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*The Malacca Conspiracy*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Don, 1960–

The Malaccan conspiracy / Don Brown.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-27215-1 (softcover)

1. Brewer, Zack (Fictitious character) 2. United States. Navy—Fiction. 3. Malacca, Strait of—Fiction. 4. Nuclear terrorism—Fiction. 5. Indonesia—Presidents—Fiction. I. Title.

PS36O2.R6947M35 2010

813'.6—dc22

2009046404

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Cover design: John Hamilton Design

Cover photography: Veer and iStockphoto®

Interior design: Michelle Espinoza

Printed in the United States of America

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10 11 12 13 14 15 /DCI/ 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

On the north side of the river, the jeeps turned left, driving a short distance down a street paralleling the water. They turned right off the river street and stopped in front of a small hotel. The white stucco building with ornate exterior features suggested a bygone era.

"Welcome to the Hotel Puri," Omar said. "It dates back to the 1800s, and has about fifty rooms. My boss has rented them all for our meeting."

"Yes, I know this place." The general took a drag from his cigar, which had burned down about half an inch. "Your boss is expecting many guests?"

"No, General. Just you, the doctor, and a select few others." Omar nodded at the hotel. "Shall we?"

"After you." Perkasa tossed his cigar onto the lush green grass beside the sidewalk. He stepped out of the jeep, waiting for Dr. Budi.

"Follow me, gentlemen." The Arab motioned for the general and the doctor to follow. As Omar pushed open the front glass door of the hotel, Perkasa felt the grip of his pistol. He switched off the safety, readying the pistol to fire.

The lobby was cool from the air conditioning. A large, sparkling chandelier hung down over a round table. Six chairs with red velvet cushions were positioned in a circle around the table.

"Please be seated, General." Omar motioned the visitors to their seats. "Farouq will be with you shortly."

*Classic subliminal power play*, the general thought. *Make your guests wait.*

No one made Superman Perkasa wait. He was the chief of staff of the Indonesian army, and as such, its most powerful officer.

He would not wait long.

Perkasa handed another cigar to the doctor.

"No thank you, General."

"Take the cigar, Doctor," the general ordered. "Strike it, and do what I do."

"Yes, General."

Perkasa lit a second cigar and took a long drag.

A slender Arab in white, who looked to be in his mid-forties, descended the oval staircase into the lobby. He was followed by two younger men. One looked Malaysian. The other looked Arab.

"General Perkasa." The man extended his hand. "I am Farouq Al-Fadil."

Perkasa rose, opened his mouth, and blew cigar smoke toward the Arab. "A pleasure, Mr. Al-Fadil." Perkasa nodded at Dr. Budi, who blew a second wave of smoke. "Thank you for your invitation."

"We're both on foreign soil, General." Al-Fadil smiled. "Thanks to our Malaccan hosts, whose common mindset is the same as ours." He nodded at three Malaysian officers standing around the table, their arms folded.

"Really?" Perkasa sucked and then swirled more cigar smoke between his teeth. Smoke wafted from his mouth as he spoke, rising into a cloud around the chandelier. But he did not blow smoke at the Arab. He had made his point. "And what is this *common mindset* of yours?"

"General, meet Admiral Chahava of the Royal Malaysian Navy. To his left, General Kersen of the Royal Malaysian Air Force. To his right, General Pramana of the Malaysian Army."

"Gentlemen." Perkasa nodded.

"These officers are natives of Malacca, and all three—like you and me—are members of the Great Faith."

Another drag from the cigar. "Mr. Al-Fadil, many Muslims serve in the militaries of both Malaysia and Indonesia. Your point?"

"Please be seated, gentlemen." Al-Fadil motioned them to their seats.

They sat, exchanging awkward glances. Al-Fadil broke the silence. "How is your friend, President Santos?"

"My *friend*, you say?" Perkasa smirked. "Ask Dr. Budi. The doctor is the president's personal physician."

"We know of Dr. Budi, and his father's sacrifice for our cause."

"Thank you," Dr. Budi said. He looked over at General Perkasa, as if unsure of what to say next.

