

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS THE FOURTH OF THE COOCH SERIES. I CALL THEM NATIONAL security thrillers, for lack of a better term. They have the violence, sex, and intrigue common to good thrillers. There is always a national security aspect to them, since Cooch became a legal adult while training at the CIA's Farm. It was fun to give him the hook into the Muslim world with a Bedouin mother.

Pulse, the thriller before this one, was a story about a US preemptive attack on Iran over a planned deployment of a nuclear weapon against Israel.

Patriot & Assassin was about Yemen and a nerve gas attack at an NFL championship game in Dallas.

Cooch, the original thriller that won an IPPY Gold Medal for thrillers, is about how Cooch evolved and his teen summers in the desert of Morocco.

I do my research for the Cooch books. Descriptions of modern weapons and their capabilities are accurate. Of course, no one has built a quantum computer into a cell phone or even used cloud computing, but it's fun to invent what is needed for the story. Besides, if one existed, it could do what is described and more. Think of ChatGPT without the starter wheels. Think about our society with Emilie, our heuristic AI chatbot, in charge.

The education backstory is personal. I've been involved with K-6 education for forty years starting with producing a video for a troubled elementary

school in Baltimore (*The Battle of City Springs*) and with educating the intellectually gifted, financially challenged child for thirty years (Cook Honors College at Indiana University of Pennsylvania). I care and I keep track of what seems to work. Little I do has gained traction in the broader world.

The foundation idea for *The Mahdi* arose while I was reading the *Economist* magazine several years ago and read of the conflict in Israel over Bedouin ownership rights in Israel. Since I had been writing about Cooch as half-Bedouin for quite a while, I decided to pursue research to see if there was a book in there for me. There was, it was a great fit, and remains that way today. Netanyahu is still pursuing the right-wing agenda, confiscating Arab land and destroying the rule of law in Israel. The Israeli intelligentsia is going crazy, protesting in the streets, pretty much as I predicted. I heard one Israeli citizen say, “I don’t want to live in a repressive, failing, Middle Eastern Jewish theocracy. I like Israel the way it is.” Now we have the Hamas conflict with no good solution in sight, except, of course, perhaps the one I present with this fiction.

The Mahdi is the first novel where Cooch so broadly expresses himself as a Muslim. I describe the novel as one seen through the lens of the modern Muslim liberal. I don’t know of other fiction that so overtly does this.

If there is to be a solution between Israel and Palestine, it is likely to evolve from religious leadership, not politics.

—ROBERT COOK



Source: UN Ocha, 2020

SOUTH OF TANGIER

FRIDAY

THE MOROCCAN DESERT SOUTH OF TANGIER WAS HOT AND DRY, AS WAS usual at this time of year, with a wind stirring fine sand from the Sahara to the east and south. Shadows cast by the northern hills inched across a rock-encrusted sandscape toward a tented encampment, where a large group of men were seated in a circle between two large, ornate tents. Camels were tethered just beyond the circle, and an assortment of trucks were parked nearby. On the far side of the tents, women worked around several cooking fires, watching the men.

The man named Kufdani sat cross-legged in the circle's center, atop a mound of dirt and sand. His eyes were closed.

A calloused open hand drove a slap toward Kufdani's left cheek. His head jerked back enough to cause a miss, except for one ragged fingernail that caught his forehead near the hairline, bringing a thin line of blood to the surface. It matched several other bleeding scratches that mingled among a cluster of small, half-moon scars, similar but long healed. The slap from the opposite side followed immediately, but Kufdani dropped his head and lifted his right forearm to bump the slapping hand away from its target. The right-hand slap came again, part of an unceasing pattern, and again ended with a miss.

The breeze picked up another waft of sand, and another and another as the day grew into late afternoon. The watchful Bedouin crowd grew more still with each attempted slap, mesmerized, as blow after blow from a series of assailants failed to make direct contact.

“Time!” a male voice shouted at last, in Arabic.

A spontaneous shout erupted from the sitting crowd. “Kufdani, Kufdani!” They leapt to their feet and ran to help him from his perch, attempting to congratulate him by collectively pounding on his back. Several men hoisted him on their shoulders.

The Bedouin ritual was over. Kufdani had prevailed once more: no one had been able to slap him from the center spot, even though his eyes were closed. Nineteen Bedouin men from various tribes across the Middle East had entered the contest along with him. Even though their eyes remained open, each had been dislodged from his perch within the allotted three minutes of blows suffered per contestant.

