queen; what was crucial was that he didn't interrupt her, never appeared to tire of her, and showed surprise at the right moment. He would even ask about the sources of her information, and then charge her with pursuing her investigations further.

Naeema was an accomplished cook—her skill in the kitchen was unparalleled. She was always up early, rain or shine, to start her day in the kitchen. Listening to traditional music, she would prepare breakfast with finesse and concentration. As soon as the family left the house in the morning and the maid began cleaning and dusting, she would dive into preparations for the next meal with equal relish. She would pop in another CD, turning the volume all the way up, taking advantage of the empty house.

Of course, Hanash rarely returned for lunch, and so she would engage in some detective work of her own—covertly questioning one of his assistants in the hope of confirming if he would be home. If he wasn't, she would prepare a meal, even a traditional tagine dish, and pack it up like one of those prepared meals from a restaurant. Despite this, there was little intimacy in her relationship with her husband. It had been years since Hanash had demonstrated the type of passion they had previously shared. He used to take her by surprise in the bedroom even before he had time to take off his police uniform and disarm. In thinking about their

passion-filled past, Naeema couldn't help but think how her current situation simply didn't compare.

Hanash had lost his desire for his wife and had been avoiding her for some time now—and she knew it. She chalked this up to his constant preoccupation with murderers, criminals, and other derelicts. The problem was, he was more distracted from her than ever before. Criminal activity had increased over the past years, due to rising unemployment, violence, terrorism, and access to the Internet, which helped in the globalization of criminality.

Outside of the bedroom, however, her married life was great. She lacked nothing. Her husband even gave her control over the family's financial matters, placing piles of cash in her care, never even counting it. He would give her unexpected gifts, though they were things that had been given to him. He never bought anything—everything he wanted was given to him for free—he just picked up the phone and ordered. He always had her back when she had disagreements with the kids, regardless of whether she was right or wrong. He only asked for one thing in exchange for all this—that she not cast so much as a speck of doubt on his relationships outside the home, which included not asking him about the women whom he greeted on the street, mentioned in passing, or whose names popped up on his phone.

Hanash's home was a villa from the French colonial period—a time when villas were luxurious, with high ceilings, spacious rooms, sweeping balconies, and lush gardens. As of

late, high-rises had been creeping closer to this neighborhood on one side, and a single villa was now worth ten million dirhams, if not more. Hanash had taken notice of this trend, and with a bit of meddling here and there, he was successful in transferring the villa from governmental ownership to his own personal possession. A huge sum no doubt awaited him if he ever thought about selling.

Hanash and Naeema had a son and two daughters. Manar was twenty-five and couldn't exactly be described as beautiful or ugly. From her father she had inherited an unsettling smile, beady eyes, and olive skin. Manar hadn't completed her studies, and in place of going to university she got a certificate in hairdressing. She opened up a salon that her father was able to rent for her at an extremely reasonable price through his connections. He outfitted it with all the best equipment, and her clients took to calling her salon "The Commissioner's Daughter."

Tarek was the youngest in the family. He was in his second year of university, studying law. His aim was to pass the police academy exam after he got his law degree.

Atiqa, their second daughter, was the only sibling who had inherited her grandparents' good looks. She had men swooning over her and asking to marry her before she even turned twenty. Despite her father's urging, she did not complete her studies, but instead fell in love with the young man who became her husband. He was serious and handsome. He got a degree in accounting, and then went on to find a

good job in the Marrakesh tax administration. Atiqa had been determined to marry him and refused to listen to opposing viewpoints. It had been impossible to dissuade her. So, in the end, her father gave in. He conceded to himself that the apple hadn't fallen too far from the tree when it came to Atiqa and his wife—both were content as housewives.

Before transferring to his current job in Casablanca, Hanash had completed an impressive stint in Tangier as the head of the criminal investigation unit focused on drug trafficking. It was a real golden age for Detective Hanash, during which he amassed both wealth and experience. His infallible police instincts led to his involvement in the Grand Campaign, which resulted in the imprisonment of some of the country's biggest hash barons, along with other crooks from the government's security apparatus. They included stubborn politicians and stingy businessmen, who were arrested either because they hadn't handed over their kickbacks or because their competitors wanted to take over their positions and business interests. Any charge of involvement in drug production or trafficking could land a suspect in prison for years.

