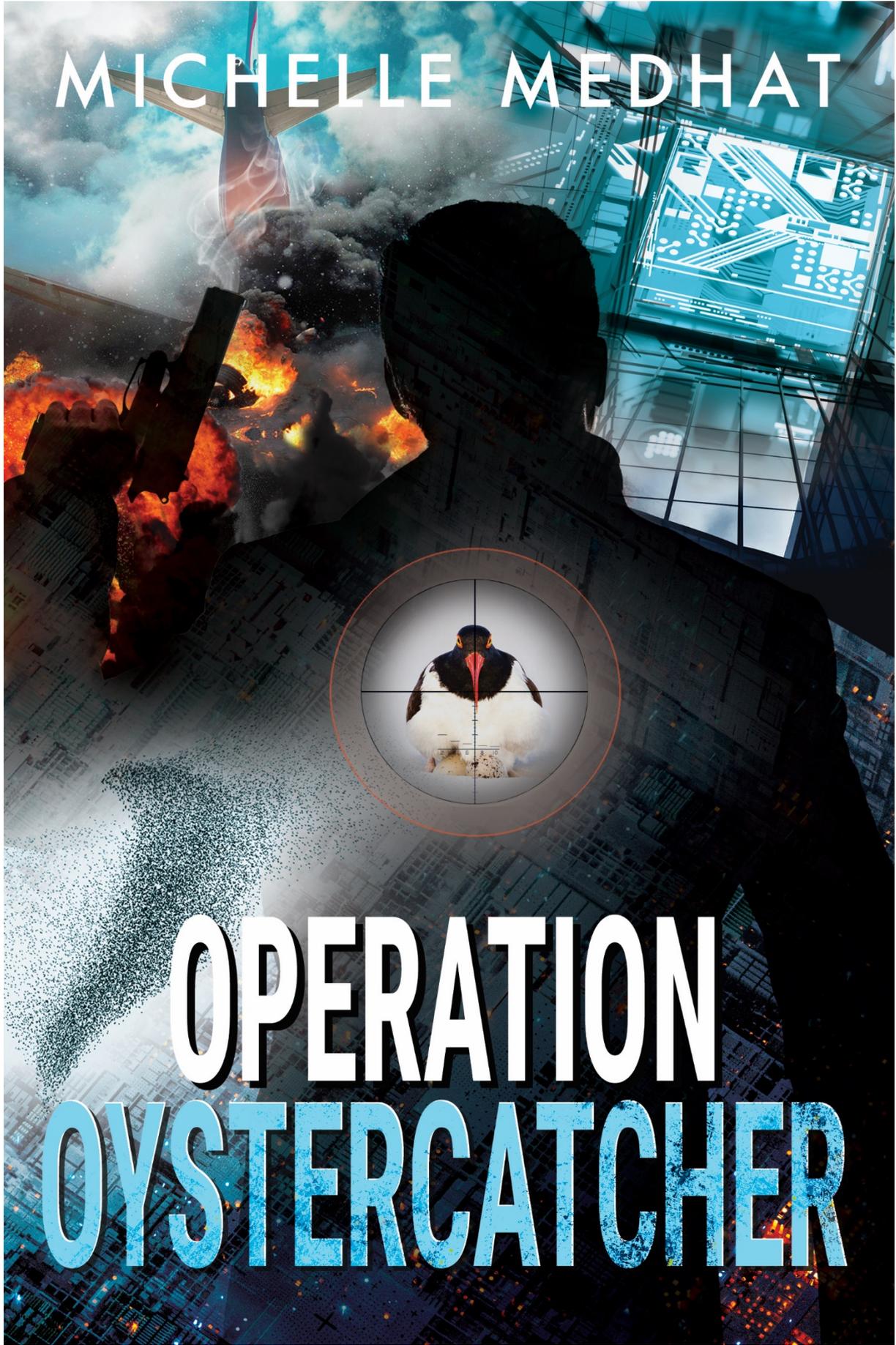


MICHELLE MEDHAT



OPERATION  
OYSTERCATCHER

# Operation Oystercatcher

## SAMPLE CHAPTER 1

MICHELLE MEDHAT

# Chapter 1

*June 7, 2015, Dubai*

Choices.