Kufdani jumped from the shoulders of the men, who staggered under his shifting weight and slapped his back yet again. The others surrounded him still, waving their hands, reaching for him.

As he fought through the crowd, Kufdani decided it was time to figure out what all the excitement was about. An eager tension filled the desert encampment, and the chieftains clearly wanted something from him. The Bedouin rumor mill—active as ever—said it was about the West Bank.

It was always about the West Bank.

Pushing through the swarming crowd to the trough past the big tent, Kufdani dipped his head in the water, letting it run over his blood-spattered, sweat-soaked shirt as another tribesman pumped the handle on the aging well. Then he peeled the shirt over his head and rinsed again, until the water flowed from his thick black hair and down across his naked chest. He was tall—not quite six feet, four inches—with the muscularity of a gymnast, but thicker in the chest and stomach. A random series of ragged lines and puckered, half-inch circles appeared randomly across his torso and arms, healed masses of white flesh against his dark skin tone. Among the special

ops community, where he had spent eight years, these scars were called “zippers” and “assholes,” depending on the shape and the cause: shrapnel and knife wounds versus bullet holes. A single, long scar ran down the side of his face too, beginning in the wrinkles beside his left eye.

Someone handed Kufdani a towel, and he wiped his face before accepting a dry shirt from one of his former assailants, who was grinning at him and squinting through a swelling, newly blackened eye from his own time on the contestant perch. Pulling the shirt over his head, Kufdani moved through the crowd, grinning and slapping the impatient hands that swayed in the air, toward the largest tent in the complex. A flap was pulled back, and he eased through the crowd, stepped inside the tent, and looked for a seat.

“Here, Kufdani!” a grizzled man in traditional garb shouted in heavily Bedouin-accented Arabic. “You are next to me. We have business.”

After slipping through the last of the admirers, Kufdani stood beside a colorful cushion woven from goat’s hair where the man sat. When he shook the man’s hand, applause broke out among the throng assembled in the tent. These were tribal leaders from the large Bedouin tribes—desert people who live traditionally by tending cattle or camels inland across the Middle East. They represented more than a million Bedouin Arabs who recognize no central government or authority. Kufdani waved to them and sat down.

The tent flap was dropped, and air circulated from the skirt as it was raised waist-level around the tent’s base. In a ring just outside the flap, other men gathered in the dust, legs crossed, to listen to the elders. Body odor was prevalent both inside and outside the tent.

Mint tea was served. The aging man in the traditional honor seat was named Badawi, and he had recently been elected the leader of all Bedouin tribes—by a substantial voting margin. A successful trader in livestock, he owned a prize-winning herd of camels and kept Arabian horses in several locations, all tended by his fellow Bedouins.

Badawi wore a scarf looped around his neck and a loose cotton shirt that fell around his waist. His face was a map formed by his life’s history in the bright desert, his skin a deep mahogany, built layer by layer from decades of

exposure to the Saharan sun. Wrinkles pulled at his face and puddled near his chin and under his eyes, and hair grew densely from his ears and nose. His hands were dry and mottled with prominent purple bruises.

“Congratulations, Kufdani,” the old man continued. His speech was modulated by breath whistling past a missing incisor. “You are again victorious in our traditional game of slaps. Welcome back to the contest and to our gathering of Bedouin peers.”

“It is my honor to be here,” Kufdani replied, bowing his head slightly. “Thank you for allowing me to sit beside you during this meeting.”

“Yet something is more critical now than your honor alone,” Badawi said loudly, his voice quivering with emotion. “I have been elected spokesman for the tribes’ leadership. We need your winning skills, your leadership, in preserving the honor of the Bedouin nation.”

As he looked around the room, expectant faces peered back. “Honor is a vital component of our people’s being,” Kufdani replied in a strong voice audible to all seated in the tent. “How may I help preserve it?”

“It is the Israelis. They treat us as animals. They have stolen our land. We get no respect.”

Badawi’s voice rose.

“The Israeli government has bent our Israeli Bedouins over! The Orthodox Jews, the Haredim, are raping our Bedouin tribesmen. Their government moves our Bedouin people—Israeli citizens—from lands on the West Bank of the Jordan that we have occupied for two hundred years and then settles us by their garbage dumps. They build homes on our land for Russian Jews who don’t work, don’t serve in the military, and weren’t born in Israel. They attack our children on their way to school. A large percentage of them may not even be Jewish by DNA, though they are certainly Russian—Cossacks, mostly. Strange, no?”