The fame that Detective Hanash achieved in Tangier through his leading role in the Grand Campaign preceded him, to the present day. He became a national hero in combating drug trafficking. Of course, the campaign went down with the cooperation of certain higher-ups, who made millions from the hash industry in Tangier. They knew about the

operation against the hash barons well in advance. In fact, they had prepared a blacklist for Hanash, which included the names of anyone who couldn't pay up, or who just needed to be eliminated.

This campaign followed on the heels of intense lobbying by European nations, which accused the Moroccan government of being lenient toward the drug organizations. Several reports had been published in the foreign press that labeled Morocco “Africa’s Colombia” and singled out several prominent officials for accepting bribes and being involved with the international drug mafia. A few Spanish papers claimed that hash brought billions of euros to Morocco—more than all other foreign exports combined. The straw that broke the camel’s back was an intense campaign by a Spanish lobby that aimed to pressure Morocco into reducing its fishing yield and agricultural exports in the European market. The government saw no other way to appease Spain than carrying out this campaign. Prior to the operation, necessary measures were taken to protect the fat cats. And it was none other than Detective Hanash—Tangier’s top investigator at the time—who oversaw all these preparations.

Just a few weeks prior to the start of the campaign, Hanash submitted a list to his bosses that included the names of drug dealers who would take the fall, as well as the members of the security apparatus and businessmen connected to them, who would also be charged. After the well-publicized trials and delivery of the sentences—many for decades of imprisonment—the

press declared Detective Hanash a hero, and he was quickly appointed head of criminal investigations in Casablanca.

Detective Hanash's big score in the Grand Campaign in Tangier, however, was his beloved mistress, Bushra al-Rifiya. Her husband Mohamed, nicknamed al-Sabliyuni meaning 'the Spaniard,' had been abducted by a gang that insisted that she not notify the police. She did the exact opposite, and called Detective Hanash.

When she entered his office that morning, he knew right away that she was the wife of either a high-caliber drug dealer or a shady businessman. She was clearly the type of woman who played with fire. Hanash couldn't get any words out at first, and he could feel his heart start to race. It was a warm morning, void of the easterly wind common in Tangier. Hanash was used to dealing with beautiful women, since the city swarmed with gorgeous women of the north who had Andalusian roots. But Bushra was something else altogether. She had a mesmerizing smile, an elegant nose seemingly carved from marble, and warm honey-colored eyes that you could never get enough of. He guessed that she was in her mid-thirties.

He extended his hand and asked her to have a seat.

What would bring a woman like this to the office of the drug cartels' number-one enemy?

"Yes, ma'am. What can I help you with?" he asked, trying his best to maintain an authoritative tone.

She stared at him with unexpected calm. "Are you . . . Detective Hanash?" she asked.

He looked around as if she were referring to someone else and then took a moment to scrutinize her. “My real name is Bineesa,” he said finally, “but if you know who it was who first called me Hanash, I want to bring him to justice! And you? Who are you? And how did you get into my office?”

“I bribed the guard,” she said casually, gesturing toward the door.

Hanash leaned back in his leather swivel chair, clasped his hands behind his neck, and looked at her carefully. He was starting to have serious doubts—was this a ruse? Her smile, self-assuredness, and calm were indicative of a woman who was used to all the chips falling in her favor. On top of that, her devastating beauty gave her a confidence he had never seen before. She was calm and collected, knowing in advance that she would always receive a warm welcome.

“May I have the pleasure of knowing with whom I’m speaking?”

“My name is Bushra al-Rifiya,” she said, staring at him as if it were a test. “I was living with my husband in Spain, and we settled here in Tangier not too long ago.”

Hanash smiled to himself even before she ended her sentence. This was what he had thought all along. He extended his hand to shake hers again, this time sincerely. She blushed and her heart raced as she wondered if he knew why she had come. She hesitated, but it was too late.

“I’m all ears. What can I do for you?” he asked gently, leaning in and giving her his full attention.

She paused. She hadn't expected such a receptive audience and needed to compose herself and calculate her next move. She wasn't prepared to share all of the details at once. She wanted to reel him in slowly. Her plan was to offer a few hints about her circumstances and then suggest that a meeting outside of the office would yield a greater reward. She shook her head a couple of times, as though she'd forgotten why she had come in the first place. Hanash cracked a smile. He knew he had her in his grasp. The snake was ready to strike. He stood up and walked over to his closed office door.