They litter up one's life. Determining paths. Outcomes.

Fate.

If only I had kept my mouth shut and fixed my eyes downward on the briefing papers instead of targeting ineffectual UK government ministers and pompous civil servants with my viciously accurate tongue and piercing glare of continual disdain and inherent arrogance. If only I'd tempered my brash attitude, just maybe I wouldn't have gotten on their radar.

Then again, maybe I'd always been there, on the periphery, just waiting to be targeted by Sir Justin Maide, head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), more commonly known as MI6.

Now, as the bullets fly past my cheek, missing me by a millimeter, I curse ever being in that meeting.

When I'd arrived in Dubai, I had no idea Russo was in the frame. My focus had been on Dr. Salim Al Douri aka Adonis. It seems my intel had holes.

I checked into the Waldorf Astoria on Jumeriah Palm. According to intel received, the meet was due at noon several levels below my suite in the fitness center.

At eleven fifty-five hours, with swift precision, I headed down to the fitness center. I turned the corner and almost smacked into a middle-aged Chinese guy with a round, flabby face and unattractive, droopy jowls stepping forth at quite a pace. He didn't look like Lao Wong, the guy I expected to see at all, and for a second, I failed to react.

"Sorry!" muttered the Chinese man, keeping his head down, and in a blink, he had vanished around the corner. I ran back trying to find him, as my SmartLens contacts linked up to the Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance systems in the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), giving a probability factor of ninety-five-point-two percent that the man *was* Lao Wong, Ministry of State Security (MSS), China. MSc in Biotechnology from MIT. Potential Al Nadir embed in Chinese Intelligence. My SmartLens proceeded to flash up intel about the guy I was supposed to intercept. I called Maide whilst I headed carefully down the corridor.

"I missed Wong."

"Ah fuck! Sam, how?"

"Arrived too early. God knows. Al Nadir aren't an exact science. He may have left the hotel. Can you get surveillance on him from outside the hotel and send ISR to me? I'm going to see if there's any breadcrumbs where he came from."

Maide, still angry with me, agreed and rang off.

I headed back in the direction Wong came from and found myself entering the men's changing room.

The room was empty, save for a guy in his forties. Dark brown hair, slightly chubby face, flared nose, thin lips. But he was tall, very tall, and muscular too. His face somehow didn't match his body. I glanced down at his shorts. There was a tinge of red that looked like blood on his thigh.

Hackles erupted on the back of my neck. And a vibe that told me something's off kicked in. I selected a locker and kept the guy alongside of me, in my eyeline. I opened my locker and shoved my gym bag inside.

The guy looked at me and smiled. I mirrored the gesture and spoke.

"Here on holiday?"

"Yeah, you too?" the man responded. He pushed an American accent, but I could still hear a faint tinge of Spanish. That wasn't anything unusual, especially if the guy was from the West Coast.

My SmartLens hadn't autoactivated. But that didn't mean I should drop my guard. I delved into my gym bag and activated SmartLens manually from my phone. The SmartLens started to scan the vicinity.

"Great hotel," I said. "Good for the kids too. Dubai's an awesome place!"

"Yeah, the little woman likes it. Always in the malls. You know what wives are like."

"Tell me," I said, waiting for SmartLens to come up with the goods. "I gotta hide the cards now."

The guy laughed. It was throaty and heavy. And again, it didn't feel like his outer appearance.

SmartLens still hadn't detected anything. I needed to drag this out. The blood spot on his thigh had gotten bigger. But he didn't seem bothered by it. It didn't look like a cut. The shorts weren't ripped. *Could be an insertion of something?* I took in his chubby face against that muscular body. His family man pretense. But he was bleeding and not giving a damn.

It was all off.

"Oh, talking of the wife, the daft bint has taken my shampoo. Have you got any?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure."

As the guy looked into his bag, I whipped out my Sig, as my SmartLens eventually gave an eighty-six-point-eight percent probability that the guy in front of me was Pedro Russo. Third in line to the Al Nadir crown.

Russo faced me with his Glock in his hand and smiled.