“I know the story,” Kufdani said, his eyes narrowing. Knowing it didn’t make it any easier to stomach.

The Bedouin were a million strong—Sunni by religion, but Semitic by blood and historic language. Their ties to this contested land, and to their

neighbors who also lived there, were strong. And yet these cousins were afforded none of the rights or respect due as a result of their history and lineage.

“We have long lived by our code of honor, hospitality and courage, and now we ask that you help us restore Bedouin honor,” Badawi repeated. “Tribes have banded together across the Bedouin nations to discuss the Israeli outrage. After endless discussion, we finally agree: we have little chance of defeating a nation like Israel. But we are Bedouin. Our honor is at stake. *We must* fight back.”

Kufdani contemplated the old man. “And what do you say is to be done? What would you have me do?”

Badawi waved his arms to the heavens. “We choose you to lead the way! You are an imam and a business leader. You have brought prosperity to Tangier’s Yahia Bedouin.” He paused. “Our honor has been violated, and without it we are nothing. With the new Israeli leader, things will get worse. But we have the courage to fix everything—if we have the right leader.”

“I understand,” Kufdani said, nodding. The Yahia tribe in Morocco had actively fought Israel’s policies on the West Bank, even filing suit in the International Criminal Court and arranging for the Moroccan foreign minister to successfully file a United Nations motion condemning Israel’s actions as a violation of the Geneva Convention. “The United States warned the new Israeli government not to annex the Bedouin land in the West Bank. Pressure is being applied.”

“Bah!” the old Bedouin scoffed. “You talk like a woman. Pressure, indeed. Why not just kiss their tiny, bald members and ask them to treat us nicely?”

Kufdani sighed. “Again, Badawi, what would you have me do? What would the tribes have me do?”

“Do what your grandfather Kufdani would have done!” Badawi cried. “*You* are now Kufdani. Use your resources to fight to regain Bedouin honor! If we can’t regain our lands by peaceful negotiations, we must make Israel’s actions terribly expensive for them. We will shed Bedouin blood if necessary so our children can live with honor, the Bedouin way.”

Kufdani held Badawi's gaze. "You speak of shedding Bedouin blood," he said. "If it is to be shed, it must be shed under the total control of the Bedouin nation. All the tribes. There should be no holdouts, no exceptions. Sacrifices must be made, both in time and in blood. We Bedouins must be in this together."

Discipline, he knew, was everything. The old man was talking about the loosely organized Bedouin nation making war on a strong, violent sovereign nation—a military that was, person for person, the best in the world. It couldn't be done in any traditional way. Yet Kufdani was an American, Bedouin through his mother's side only, and his influence had always been limited.

"Each tribe has committed to doing what is necessary to recover our nation's honor," Badawi insisted. "We will depend on you to guide us."

Kufdani looked around the room at the silent, attentive men. "There is a time for dissent and discussion. If I am to do this, that time is over. To be your leader, I must have both obedience and dedication to my command."

He sat back on his cushions for a few moments, silent as he considered what was to be done—and whether he was willing to be the one to attempt it. Then he spoke.

"Collectively, you will recruit all tribes—even those not represented here—to our cause, and you will demand that they follow my rules as part of the Bedouin culture, as though our lives depend on it. Because they will.

"This is going to be hard. I require each tribe, depending on size, to devote one or two of its best men to our effort. Not slackers! You will provide leaders—under forty years of age would be best. I may call for assistance, and I expect to get it."

Kufdani thought for a brief moment and then announced he would send a list of requirements to the tribes, each of which would then supply names and qualifications in response. When these chosen leaders returned home from their efforts, the remainder of their tribe would be influenced by their guidance.

"This is not the time for independent action," he continued. "The full

measure of the Bedouin nation effort is impossible without the involvement and enthusiastic participation of our women too.”

He explained that each tribe would also pick a female leader for its women—one without constraint on her education. She would be chosen for her wisdom and treated with respect as a Bedouin leader, following the guidance of other Bedouin women affiliated with Kufdani Industries, in southern Spain.

Furthermore, education would be provided to all Bedouin children without exception, both girls and boys, with the help of teaching materials provided by Kufdani Industries—the same educational approach that gave rise to the commercial success of the Yahia tribe in Morocco. Together they must create a new model of the Bedouin worker, Kufdani insisted, by educating their people better than others did. Their tribes would need to develop strength going forward if they were to stop the Israelis from violating their honor again and again.