"I am a busy man, Mr. Al-Fadil," the general said. "My time is valuable. What is your point?"

The Arab smiled. "My point is this: we have watched Indonesia for years." Al-Fadil motioned to one of his assistants. "Bring us drinks, please."

"Right away." A servant wheeled in a silver tray displaying bottles of Indonesian and Malaysian hard liquors and wines, along with an assortment of fruits, cheeses, and breads.

"General?" the servant asked.

"No." The general waved his hand and eyed Al-Fadil. "I am sure you did not bring us here to discuss international politics or to sip wine and eat cheese. You did not answer my question."

"Your finest red wine, please." Al-Fadil nodded at the server, who uncorked an expensive bottle of Malaysian merlot. "Ah, yes. My point..." He sniffed a splash of wine in his glass and took a sip, nodding approval at the server, who filled his glass. "We know your background, General. We know your fervent devotion to the faith. We know that under the circumstances your power is limited. The problem is not you. The problem is with your president."

Perkasa chomped his cigar between his teeth, studying the man's face.

"You are an Arab, Mr. Al-Fadil. And you are Islamic. Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic country." A drag from the cigar. "More than one hundred eighty million Muslims live in Indonesia. We are the fourth largest nation in the world. What is your problem with Indonesia?"

Al-Fadil sipped his wine. "Your country is like Pakistan was. A great nation full of Muslims, but with lukewarm leadership that is Muslim in name only, leadership that embraces our greatest enemy, the United States." Another smile. Another sip. "We took care of the problem in Pakistan."

"Bring me an ashtray." Perkasa waved to the servant.

"Yes, General." A sterling silver ashtray appeared on the table.

Perkasa put the stogie into the ashtray. "Yes. I heard that your organization was helpful in the elimination of Bhutto. If that is true, accept my compliments."

"I can neither confirm nor deny any such thing," Al-Fadil laughed. "Nevertheless, I accept your compliments." He raised his glass, as if to celebrate a great accomplishment. "Are you sure you do not wish to drink, General? Perhaps a toast to the unfortunate demise of Benazir Bhutto?"

"Perhaps later," Perkasa replied. "Bhutto sided with the Americans. So does Santos. Both purport to be Muslim." Perkasa took a drag from the cigar. "What are you getting at? You wish to assassinate Santos too?"

"Not so fast, dear General." Al-Fadil set the glass on the table. "Since you are unwilling to drink with me, perhaps I could smoke with you?"

His eyes locked onto the stogie, casting a longing look upon it. "Would you share one of those with a brother of the faith?"

"Why not?" Perkasa slid a cigar, a cutter, and a lighter across the table.

The Arab cut the cigar with the ease of an experienced aficionado, lit it, and exhaled smoke off to the side. "This is not as simple as you would suggest, General. Indonesia and Pakistan are different nations."

"Not so fast, my friend." Perkasa flung his hands in the air. "I suggested nothing. And I by no means proposed or suggested the assassination of Santos."

"Of course you did not, General," the Arab said. "I was addressing the great geographic and political differences between Indonesia and Pakistan."

"Very well," Perkasa said, having set the Arab straight. Not that he would mind seeing Santos dead, but no one would ever be able to say that an assassination was *his* idea. "Please proceed."

"As I was saying," Al-Fadil nodded, "unlike Pakistan, Indonesia controls, or at least has the *potential* to control, the most strategic sea lanes in the world. Your islands stretch across the waters from east to west in a distance greater than New York to Los Angeles. Your country, unlike any other Islamic country in the world, has all that is necessary to become the world's first Islamic superpower." The Arab took another drag from the Cuban stogie. "Except for one thing ..."

General Suparman Perkasa let that sink in. "And that would be?"

"Leadership," Al-Fadil said, without hesitation. "And related thereto, courage and vision."

Perkasa flicked a segment of white ashes into the silver tray. The Arab was correct. "Look, you know that I am no admirer of our president, or you wouldn't have gotten me here. But as you have pointed out, Mr. Al-Fadil ..."

"Please, General, call me Farouq," Al-Fadil interrupted.

