

LETHAL AFFAIRS

by

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PROLOGUE

Istanbul, Turkey Twelve Years Earlier

Sweat dripped from Domino's forehead into her eyes, making it difficult to focus. She'd been cooped up in this stifling room across the street from his hotel for four days, sitting at the curtained window with a view of Hamad Omar Hasan, the founder of an extremist group making life difficult for the American and U.N. Forces in his native Kuwait. Legal authorities had located him but didn't have enough evidence to arrest him, so the Elite Operatives Organization had the task of neutralizing him.

Though exhausted from the heat and lack of sleep, she watched his every move through a telescope. Years of training enabled her to shut out all distractions that might compromise the operation. This first time in the field she was strictly surveillance, so she had to notice everything. It was fourteen hundred hours—two p.m.—Hasan's usual nap time. He was lying on the couch today, though.

One of his men stood in front of the window to look out on the street, his long-standing hourly ritual.

Domino followed his gaze down three floors. Istanbul's Grand Bazaar was busy with tourists seeking handbags and rugs, colorful woven fabrics, or some type of handmade curio or piece of jewelry from one of the thousands of vendors and shops. The noisy midday traffic stirred up a haze of dust that covered everything.

A dark, four-door, late-model Audi stopped in front of the hotel. Most vehicles in the city were either rundown or older models of once-expensive cars, so this one stuck out. The guard in the window spoke into his cell phone while he continued to stare down at the street. The driver of the car appeared to be on the phone too. Was the son of a bitch finally leaving the hotel room?

The guard awakened his chief, then another of his men wrapped his turban—black, the same color as his beard. Since the owner of the car hadn't come up, Hasan must be going down. Domino took out her cell and dialed. "Take your positions. Rabbit leaving the hole." The three Kuwaitis headed for the door.

Letting go of the scope, she pulled a long robe over her clothes and wrapped the *hijab* around her face. Once on the street she climbed into the back of a nondescript, older car, one of her own behind the wheel, also dressed appropriately. A Muslim woman could not enter the car of a Westerner without drawing attention. The third EOO operative was a few cars ahead.

Years of training, pain, and no personal life all led to this moment. She was to keep low, follow the target, and update the others. No one would notice a local woman.

They drove for almost an hour in heavy traffic, the male operator cursing at their frequent stops to let people cross. Domino tried to stay focused. In the city of Esenyurt, the other operative in the car ahead called. Hasan was about to get out.

They stopped, too. *Never lose the target.* She grabbed a couple of transparent plastic bags next to her, filled with fruit and vegetables, got out, and caught up with her quarry as he exited the car. The street was jammed because of the open-air market.

A rivulet of sweat ran between her breasts. How did women endure such heat dressed in these things? *Stay focused and you won't feel the heat.*

The target appeared to be there for the market. She followed him, ignoring the stench of the dense crowd and overripe fruit. At one stall, he leisurely picked out the ripest watermelon, which one of his men then carried. They strolled on and finally entered a small Turkish café, which promised air-conditioning, coffee, and *lokum*. Hasan sat inside the café's large front window and peered at the passersby.

In the welcome shade behind a column of a nearby mosque, another good vantage point, Domino made the call. "Café Lokum, end of the market. Rabbit appears to have settled."

Less than ten minutes later, the window of the cafe shattered. One of the other EOO ops had fired from the balcony across the street.

The first bullet missed completely. One of Hasan's men jumped in front of his boss and took the second in his ear, which oozed blood before he dropped. How had the other operative missed? *It happens. Keep your focus.*

Someone fired another shot, from her left, and her confederate fell off the balcony to the street. *Fuck! Is he dead?* The shooter was screaming in Arabic something about Allah. *Damn.* Hasan had more men on the street.

Now Hasan and his remaining man opened fire from inside, and they apparently didn't give a damn who got hurt or killed. Civilians started to go down, and people screamed as they scattered for cover behind the market stalls. A woman shot in front of the café lay on the dusty ground, her toddler crying in her arms.

Amid the shots, Domino focused on the little girl trying to free herself from her dead mother's weight. She would walk right into the middle of this. *Assess and resolve.* Only two of them remained now, fighting God knew how many, and she didn't have a gun. One of Hasan's guys was firing nonstop at the other EOO operative, and the little girl wandered toward the line of fire.

Domino shook herself into action and retrieved the knife strapped to her calf. In a crouch, she silently hurried toward the shooter who'd killed the other operative, still firing from behind a tree. The adrenaline pouring through her filled her ears and drowned out even the sound of the guns. Her heart jackhammered so loud she wondered whether it might give her away.