“All tribes must participate!” he said, raising his voice for all to hear. “Those that don’t will answer to Badawi and to the rest of the Bedouin nation.” He turned to the tribes’ spokesman. “I will investigate what can be done, Badawi. You will take a new reading of the tribal leaders, their followers, and their ability to obey instructions, and we will talk again in a few days.”

“No,” Badawi said. “These discussions have taken place at length already.”

Kufdani stood before the crowd of hopeful faces, thinking what an unfamiliar sight it was. “Then gather everyone’s information,” he commanded, looking down at Badawi but addressing all of his people too. “Choose your leaders, and tell me about them in writing. Prepare to send them to me. I will contact you with guidance in a few days and then expect your response within a week.”

The spokesman nodded enthusiastically. “The Bedouin nation is committed to you as our leader in this matter of honor. We await your command, Kufdani.”

Kufdani nodded in return. “I expect obedience if I am to undertake this

matter. If I, as your leader, commit fully to this endeavor, I expect each of you to respond in kind.”

Dinner was within sight, and Kufdani longed for a good night’s sleep before his return to Tangier in the morning—the sleep he could find only in the dark emptiness of the desert.

“Now,” he announced as he sat down, “let’s get back to our tea.”

TANGIER

SATURDAY

ALEJANDRO MUHAMMAD CUCHULAIN STROLLED DOWN A HALLWAY SURROUNDED by stone and then turned north, toward a large office space with massive windows overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the old city of Tangier. What had started many decades ago as a cavern for holding inventory of various trading goods, cut into the hills above the city, had evolved into Kufdani Industries, a huge office and manufacturing facility that extended deep into the mountainside. Five independent executive facilities, including offices and residences, filled the north wall of that complex—behind which were four hundred thousand square feet dedicated to offices, a warehouse, a medical center, a cafeteria, and a computer processing center—all perched six hundred feet above the Mediterranean.

“Here he is!” Brooks Elliot said, standing with a grin for the tall man built like a gymnast who had entered the meeting room. “Is it Kufdani or Alex today?”

“I think I’ve had enough Kufdani for a while, so I’ll answer to the latter,” Alex said, smiling as he clasped Elliot’s hand. Each man clapped the other’s shoulder. “I didn’t plan for the Bedouins to call on me for much, but—well, this is as good a time as any to discuss what’s going on.”

Alex studied the group of four middle-aged adults lounging around

an enormous ceramic table inlaid with colorful tiles: two men sitting cross-legged on a padded circular bench, and two women stretched out on enormous cushions covered in a complex weave of orange and brown with yellow flecks, sipping mint tea from heavy ceramic mugs. On the floor in front of the women sat a small, ornate wooden table with a battered ceramic teapot warming over a burning candle.

Each of the five owned a stake in Kufdani Industries, an investment group that included a venture capital firm in New York; majority ownership of Axial Systems, a software and physics company; and a private venture finance firm. At its center was Kufdani Trading Company, a decades-old trading company with more than thirty thousand employees and offices across Europe and the Middle East.

Alex had been looking forward to the whole gang getting together again.

He had been an American for most of his adult life, first as a US Marine and then for eight years as an operator in the CIA special operations unit, but had spent each summer with his Bedouin grandfather as a child, learning about Islam and life as a Bedouin. Several years earlier, Alex had inherited the Kufdani Trading Company from his grandfather and began to build the company it had become, first adding Kufdani Ventures and then purchasing most of Axial after being an investor since its IPO and seeing it through a few financial challenges. Once Kufdani Industries had taken Axial private, the US National Security Agency had discovered its power. Revenues had skyrocketed while costs stayed subdued because, once conceived and written, software is cheap to reproduce, copy after copy.

Now here he was, with some of the people he cared most about.

The Kufdani Industries executive strategy team waited for Alex to suggest where the discussion should go. One of the women was blonde, stunningly attractive, distractingly busty in a polo shirt, and relaxed. Her hair was wet from a recent swim and carelessly arranged, and she wore loose, casual blue cotton shorts and flip-flops. She was Caitlin O'Connor, the smartest person in the world—or so she claimed. Few argued. She was also Alex's live-in lover.