"Very well," Perkasa continued, "as you have pointed out, Farouq, Indonesia, because of her geography, possesses a greater geo-strategic importance to the world than Pakistan. Control of those sea lanes means billions of dollars to America. You cannot do in Indonesia what you did in Pakistan. The Americans did not step in there. Here, if you moved against Santos, they would send their navy. Perhaps their marines. They

would use force. And remember that President Williams likes to play John Wayne with the US Navy." His cigar had gone out. With a single flick, a blue-and-orange flame leapt from the lighter.

"Ahh, the all-powerful Americans." The smiling Arab sipped more wine. "Good. Our thinking is congruous." He put the glass down and motioned for more. "What if I told you, General, that we have a plan for Mack Williams and the Americans? What if I told you that we have a plan to make you the most powerful Indonesian in the world? And what if I could show you a plan that will work to make Indonesia the first Islamic superpower, with you at the historic forefront of this great awakening?"

Perkasa glanced at Dr. Budi, who was raising an eyebrow and sipping a glass of water.

He looked back at the Arab.

Silence.

"You know, Farouq," Perkasa said, "you have succeeded in piquing my curiosity. I will have that drink now. Red wine will be fine."

"Excellent," Farouq said, motioning the servants to attend to the general's request. "Let us drink, General, to a new alliance ... a new *strategic* alliance that will change the history of the world."

"That," General Superman Perkasa said, "I will drink to."

# CHAPTER 1

***One year later***

***New York Mercantile Exchange***

***1:04 a.m.***

**T**he headquarters of the mammoth New York Mercantile Exchange, located in New York's World Financial Center and fronting the Hudson River, was sixteen stories high and more than five hundred thousand square feet.

From his office on the eighth floor, in the dark hours of the morning, Robert Molster enjoyed sipping cappuccino and watching the lights on the river and the sparkling shoreline across the way in New Jersey. The clear, cold night, even more biting because of the six-inch snowfall that had blanketed the city earlier in the day, leaving mounds of snow piled up along the concrete barricades down by the waterfront, seemed to magnify the lights shining on the other side of the river. A few boats, barely visible under blinking red-and-green navigation lights, glided back and forth along the dark river. Molster shook his head, still amazed that he sat here, in this job, at this very moment.

Two years ago, Molster was finishing his MBA at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. He had hoped to land a job with a midsize brokerage firm in downtown Richmond. Any regional firm would do, he had thought at the time, as long as he stayed in Virginia.

He'd already decided that he had no interest in becoming either a broker or a trader. But the thought of being a stock analyst had intrigued him since his days as a junior in college, when a business professor had

introduced him to *The Wall Street Journal*. Becoming a stock analyst would have been prestigious and would have guaranteed excellent pay. Plus, in Richmond he could've bought a decent-sized home, perhaps in the prestigious West End or fashionable Shockoe slip. He had thought he would meet a nice, well-bred, well-mannered young Southern belle from Sweet Briar College, or the University of Mary Washington. Either would do. Then he would raise a family in a town with lots of history, without the hustle and bustle of big-city life.

All that changed one day just before graduation, when a young woman, a recruiter from the New York Mercantile Exchange, appeared on the Charlottesville campus.

"Ever think about being a commodities analyst?" she questioned him.

Commodities had never crossed his mind.

"You'd work the night shift, watch commodities trading on the overseas markets, and feed data to the media, the wire services, and then to floor traders who start work at 9:00 A.M. But—and this is where you'll make contacts that will help you write your own ticket—you'll give a daily briefing to the chairman of the Mercantile Exchange or one of his assistants about overnight trading activities. You'll learn everything there is to know about oil. You can become an analyst for one of the private commodities firms and make so much money you can retire before you're forty."

She reviewed his résumé, and raised a huge selling point.

"I see that you're an officer in the navy reserve. If you're worried about your navy obligations, don't be. Our chairman, Mr. Goldstein, is ex-navy. You'll have no problems doing reserve duty on the weekends or in the summer."

Some high-paying employers were against his naval reserve obligations, which required him to be in Washington one weekend a month and who-knows-where in the world for at least two weeks each summer.