"You can tell me whatever you want. No one can hear you behind this door!" he boomed, emphasizing his point that her secrets would be safe inside these walls.

She stared into space and thought carefully, searching for the easiest way to divulge why she had come. Hanash watched as the expression on her face changed. The confidence she had strode in with gave way to a pout and she cast her eyes to the floor. She took a few quick breaths. He knew she was trying to keep her composure. He moved back around his desk and pushed the button on his phone to mute so that they wouldn't be interrupted. He could tell she was searching for a way to seem unrehearsed.

"I don't know where to start."

"Start from the beginning."

She took a beautifully embroidered kerchief from her purse and clutched it nervously. "Better to start from the end. My husband was kidnapped."

He understood intuitively that what was most important was not her husband's kidnapping, but the way in which the kidnapping would be resolved. She gave him the information, piece by piece, monitoring his reactions. This was curious to Hanash because it was the same conversational tactic the big-time drug dealers used. They would give clipped, half-sentence responses to see if their interrogator responded. And they were never in a rush. They knew that the development of the case was dependent upon every little detail they decided to share.

"What is your husband's name?" Detective Hanash asked firmly.

"Mohamed bin Bushuayb, known as al-Sabliyuni."

The detective sat back, taking his time. He was bothered by the fact that he had never heard this name before. "Is he currently living in Tangier?" he asked, as though they had been friends forever.

"He's from Katama, like me, but we were living in Spain."

This cut to the heart of the matter: Katama was a world-renowned hash paradise. He nodded, indicating that her message had been received. "Do you have a picture of him?" he asked.

There was a long silence, as if he had asked her to divulge something off limits. He turned to his computer and typed something, looking at the screen. She searched in her purse, and took out a small picture that had been in a side pocket. She looked at it adoringly before handing it over to him. Detective

Hanash stared at it intently, as though this man were his sworn enemy even before meeting him. Bushra bit her lip, convinced that she had just entangled herself in something grave. Detective Hanash knew exactly what her movements meant: that this was the beginning of an agreement between them.

“Do you know his kidnappers?” he asked nonchalantly, as if he knew the answer in advance.

“No” she said, trying hard to chart an ambiguous route.

He shook his head, knowing what she was up to. “How did you find out he was kidnapped?”

“One of them called me and warned me not to talk to the police. My husband spoke as well, and asked me not to call them. I know I’m not supposed to be here, but here I am.”

“What did the kidnappers request from you?”

“A briefcase, but I have no idea where it is.”

He got up from his desk and took a seat next to her.

“What’s your husband’s line of work?” he asked with a sense of gravity that warned her not to lie.

“I don’t know exactly. I’m just a housewife. We were living in Marbella and then moved here just five months ago. And then my husband was kidnapped.”

She sniffled, choked up, and looked as though she were about to start sobbing.

“If I understand you correctly, you want to get your husband back,” he said with feigned empathy. “The kidnappers asked you to hand over a briefcase and you don’t know where it is.”

She nodded without looking up at him.

Hanash was struck by the gall of this woman. What she had divulged so far lacked cohesion. He hadn't yet pressured her or asked follow-up questions as he would in a real interrogation. He wanted to give her a sense of assurance and listen to her without suspicion, but his years of working with criminals had taught him not to trust what she was saying. He knew she was testing him to see if he would reveal anything he knew about her husband.

She sensed that Hanash was figuring her out and starting to read her thoughts.

"I think your husband is engaged in illegal activities," he said, which clearly took her by surprise.

He was extremely polite in how he crafted this accusation. She went silent for a moment, not knowing how to respond. She knew that whatever she said next would be filed away by Hanash. She muttered some incomprehensible, barely audible remark and then shut up, thinking it better to not even venture a comment. Her mood had changed completely.

Detective Hanash returned to his desk. She did not look like a grieving woman whose husband had been kidnapped by a gang. Her outfit, composed of items from famous Spanish designer boutiques, suggested someone who clearly had other intentions in visiting the office of Tangier's most notorious detective.

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Whitefly

by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin

The Final Bet

by Abdelilah Hamdouchi, translated by Jonathan Smolin

A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me

by Youssef Fadel, translated by Alexander E. Elinson



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