The other woman was LuAnn Clemens, a tall, broad-shouldered Texan with sun-streaked brown hair cut short. She wore a white shirt that had experienced many washings, tailored in cowboy fashion across the yoke, and baggy cotton shorts similar to her friend's. Her feet were bare. LuAnn had once edited the *Michigan Law Review* and soon after became a managing partner in the seventh-largest law firm in America. Now, she was the wife—and better half, really—of Brooks F. T. Elliot IV: Princetonian, former US Navy SEAL, Rhodes scholar, and advisor to the president. His father was an aging US senator; hers owned an oily portion of Texas.

Brooks sat down next to Alex and across from the women: relaxed, smiling, waiting. He was slim and ordinarily handsome despite standing well under six feet tall, with regular features. His brown hair was conservatively cut, and he wore an ironed, blue cotton button-down shirt and khaki shorts. He waited patiently, a skill nurtured through countless business and political meetings.

On the other side of Alex sat Jerome Masterson, his longtime friend and CIA special ops field partner. Jerome was dark-skinned, with a full beard and long, thick arms sticking out from a gray polo shirt adorned with the US Marine Corps symbol on its chest pocket. Whenever there was trouble, Jerome was nearby and often useful: skilled at logistics and training, he was also a legendary sniper.

Alex reached into the refrigerator, pulled out a beer bottle, and popped the lid. He stuck it to his lips. "I'm tired of mint tea," he said, letting half the bottle's contents run down his throat. Then he leaned back. "So, my fellow Bedouins say I'm the last hope for restoring the honor of the Bedouin nation. They want to reverse Israel's confiscation of Bedouin land in the West Bank. If I succeed, they'll back me with citizen commitment and, of course, pay me with tribal accolades."

"What do the rest of us get?" Caitlin asked, frowning and smiling at the same time.

"You get everything I get, less the tribal accolades," Alex said, smiling around the neck of his beer bottle. "Plus, we're going to start educating the

rest of the Bedouin nation—nearly a million people. That is a commitment I got and am going to enforce.”

“Works for me. Another million kids is a big deal,” Caitlin said. The Bedouin leadership had resisted the Axial Systems education program despite the low cost and continued to under-educate women and children. From their experience teaching in Morocco, however, Caitlin and Alex had seen that people get hooked on learning. “For me, that’s the Holy Grail.”

“It’s a big risk.” Brooks shifted on the padded bench. “Shall we cut to the chase here? Do you feel this is a personal matter, a matter of family honor?”

Alex nodded. “It is.” Both his parents would expect him to defend his honor, however he defined it. “But a big potential education bonus will also help us meet our goals there. I’ll have to do this.”

Brooks shifted again on his seat. “And if we don’t agree to support you, you’ll go off into the sunset alone to fight this beast.”

Jerome Masterson chuckled. “Cooch ain’t going no place alone, especially if there’s violence involved. He’s with me, like always. I know how he thinks and acts when he’s stressed: I like it.” An African-American man by birth, now living in Tangier as a dark-skinned Arab with several wives, Jerome had some money saved and lived pretty well. For him, this could be interesting—maybe even fun. “I smell an op,” he said. “And if there’s an op, I’m in if Cooch is in.”

“Yeah, I’m in too,” Caitlin agreed. “I don’t like that racist, theocratic bullshit they’re pulling in the West Bank.” The last time she was invited to observe at Israel’s super-secret nuclear location, the Israelis had ignored her advice about how to mathematically describe a particular speculative phenomenon. “They treated me like the help. They came back later, but still.”

Alex smiled to himself. Caitlin viewed the world as her intellectual property. She could make every conversation about herself.

“Anyway, what are they going to do, give me another Fields Medal? Take the old one back?” she continued.

“I get it,” Brooks broke in. “If everyone is committed to this ill-defined, boundless, and most assuredly dangerous venture, so am I. We agreed on the

education part long ago, and we knew it would be slow and incremental. I guess this is just as good a way as any to get there.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” LuAnn asked. “Do I get a vote?”

Alex grinned. “For sure you get a vote, and for sure we need you. You make money for us, don’t you? Plus, you’re with Himself.”

“You sure are a smooth talker,” LuAnn snorted. “I vote to spend as much as we need to, and involve all of us to support Alex in his mission.”