The knife in her right hand would be fast and quiet. Behind the shooter now, Domino grabbed his hair, pulled his head back, and cut cleanly through the carotid. He dropped like a stone. Without hesitation, she sheathed her knife and hid his MP5 submachine gun under her robe, then started toward the café through the flying bullets and panicked civilians.

She still had an operative on his own who must be running out of ammo. They had yet to accomplish the mission, and she had to prove herself. *Don't hesitate. You can do this. Remember your training.*

Though concentrating on the café window, she saw the little girl on her knees, back beside her dead mother, crying while bullets flew over her head. The sight propelled her through the gunfire and past the

Turkish police, who were busily trying to arrest every local Turk and Arab. She had to act, now. *Don't overthink. Overthinking makes you hesitate. You hesitate, you go home in a box.*

Domino crept to the back of the café, intending to work around to the front as quietly as possible. But there she spotted the toilet window. She jumped with the submachine gun slung over one shoulder, hung on to the window frame, and pulled herself up. Once in the men's room, she put her hand on the door handle.

Failure is not an option. She took a deep breath and shut out everything in her head, until she could no longer hear the shooting in the next room or the cries of the little girl or the shouting of the people.

Swinging the MP5 up into position, she pushed the door open. Hasan and his man were hiding behind an overturned marble table, shooting at whatever moved. She pointed the gun around the wall and pulled the trigger, then stepped out, exposed. She fired until she couldn't hear them shoot back.

Hasan and his guard were limp, piled on top of each other on the floor, surrounded by hundreds of shells, their blood all over the place. Or was that watermelon...or both?

In a haze, she rushed back to the toilet, dumped the MP5, and shed the robe and hijab. She had to look like a lost, scared American tourist because men in robes had done the shooting. If she wore Muslim clothes, the police would question her before she made it halfway through the market.

She lifted herself up the way she had come in and was hanging from the window on the outside, about to let go, when a man shouted and pointed in her direction. He was forty feet away, yelling in Arabic for her to stop.

"Antezer kefi!" He wore a robe—another of Hasan's men—and he held a rifle.

Cursing inwardly, she released her grip and dropped, and when she faced him, he fired. The bullet hit the wall beside her head, and she grabbed the knife strapped to her calf. From a crouch, she threw it in his direction.

They both watched in silence as the blood started to spread across the front of his robe. He tried to lift his rifle in her direction but an instant later was on the ground. She ran to his limp body and dislodged

her knife from his chest. About to push her hair out of her face, she froze at the sight of his blood on her hand—a hand that seemed foreign.

More gunshots sounded from the near distance. Domino drowned out the noise and her surroundings and wiped her hands clean on his robe. She pulled out her cell to call the remaining operative. “Rabbit’s down,” she said without emotion.

CHAPTER ONE

Malta Present Day

Dawn was still an hour away, so relatively few souls were already at work in the sleepy seaport capital of Malta on this cool June morning. Bakers, of course, and vendors at the open-air market, and fishermen returning from another night of casting their nets into the warm azure waters of the Mediterranean. In the Co-Cathedral of Saint John, five priests prepared for Sunday morning mass.

The massive sixteenth century cathedral was Valletta's most important historical monument. Its lofty baroque interior and priceless art brought in tourists and had inspired Sir Walter Scott to proclaim it the most magnificent place he had ever seen.

As the eldest of the priests replaced votive candles in the chapels, he stopped occasionally to admire the ornately carved stone walls and the inlaid marble tombs of knights that comprised its floor. Stooped and balding, except for the fringed crown of gray around the back of his head that he now scratched at absently, the monsignor had been at St. John's for thirty of his sixty-four years, longer than any of the others.

In the nave, the monsignor looked up to admire Mattia Preti's masterpiece, the vaulted ceiling with its vivid scenes from the life of Saint John painted directly onto the plaster in fresco. He was drawn to the scaffolding around one scene and the intense concentration of the woman at work there.

Like most priests, he was a good listener in the way most people are not. He'd heard tens of thousands confess their sins and so was wiser than most in the nature of men and their ability to hide what was in their heart. And he had grown adept at hearing beyond words, at understanding from someone's sighs and silences, postures, and expressions what they loved, or dreamed, or feared, or needed to confess.

But the young American was an enigma. He had tried on several occasions to strike up a conversation with her about her life or her work and had found her always well-mannered, almost uncommonly polite, but guarded. And her answers to his questions seemed practiced. Never spontaneous.

He had learned she was thirty-three, unmarried, and that she never knew her parents. She traveled a lot and loved her work, she said, particularly when it involved cathedrals, and she told him her time at Saint John's had been very rewarding.