"Lieutenant Robert Molster. What does this J-2 mean?"

"That's the intelligence section of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," he responded. "It's in the Pentagon. I go one weekend a month and help them sort through boring data." He figured that would blow over her head.

"The *Pentagon*"—a look of awe crossed her face—"Impressive,



*Lieutenant Molster.*" She smiled. "Come to Manhattan for an interview. All expenses paid. Overnight at the Waldorf-Astoria."

Three weeks later, he got the job. *And* he got an added bonus.

The young lady who interviewed him, the intriguing Wellesley graduate named Jane Morgan ... well ... she had accepted his invitation to dinner upon his arrival in New York. Two years later, they were still dating.

A Virginia gentleman and a Connecticut Yankee.

So much for settling down in Richmond with a debutante and a membership in the Country Club of Virginia.

At the Exchange, "Janie," as he later learned that she was called, held the same job that he did. Except Janie worked the day shift. He worked nights. Then there was his time away in the reserves. Sometimes that made dating a challenge.

Somehow, they managed.

Overall, life was good. Plus, he was still able to keep his toes in the waters of the US Navy.

Enough reminiscing.

The cappuccino was gone now. His five-minute break was over.

No rush.

Trading in light, sweet crude oil futures had been halted at 1:00 A.M. due to a limit move upwards of ten dollars in the market. That would slow things down for about five minutes before trading resumed. He had to get back to his screen. Probably, he'd see a big sell-off of profit taking after the move, with prices dropping back down. He'd need to document the data for his morning briefing.

Back to work. He tossed the paper cup in the wastebasket and walked across the hallway to his monitor.

He sat down and a cacophonous buzz rang from his computer speakers. What now?

*Limit Alert ... Limit Alert ... Trading in January Light, Sweet Crude Calls halted due to limit move of \$10.00. Trading to resume at 130 A.M., EST, 630 A.M., GMT.*

A second trading halt in less than fifteen minutes? He'd never seen this before. Somebody would make billions in short order.

What was going on out there?

Should he call the chairman? Would waking the chairman make him look like an overanxious greenhorn?

He flipped out his cell phone and hit "1" on the speed dial.

"Good morning," Janie Morgan's velvety, if sleepy, voice said.

"Sorry to call so early. Something's up."

"Mmm." The sound of sheets fluffing. "What?"

"Crude oil. Two limit moves in an hour. Light, sweet crude. Just got a second trade halt in the last fifteen minutes."

A second passed. "Wow." Janie sounded wide awake now. "Two in fifteen minutes? I've never heard of that."

"No kidding," he said.

"What's going on?"

"Dunno. Think I should call Chairman Goldstein?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure," she said. "Let me think."

"I don't want to look panicky, but still ..."

"Hmm. Know what?"

"What?"

"I'd call. Better safe than sorry."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear, but it confirmed his gut instinct. "I thought you'd say that. I'll call him right now. If he gets hacked off that I ran him out of bed, so be it."

"He won't," she said. "If he does, blame me."

"No chance," he said.

"Call me later. Love you."

"You too."

Robert hung up, then picked up the phone again. He punched the speed dial ringing directly to the residence of the chairman of the Mercantile Exchange. After two rings, a groggy voice answered.

"Mister Chairman ... Robert Molster at the sweet light crude desk ... Sorry if I woke you ... Yes, sir ... I think we may have something strange going in the futures markets."

## ***USS Reuben James The Strait of Malacca***

### ***Two hours earlier***

**T**he sun beat down on the slate-gray steel, heating the deck near the bow of the guided missile frigate. From his station at the forward lookout post, Boatswain's Mate, First Class Elliot Cisco swiped perspira-

tion from his forehead, then positioned his binoculars off the port side of the ship.

Out to the left, about a thousand yards from the *Reuben James*, the tanker *SeaRiver Baytown*, her belly full of Persian Gulf crude oil, churned low through the blue waters of the Malaccan Straits.

About a thousand yards beyond the *Baytown*, but not visible from this vantage point, the USS *Kauffman*, another *Oliver Hazard Perry*-class guided missile frigate, guarded the other side of the tanker.