“I really appreciate this vote of confidence or complicity or whatever it is. I’ll go to Israel to try to sort this out with their leadership,” Alex said, walking to the wet bar and grabbing another beer. If nothing else, the five of them would have a good time planning it all. He wouldn’t be looking to engage the Israeli people in this venture—only their government. “I can’t imagine I’ll get much of a hearing, though. What we do after that is what should get their attention.”

He popped the cap and stood, gazing at Tangier harbor. Yesterday he had been getting his face slapped. Today he was looking over one of the best views in the world, thinking about his new mission and the many, many moving parts he would have to put in play all at once.

“You’ll need to get your ducks lined up in DC if you’re going to engage with the Israelis,” Brooks called out from behind him. “I assume you’ll be making that trip before long, so I’ll head there in the morning and get to work doing the prep. Good thing the president likes you . . . for now.”

“Yeah,” Alex chuckled. “I have to stop and see my sister in New Jersey anyhow. My mother is over there right now.”

“Oh, visiting with Elena’s family should be fun,” Brooks said. “Has your brother-in-law warmed up to you yet?”

“Not in the fourteen years since he married my sister, so I suspect it’s a lost cause.”

“If the Israelis get intransigent, I have a few ideas that could be enjoyable for us while inconveniencing them quite a bit.” The focus was back on Caitlin, who had worked full-time for over a decade on developing “Emilie,” the name she chose for her software product that tied big-data analysis with

predictive analytics. Emilie collected vast amounts of data in the cloud, then produced stunningly accurate predictions—what the requestor should do next, and where—using the power of artificial intelligence combined with the speed of a top-secret quantum computer: the Kphone, cleverly disguised in its cheap plastic case.

Alex turned to look at Brooks, who had a faint smile on his face. “As a representative of the president of the United States, with the rank of ambassador,” Brooks retorted, “I do not want to hear about ideas like that from a woman like you.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you too.” Caitlin grinned.

“Caitlin and I will talk it through. Get some rest, everyone,” Alex advised.

He thought for a moment. The Israelis owed him big-time, so perhaps Mossad could arrange a meeting with the new prime minister.

Now it was his turn to grin. “I’ll call Guns Epstein tonight and catch up.”

MOSSAD HEADQUARTERS, TEL AVIV

SUNDAY

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, AT MOSSAD HEADQUARTERS, NORMAN “Guns” Epstein put his heels on the edge of his steel credenza and turned slightly to the older woman sitting across the desk. Sheila Pelzer had tight gray hair and an aging, formerly attractive face atop a body pointing to age seventy. She was alert as ever, though—by necessity.

Epstein had asked her for a short-notice meeting, which was unusual behavior for him. Still, he was on the shortlist to succeed her as head of Israel’s foreign intelligence body, Mossad, so the meeting was easily arranged. She studied him over the rim of her teacup. His enormous biceps stretched the sleeves of his shirt—thus the nickname “Guns.” He had long run Mossad’s intelligence efforts in the United States under the cover of an electronics engineer teaching at the graduate school at New York University, returning from New York with upper arms the size of tree trunks. Now he was firmly in place in Tel Aviv as her number two.

“I got a call yesterday from a friend in the dark world—a Bedouin sheik, half American,” Epstein began. “He’s upset about the recent West Bank business and the stolen land argument. The Bedouin tribes have collectively appointed him to discuss the issue with the new prime minister.”

Pelzer understood his concern. “What makes him think he can see the prime minister?”

Epstein shrugged. “He wants us to arrange it for him.”

“And we should do that for him . . . why? Because we’re known as the softie Mossad?”

“No,” Epstein replied. “Because he was the guy who put together the Iran attack.”

Now Pelzer got it. “Ah, it all comes together now,” she said. “Cuchulain, the CIA guy.”

Some kind of a tactical-explosives maven, this operative had told the Israelis exactly when the attacking Arabs would be coming and, at no small personal risk, bootlegged several thousand of those terrific Coochmore mines that the Israeli forces had used so effectively. Pelzer remembered the exact number of dedicated Muslim antagonists who wouldn’t be fighting the next round because of Cuchulain’s warnings and equipment: 8,721.

“That battle coverage was very well done, and slaughtering the cream of the local Islamists was a big win for Israel,” she admitted. “I’ll bring it up with the prime minister. A meeting is not much to ask, I suppose.”

Epstein sat back on his chair and gazed blankly at the computer screen. Pelzer knew he was working out how to explain the risks and rewards of a situation like this to someone at least as smart as he was.