And she certainly was a dedicated and capable artisan, always there even before he was, working tirelessly, often late into the night. And the result of her painstaking efforts thus far, in the neighboring scenes, was breathtaking.

But there was much she wasn't saying. Intense, he thought. Very earnest. He wondered why such an attractive young woman always appeared so lonely. Vowing to try again soon to draw her out, he resumed his preparations for mass.

Luka Madison paused to unzip the top of her navy coveralls, shrugging out of the sleeves to tie them around her waist. Beneath, she wore a black, long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans, both molded to her five-foot six-inch frame. Comfortable sneakers completed the ensemble. Standing for long hours, day after day, seldom bothered her. She was in excellent physical condition, trim and athletically toned but not overly muscular, with dexterous hands used to long labor.

Her medium brown hair needed cutting. She generally liked to wear it only to her shoulder blades, with long bangs she could pin back while she worked, but she lacked the obsession with hair and makeup of most women and had let her usual trim slip by a few weeks longer than normal.

She preferred working in the quiet before dawn, when she heard only the occasional muffled prayers of the priests and their soft footfalls as they carried out their duties.

In an hour, the parishioners would arrive and, later, the tourists, whose constant, whispered conversations created a dull white noise to mar her sense of peace. The smell of burning candles, old and new, grew pungent high on the scaffolding, and the incredible acoustics allowed her to make out snatches of conversations from below. The families—the loving parents and patient grandparents with strings of

children in tow—saddened her, because they represented memories she had never had.

But at this time of the morning, in her solitude, she was content. For the last few hours, she had been restoring an auburn-haired angel to her brilliant, almost garish former glory, carefully removing years of candle soot and the previous restorer's handiwork to reveal what the artist had intended. The lovely face, the only area still unfinished, beckoned to her.

Luka checked her latex gloves for rips before she reached for another bottle of saturated calcium hydroxide and carefully dipped her swab. She brought it over her head once again and applied the solution to the angel's peaceful smile. As it became more vivid it drew her in.

The sudden vibration of the cell phone in her pocket broke her concentration. She checked the caller ID and sighed. Keeping her voice down, she answered. "Good morning."

The woman's voice on the other end was maternally tender. "Hi, honey. It's me. How's everything with you? Are you working?"

"I'm doing fine," Luka responded. "And yes, I'm at work. You know me, I always start early."

"That's nice, dear. I hope you make time for breakfast, though."

"I will. I have it right here with me."

"Oh, before I forget about why I called. We want you to join us for dinner tomorrow."

She frowned. "Dinner plans tomorrow? That's short notice."

"Thanks, honey, I knew you'd understand," the voice said, as though she had just readily agreed. "Don't forget breakfast. See you soon."

Luka flipped the phone shut and stared wistfully at the angel another minute before she packed up to leave.



Baltimore, Maryland

Monday

Hayley Ward maneuvered through the throng of television, newspaper, and radio reporters, positioning herself so she would be standing in the hip-hop artist's direct line of sight as he left the recording

studio. She knew every way possible to gain an advantage and didn't hesitate to do whatever she needed to get a story. For this one, she'd put on a red blouse, because it was the man's favorite color, and red lipstick.

She'd spent a lot of time on her makeup and hair, though she didn't need to. Beautiful parents had blessed her with unbeatable genes. She had full, kissable lips, a million-dollar smile with dimples, warm hazel eyes; high cheekbones; and shiny, shoulder-length auburn hair with natural wheat-gold highlights.

Hayley was only five-four, and most of the other media reps towered over her, so she compensated with three-inch heels. And when she interviewed men, she always wore clothes that showed off her perfect hourglass figure to best advantage. The blouses and tops displayed a little cleavage, and the skirts were short enough to allow a good view of her legs. Today with her red blouse, she wore a charcoal skirt and blazer with matching pumps.

She was striking, and it was hard not to notice her. Hayley counted on that fact. The crowd of media came alive as the singer's entourage emerged, and she elbowed past the *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent just as the rapper himself appeared.

Her voice was only one of many shouting his name, but she was in exactly the right spot to catch his eye, which was enough. He headed straight toward her.



Southwestern Colorado

The campus sprawled over sixty-three acres and consisted of several squat red-brick buildings, dormitories and classrooms, and larger structures that housed administrative offices and training facilities. The remote location gave it much-needed privacy from outside scrutiny, and best of all, it was adjacent to the nearly half-million-acre Weminuche Wilderness Area, which provided it with the diverse ecological environments necessary for comprehensive field training.