If anything went wrong, Cisco hoped it would come from the other side—and that the *Kauffman* would have to deal with it. Swinging his binoculars out in front of the bow, he knew that wasn't likely.

USS *Kauffman* was guarding the waters between the tanker and Malaysia.

USS *Reuben James*, on the other hand, was guarding the waters between the tanker and the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Naval Intelligence had warned that radical threats to maritime shipping, and thus the world's economy, would likely be launched from the heavily populated Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Java.

Clear seas appeared in the binoculars out in front of the ship. Cisco took in the morning breeze that was whipping in from the southwest. Swiping his right hand across his forehead, he brought the high-powered glasses back to his eyes and swept the horizon to the right, out toward Sumatra. Slowly, he scanned in a clockwise turn, stopping his sweep at the three o'clock position.

Nothing but blue waters and a mountainous shoreline.

Moving his view to the left again, back toward the bow, a flash swept across the seascape.

He stopped the binoculars and angled back to the right. Nothing. Were his eyes deceiving him? That could happen at sea.

What was it? Reflection off glass? The engine of a boat? A whale? Where was it?

Whatever it was, it was too low in the water for the ship's radar to detect.

He readjusted the powerful binoculars.

Nothing but blue water.

There! Again!

The inbound flash bounced off the water, perhaps a mile out to the starboard.

Cisco held the binoculars in place and adjusted the focus ring, bringing the image into focus. The sun was reflecting against the wind-shield of a speedboat!

He picked up the watch telephone.

"Chief, small craft at three o'clock! Inbound at high speed! One mile and closing, sir!"

***Rasa Sentosa Resort***

***Sentosa Island, Singapore***

***11:16 a.m.***

Sweet strains of violin music blended magically with the single cello, filling the air with a classical melody that blanketed the mumbling voices nearby. Swooshing water streams jetted from a half-dozen indoor fountains, muffling the clicks of bellmen's leather shoes traipsing across the expansive marble floors.

Behind the reservations desk in the main lobby, Ashlyn Claire hardly noticed the typical midday sounds of the luxurious Rasa Sentosa, Singapore's only beachfront resort.

At the moment, her agenda was single-minded—to coordinate with housekeeping to ensure that more than fifty rooms were cleared out in time for check-in, which was still two-and-a-half hours away.

At a world-class resort like the Rasa Sentosa, nothing could prove more disastrous to the career of an aspiring young hotel management intern than to send a well-paying guest to a room that had not been properly prepared.

A small smudge on an obscure portion of a mirror or a window.

An overlooked thumbprint on a faucet in the sink.

A slight wrinkle on a comforter.

Not acceptable.

Ashlyn checked the screen again. Still nothing open. Not yet anyway. Except for the block of rooms reserved for the British prime minister's advance team.

Therein lay the problem.

British Prime Minister John Suddath was in Singapore for a controversial summit with the president of Singapore over the future of Changi Naval Base. The Brits and the Americans were pressing Singa-

pore to expand the base to accommodate more ships for the Royal and US Navies to patrol the Strait of Malacca. The Americans would pay for the upgrades. That's what Singaporean television was reporting, anyway.

But Malaysia, Indonesia, and China had protested the deal.

Protests erupted all over the region, and someone leaked that Sud-dath's advance team was staying at the Rasa Sentosa. Then two days ago, rumors flew that Suddath himself was staying at the hotel.

That rumor ignited the picketers. Yesterday, more than two hundred paraded in front of the hotel, clogging the main entrance and blocking guest registrations.

Last night, the British and Singaporean governments issued joint communiqués that the PM would be staying at Istana Merdeka, the Singaporean presidential palace, during his stay in the city.

That thinned out the picketers. But even this morning, about twenty of them still strutted in an oblong circle, bobbing their signs deriding the US and the UK.

Ashlyn checked her watch. Twelve-thirty. Nothing to do but wait.

A whiff of alluring cologne took her focus off the terminal. A smiling, olive-skinned gentleman stood behind the reservations desk.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked.

"You don't look Singaporean." The gentleman's eyes danced at her. "Australian? South African?"