“We both know the arrogance Alex Cuchulain will face from our prime minister. How Cooch will deal with that arrogance is a national security risk,” Epstein said. “Worrying about how to prevent national security crises is what we do. In this case, we worry about Cooch. He could be a problem.”

“Mmm. This particular ‘problem’ is connected to the White House through Mac Macmillan and Brooks Elliot, no?” Pelzer asked. Although Epstein was familiar with this group from his younger days, when he was running Mossad’s US division, Pelzer herself knew Colonel Macmillan well—a formidable opponent and a vicious, ruthless, experienced man. Alarm bells were beginning to tingle in her head. “Give me your assessment of the whole cabal, individually and as a group.”

Epstein nodded, then leaned forward. “A cabal is indeed what Cooch heads. There are four key players in addition to Cuchulain. As you know,

Elliot is a special ambassador to the US president. And Macmillan is Cooch's former boss at the CIA—he's somewhere in the National Security Advisor's shop now, and well respected.

"Cooch is the leader," Epstein continued. "He's a cold-blooded killer wrapped up in a façade of civility. There's no one as cool in battle as he is. He was a US Marine assigned to CIA special ops for eight years—reflexively violent when confronted and enormously competent at committing violence, both personal and unit.

"Cuchulain then went to Pittsburgh for a computer science and electrical engineering degree at Carnegie Mellon," Guns explained, "before heading off to Oxford for a master's degree in Islamic studies.

"Now he runs a gazillion-dollar trading company out of Tangier, plus a big private equity fund in New York," Epstein said. "He's filthy rich and well connected. And his girlfriend claims to be the smartest person in the world. I'll get to her in a moment."

Epstein stood up to refill his cup from a coffee pot on a plain wooden table. The cup was clearly a favorite: the purple NYU logo was fading, and the porcelain was stained a little by age and countless refills.

"We can deal with Cooch and Brooks Elliot if we have to. They're just a pair of smart, well-connected wolverines. Cooch's number two guy in anything related to violence, Jerome Masterson, is a retired US Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant living in Tangier—a legendary Marine sniper and trainer," he went on. "Cooch and Masterson were battle partners. They are very close. We can handle him too, but he has reach."

Masterson was head of security at Kufdani Industries HQ in Tangier, Epstein told her—the largest trading company in the Middle East, with offices in twenty-eight countries, nearly thirty thousand employees, and a fleet of fat cargo ships and airplanes that carried premium cargo around the world. In addition to his offices and residence, Masterson had a 15,000-square-meter training facility. He was paid to run a very elite warrior training program for the Moroccan minister of defense—the king's cousin, who was a good friend of both Cooch and Elliot. Rumor had it that Masterson's program

had trained some eight hundred warriors, mostly Bedouin, primarily using South African 40mm belt-fed weapons.

“Now,” said Epstein, “about the girlfriend.”

HOW CAN I POSSIBLY EXPLAIN Caitlin O’Connor and the risks she represents? Guns thought, uncertain of how to fully distill the dangers inherent in someone who won a MacArthur Fellowship at age twenty-five and a Fields Medal at twenty-eight.

Guns had an interesting character of his own. His reputation in the field, back when he was running the US for Mossad, was that of a strong, direct, and ruthless operative. Among Mossad’s more politically sensitive and astute, he was seen as a bit of a cowboy, slow to get on board with consensus. That was probably why he was popular with the Americans—both local operatives and Jewish civilians. Sheila Pelzer liked him too.

“The one we might not be able to handle is the smartest member of this little cabal—a particle physicist named Caitlin O’Connor,” he said. “She rents her brain to the NSA, which in turn pays her company, Axial Systems, several hundred million dollars a year—plus another twenty million to cover her residence and its security. What exactly they are buying is unclear.”

“My word, that’s a lot of money!” Pelzer exclaimed. “And she’s a problem for us . . . how?”

“She’s just so friggin’ smart.” Guns shook his head. “It’s disturbing. Sometimes she talks casually about things no one is supposed to know—things we didn’t know *anyone* knew. It’s as if she’s reading our mail, even when it’s in a language she doesn’t speak. She is intimate with electronics at the quantum level. Our brightest physicists marvel at her skills.”

A decade or so earlier, he explained, O’Connor had invented predictive big-data analysis and never told anyone, claiming it was intellectually obvious and not immediately important despite great promise. She was done worrying about what the rest of the world had only started worrying about.