It looked much like the private boarding school it was purported to be, except for the extraordinary security. High razor-wire-topped fences surrounded the campus, security cameras appeared everywhere,

and the sign on the guard gate read *No Trespassing. Admittance Only With Proper Identification.*

At night, armed guards patrolled at irregular intervals. And in the administration building, a massive neo-Gothic structure with bell towers evocative of medieval cathedrals, nearly every door required a coded key card. The complex was the home of the Elite Operatives Organization, a specialized school that, in its fifty-sixth year, was still as unknown to the world as it had been in its earliest days.

Montgomery “Monty” Pierce, the EOO’s chief administrator, studied the school’s latest acquisitions as they romped on a massive wooden playset outside the junior dormitory. His fair Scandinavian complexion turned blotchy when he spent too long in the sun, even in June, so he kept his suit jacket on and chose a bench in the shade of the building.

The three boys and three girls he was inspecting ranged in age from four to six, and all were healthy, unusually bright children. But if the past was any harbinger, at least half of this current crop would end up in foster care or be privately adopted out before the age of twelve because they fell short of EOO requirements. And only one at most would have the exceptional qualities necessary to place him or her in the ranks of the school’s top graduates, the ETFs, shorthand for Elite Tactical Force.

David Arthur, Director of Training, jogged toward Pierce from the gymnasium in his customary combat fatigues. Like him, Arthur had just passed his fifty-eighth birthday, but with his lean, muscled body and dense, copper-colored crew cut, at a distance he could pass for a student.

Though Pierce had kept his weight in check, his own body, by contrast, bore the fleshiness of his years behind a desk, and his face revealed the deep creases of his frequently dour expressions.

Arthur settled onto the bench. “Any obvious standouts?”

Pierce pointed to a dark-haired boy atop the monkey bars. “Him, for sure. Agile. Fearless. From the Ukraine.” Nodding toward a red-headed girl jumping on one of the trampolines, he added, “And perhaps this one, from the Stockholm orphanage. Exceptionally high I.Q.”

“Joanne will be pleased. Speaking of whom here she comes.”

Pierce straightened his tie and sat up straighter.

Joanne Grant, the third member of the governing trio, was the least

recognizable from her days as an ETF. Since she'd become Director of Academics she'd gained ten pounds, and her once-ebony hair was now entirely white.

Only Pierce and Grant dealt with the outside world, contracting with EOO clients and making contact as necessary with the myriad high-level resources the Organization had cultivated. But when they determined how and when to utilize their valued ETFs, Arthur took an equal role. In order to ensure its elite operatives were not unnecessarily put at risk to settle a personal vendetta, at least two members of the Governing Trio had to sign off on any high-level assignment, which was the reason for today's meeting.

Pierce and Arthur rose when Grant reached them, and they set off in the direction of the obstacle course, talking as they walked.

Arthur asked, "This about the Guerrero affair?"

"Yes," Pierce confirmed. "Our contact in Cuba called over the weekend. Guerrero's moved up his return home and is leaving tonight. We're still trying to nail down the particulars."

"Tonight?" Grant increased the length of her stride to keep up with them. "I thought Allegro was unavailable until Thursday."

"She is. We can't pull her off the case she's on," Pierce said. "It's taken two weeks to get her into position to obtain the information for our Seattle client, and it all goes down tomorrow morning."

"We can't send Mark alone to get Guerrero," Arthur pointed out, quite unnecessarily.

"No. Not on his first assignment." Pierce pictured their most recent graduate. Mark Johnson, aka Sundance, was a clean-cut young man with sandy blond hair and blue eyes. "Especially since things are in flux. We need a senior ETF with experience. That's why I sent for Domino as soon as we got the call. We don't have much time, and she's the only one available."

"I hate to use one of our best on such a high-profile assignment," Grant said. "Especially since it involves so many unknowns now. It's too risky—the cops and the media will be all over this. Surely there's someone else."

They were passing the ball field, where some students were playing baseball. Grant, without looking, quickly raised her left hand and caught a hard-hit ball coming from that side that otherwise would

have hit Pierce, walking half a step ahead. The demonstration of her well-honed reflexes would have stunned anyone else, but neither man blinked.

“I know you have a soft spot for Domino, Joanne, but this job is too important to leave to someone less qualified,” Pierce said. “And tonight will be our only opportunity. I’ll have a support team in place in case they need it.”

“I don’t know...” Grant frowned, and her steps slowed, forcing the men to pause also.

“Domino is the best suited. You have my vote,” Arthur declared, ending the debate. “Sundance needs a strong second. He has the skills, but he hasn’t been tested yet. And Guerrero might present unseen difficulties. The man’s cocky and unpredictable.”

Two votes was all it took, so the trio disbanded, Grant and Arthur returning to their offices as Pierce reached for his cell phone to set things in motion.