"Took you long enough, Sam! You boys down a bit on your prob searches?" chided Russo, stepping back toward the door, "Or have we just got so much better..." Russo touched his face. "At hiding who we really are!"

In the confined space of the locker room, if I had moved, he would've shot, and I would have too. We'd both be dead, or badly wounded, and we'd have achieved nothing from the action. My only play was to let Russo leave and I'd follow. Just as Russo stepped back, a young, blonde haired man appeared from behind, through the door to the changing room.

"What the fuck!"

I used the seconds of distraction, as Russo instinctively spun around to check out who'd spoken, and charged at Russo, smashing him hard against the lockers. I bashed his hand several times to force him to drop the gun. He punched into my side, and then into my face. But the gun fell to the floor. I kicked it away underneath the benches out of Russo's reach. I whacked the butt of my gun against Russo's temple, and his head bounced on the wooden locker's surface. His eyes flickered and then he growled, and I could feel his strength surging up. His head connected with my forehead, causing me to see stars momentarily, and it knocked me off balance.

Russo rushed at me and slammed me into the other lockers. As my back hit the lockers, I felt a shuddering pain, and my gun slipped out of my fingers. His hands grasped around my

throat. With a raging force, I pushed my hands up through the gap made by his elbows, breaking his hold on my throat. I twisted my body around and rammed him hard against the lockers on the other side. I punched him again and again in the jaw with lightning speed, but Russo shot a stinging punch to my solar plexus. I gasped, almost winded, but continued my attack on Russo. He growled. His knee came up hard, crashing into my balls. I flinched, feeling searing pain. I snarled but didn't lose focus. My fists smashed into the side of his face.

"Stop!"

I heard a gun behind me fire. The bullet hit the ceiling, showering us in pieces of plaster.

"For fuck's sake, stop!" screamed the young man. I could hear the trembling in his voice.

I pulled away from Russo, who had also halted his attack.

At the time, I was unsure as to whether the young guy was Al Nadir or if he was just a concerned citizen trying to break up a fight.

Russo stepped to the side and I turned around to face the scene. The young guy had Russo's gun. Mine had slipped under a bench on the other side. I looked at Russo. That blood spot had really enlarged now, bigger than five centimeters across.

Russo edged toward the young man, who now appeared to not quite know what to do next. On his face told the truth of his predicament. He was scared.

He waved the gun back and forth, aiming it at Russo and then at me. I could see he didn't have a clue how to handle it. His posture was inspired by too many gangsta rap videos, for he tilted the gun, holding it at the side.

Russo, I knew, could also see the young man's inability with the weapon. He slipped closer toward the blonde guy. I visualized Russo's move before it happened, but I couldn't do anything about it as I was further away, and I'd have unnerved the guy. Perhaps enough for him to fire the gun. But Russo, the bastard, made his move, and fast.

In a sweeping gesture that carried the speed of an ex-special forces soldier, he snatched the gun out of the young man's shaking hand.

Russo smirked.

"Call this professional courtesy, Sam, but I've got much better things to do than shoot you today. But next time, you won't be so lucky!"

Grabbing the terrified young man as leverage, Russo dragged him outside the changing room. I bent down, picked up my gun, and pelted out into the corridor and up the steps to the lower level reception area after Russo.

I found the young man in a ball on a leather sofa. He looked unharmed. Not sure of his mental scars though. I pushed the unfortunate bystander's welfare out of my mind and ran to the back of the hotel, toward the beach and the sea.

Russo concentrated on running away. He didn't fire. I didn't either. The pool area was chock full of families everywhere. I didn't want to hit an innocent onlooker, least of all a kid. At first, I thought Russo had the same consideration. But then I realized he's Al Nadir. He didn't give a shit about others' lives. But he did care about himself. I couldn't explain it, but I had the sense that he was preserving himself. He didn't want to be caught or hit, as his body was precious to him. Perhaps something he had on him? I thought about the growing blood spot. Or *in* him?

Those few seconds of time Russo had on me increased, as I maneuvered a little clumsily around holiday makers.

I could see the jetty in front. He ran down, turned, and fired. So much for professional courtesy!