“Today we call it ‘artificial intelligence,’” Guns said. “We’re touting ChatGPT and OpenAI as miracles. Well, Caitlin O’Connor did all that stuff years ago. No one should give her a twelve-year head start on anything intellectual. I can’t imagine the ways she could hurt us if she chose. We just need to steer clear of her.”

Pelzer gazed at him. “Can I get her with a love hawk?”

Guns snorted. “Last time we tried that, we lost the hawk after she screwed him half to death and told him he was stupid. He quit Mossad and got a nice, quiet job teaching physics somewhere. And she’s just as much a pain in the ass as ever.” Guns had argued against that plan the first time and would argue all the more strongly this time around.

Pelzer raised her hands in front of her face. “What about your pal Cooch? Maybe he can be convinced to stray toward another woman . . . or maybe he goes both ways?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Guns replied. “And Cooch already is unfaithful to Caitlin, but only because she wants it that way.” He’d heard that O’Connor liked to “interview” top post-grad physicists with a lip-lock or something even more intimate, and that Cuchulain had long since accepted that part of the relationship.

“That’s odd. So, what is he like as a person?” Pelzer said. “Without O’Connor, and separate from business. As it affects *us*. How do you sum him up as a threat?”

There’s the question, Guns thought. *Cuchulain is a massive threat, but how did he get that way?* Cooch’s post-CIA relationship with Macmillan was already in place when Guns had started in New York over a decade earlier, and his youth was beyond Mossad’s reach except in the most academic way. But Guns knew how to spin hearsay into a story.

“As an individual, Cooch thinks through things more than most I’ve met in this business,” he continued, “and he’s maybe the most lethal human being on the planet.

“Cuchulain’s father, Mick, had earned the Congressional Medal of Honor in Vietnam and spent many years in a wheelchair from the wounds

accompanying that award. When Cooch got into high-school trouble, his father used Macmillan to get the boy into the Marine Corps. Then Macmillan yanked Cooch out of Parris Island to CIA special ops.”

“As I recall, Macmillan ran that group for years,” Pelzer said. “I assume this Cooch person blossomed into whatever he’s become?”

Guns took a big swallow of his coffee and thought about how Cooch had spent much of those years in special ops—studying with a master of violent movement—and how he’d ended up today.

Six-foot-three or -four, about 240 pounds, maybe 2 percent fat, he thought. Senses movement as it occurs, without seeing it. Goes against dozens of people and comes out the other side. It affects how he thinks, drives his anticipation.

Guns had seen it over and over, and it was scary. He wasn’t sure how to explain that to Pelzer, but it would be important for the longer term when dealing with Cuchulain.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s safe to say he blossomed.”

Pelzer got up, stretched her lower back, and turned to the teapot behind her. “So he could be a real pain as an individual, even aside from the group. But how smart is he?”

“Very bright and a good electrical engineer, mostly when it comes to explosive design. He’ll know what he wants and be clear about it,” Guns said. “And he’ll do whatever he promises to do, if he can. He’s a notable planner. And Elliot is a Rhodes Scholar, you know. Those two are best friends—I’ve heard them discuss Thucydides and Machiavelli, as if the two thinkers go together somehow . . . ?”

“Mmm, they do,” Pelzer said. “The latter studied the former. As did I.”

Guns nodded, though ancient philosophy wasn’t exactly his specialty. “Anyway, it almost doesn’t matter how smart Cooch is. O’Connor will be involved, and Elliot. They all will.”

This was a cabal of true experts. Guns couldn’t possibly stress that point enough.

“There’s another woman too: Elliot’s wife, LuAnn Clemens,” he continued. “She runs the money-making side of Caitlin’s business and Kufdani

Industries alike. She's a noted lawyer and quite competent—probably tangential to the West Bank thing. She's buddies with the American First Lady, so we should try not to piss her off.”

“Mmm, I suppose.” Pelzer gazed at the ceiling for a long moment. “So, it looks like this guy could do us some damage if he chose. Eliminating him would likely cause a giant problem with the Americans, so I'd recommend against that. Yet we don't know quite how to predict what he will do. So, it seems safer to set up the meeting and see what we can learn. Fair?”

”Fair,” Guns agreed. “Let me know if there's a glitch, but I'm sure Cooch will make room in his schedule for the prime minister.” He paused. “Oh, and in our world, he calls himself by his Bedouin name.”

“Which is . . . ?”

“Kufdani.”