His friendly expression and sparkling black eyes exuded an immediate, spellbinding charm.

Was he Indian? Pakistani? Middle Eastern? He sported an amazing British accent, wherever he was from. And the white suit enhanced his dark, handsome features.

"I'm British," she said, with pride in her voice.

"That's a brave admission considering those lunatics out there." He nodded toward the hotel entrance, with a dubious half-grin.

"Yes, well . . ." She glanced outside at the picketers, then back at the man. "Could I help you with something, sir?"

"I'm Ahmed." He cleared his voice. "Edward Ahmed. *Doctor* Edward Ahmed. I'm here for check-in."

"Let's see if I can find you, Dr. Ahmed." Ashlyn clicked the *Enter* key. "Got it." She looked at him. "Do you have a passport that we could copy?"

"Certainly." He handed her his Yemeni passport. The name and photograph matched.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but we don't have any rooms yet. Check-in is at three. I can call you if something opens earlier."

"Fine," he said. "I could take a stroll on the beach. Where may I leave my luggage?"

"The bellman will store your bags here in the lobby area until your room is ready."

"Fabulous." The man's black eyes sparkled. "I look forward to seeing you again, Miss ... I'm sorry I didn't catch your name."

"Claire. Ashlyn Claire."

"Yes, Miss Claire, and may God save the Queen." The man turned and walked off with a smile on his face.

Or was it a sneer?

No matter, Ashlyn had work to do. The first members of the prime minister's advance team were due any minute.

### ***USS Reuben James*** ***The Strait of Malacca***

***10:18 a.m.***

**S**kipper, forward lookout reports inbound craft! Approaching at high speed at three o'clock! Range one mile!"

"Where?" The skipper of the *Reuben James* moved to the starboard side of the bridge. Junior officers and enlisted crew members on the bridge were pointing their fingers over the water.

"There! I see it!" the executive officer said.

The captain saw it through his binoculars. The boat crashed through the waves, racing toward his ship, or more likely, toward the tanker he was guarding.

"Issue a no-approach warning, followed by a shot across the bow. If she closes within five hundred yards, take her out. Sound general quarters."

"General quarters, aye, Captain." The XO picked up the 1MC, the public address system that broadcast all over the four hundred, forty-five-foot warship. "General quarters! General quarters! Small craft approaching at three o'clock. Possibly hostile. General quarters! Man battle stations!"

Alarm bells rang throughout the ship. Crew members scrambled up and down steel ladders and across the decks to take their positions. The XO's voice boomed again over the loudspeaker, broadcasting simultaneously over the open maritime radio channels.

"This is the USS *Reuben James*. To the vessel approaching: turn back or you will be fired upon."

No reaction.

"Repeat the warning, XO."

"This is the USS *Reuben James*. This is your last warning. Turn back or you will be fired upon."

The boat sliced through the swells, straight toward the ship.

"Weps, fire one warning shot across the bow!"

"One warning shot across her bow! Aye, sir!"

*Boom!*

White smoke rose from the barrel of the Oto Melara 76/62 naval cannon in the forward section of the ship.

A second later, *splash!* Water sprayed across the boat's bow. No reaction.

"Fire another!"

"Fire! Aye, Captain."

*Boom!*

This round splashed just in front of the boat. Again, no course change. The roar of the boat's engines could now be heard on the ship.

"That's enough," the captain said. "Open fire! Take her out!"

"Aye, sir." The weapons officer picked up a telephone to the two gunner's mates manning the fifty-caliber machine guns mounted along the starboard side of the ship. "Open fire. I repeat, open fire!"

*Chit-a-chit-a-chita-a-chita-chita-a-chita-chita-a-chita-chita-a-chita.*

Like dueling jackhammers shaking and pounding the deck, the fifty-caliber machine guns sprayed a wall of lead over the sea, splashing a straight trail in the water toward the boat.

Flames and smoke erupted. *Boom!* The sound of the explosion traveled across the water and rocked the *Reuben James*. The boat, now a flaming hulk, drifted listlessly on the sea.

"Get a rescue party out there," the captain said. "Let's see what we can find."