A few small speedboats bobbed gently on the tide. One was mine, named aptly, *Trouble in Mind*.

I leapt into my boat, but Russo had already powered up his engine, reversed, and pulled away. He revolved, smiling, and shot directly at me again.

So, here I am. Getting shot at by someone who shouldn't even *be* here.

I said to Maide that Al Nadir aren't an exact science. In truth, they're a moving *fucking* feast, and always seem to be several paces ahead of me!

Russo turns and fires again. I aim my Sig Sauer and shoot, but Russo has turned that fraction of time being in front of me into a distinct advantage. Gunning the engine hard, he quickly puts a wide distance between me and him. I push the lever and the boat accelerates swiftly, and under my touch, the engine revs up. In seconds, my sleek, silver-white bullet boat rises up and skims over the azure, crystal waters on the inner side of the crescent making up Jumeriah Palm.

Russo racks up his speed, and a swell rises behind him. Waves smack into my boat dousing me in fresh salt water. Undeterred, I wipe my Ray Bans free of water with one hand, and turn the wheel sharply, burning up Russo's ass.

Bullets pepper the glass splash-back screen, cracking it, and I duck, but keep one hand on the wheel, holding tight on the boat's direction. I slip to the side, by the seats, and shoot back at Russo. I watch as liquid pours out from the side of his boat, and I know I've hit the tanks. Russo's engine screams as he pushes it hard to get away, but he's shedding diesel. He has to get to the mainland. I slam my engine to max. The stern rises up at a forty-five-degree angle, and the back of my boat digs into the sea. Like a surfer, I ride the waves, bouncing across, Russo, my quarry, in my sights. With every hit down into the waves, the water leaves me drenched. I don't care. The hot Dubai sun, unyielding in its scorching intensity, bakes me dry in minutes.

Another bullet shoots against the side of my boat. I fire back at Russo, now docked in at the marina. I swerve, narrowly missing a jet ski rider who leaps into the water, terrified. I flip the engine off and charge after Russo, who is disappearing through Carluccio's linked to Marina Mall.

I flash through the restaurant. Images of stunned tourists and shocked waitresses hit my peripheral vision. But Russo, my target, and my only concern, is getting closer. I clock mall security as I run up the escalator to the ground level, but I note their eyes fall on the gun in my hand and they hold back, just talking in their mobiles.

Russo is running fast, knocking people out the way. I tear past those fallen, kids crying, a pregnant woman howling, some old guy in a white robe with a stick holding his chest.

God, I hate it. But I can't stop.

Russo is but a few paces away. He's heading to the front of the mall. I can't let him get away.

I surge forward, my heart thunders, pushing against my breastbone, but I ignore it. I can endure more, much more. Taking a deep breath, I continue.

The glass doors of the main entrance loom up and Russo pelts through them. Through the glass, gleaming in the mid-day sun, a black Lamborghini Aventador waits, its engine gunning, causing people to turn around and stare. I literally throw myself through the mall doors, but Russo is already in the passenger seat, closing the door.

I leap towards the handle on the passenger's side, but a force pulls me back violently, and I fall onto the marble floor, so hot it sears my ass through the shorts I'm wearing. The Lambo flies away from my grasp with a thunderous growl.

"Oqaf ya sayd!" *Stop, sir.*

A gun is shoved in my face, and my own gun is snatched from my sweaty hands. Shaking with fury, I submit to another group of hands that flip me over and handcuff me.

I can do nothing.

I know the protocol. I'll wait until I'm in the police station, and then I'll request to speak to their commanding officer (CO). UAE Station can sort out the rest.

After all, it's their job, not mine.

In the grey-walled cell, I sit and sweat. No AC. No water. Just surly stares from the local plod. I demanded to speak to their CO as soon as I was hurled into the cell, but apparently, he's out, at a wedding or something.

They took my gun and phone, but not my wallet, so they still don't know who they are dealing with. Although, from the looks of contempt, I get the feeling they may have an idea that I'm not just a simple tourist there for the sun, sand...and whatever!

I just sit it out. No point in shouting and bawling. They're going to be eating humble pie, or kanafa, before long.

WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT....?

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