

MARAUDER

By Clive Cussler & Boyd Morrison

One

Strait of Malacca

Captain Omar Rahal tracked the small boat racing across the placid waters of the narrow strait. It was approaching his California-bound oil tanker from dead ahead, and far too quickly to be a fishing boat. He'd tried to raise them on the radio, but there was no response. It meant only one thing.

Pirates.

Using his binoculars, he could see that the boat was full of men armed with guns, but there was nothing he could do to avoid them. The Dahar was more than 300 meters long, and the strait between Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra was barely three kilometers across at its narrowest point. The ponderous ship would be impossible to turn around, and the speedboat would easily outmaneuver any attempt to ram it.

"Increase to full speed," he nevertheless told the executive officer. "We're not going to make the Dahar an easy target." Such high velocity for a ship as big as theirs was risky in these tight confines, even with calm seas, but he couldn't let them hijack his ship without doing something.

As the XO ordered full power, Rahal activated the shipwide intercom. "Now hear this, men. We have hostiles off our bow. They are armed and mean to board us. Initiate emergency lockdowns and go to your action stations. Do not, I repeat, do not attempt to fight them." He didn't want any crew members to die on his watch.

The boat passed behind the bow of the Dahar so that Rahal could no longer see it. He went to the port bridge wing so he could watch for it over the side of the ship.

They came back into view, and he could now make out seven men clad in T-shirts and armed with automatic rifles. There had to be an eighth driving, hidden by the roof of the tiny wheelhouse. The boat circled around so it could match the tanker's speed. Rahal spied a man holding an extendable ladder.

He called to the XO. "Activate the SSAS alarm."

The XO flipped open a safety cover and pressed a large red button. The Ship Security Alert System was a silent alarm that contacted the ship's base of operations to inform them that a hijacking was in progress. It ensured that the hijackers would not be warned that help had been summoned.

A few seconds later, the bridge phone rang. Rahal picked it up.

"This is Captain Rahal on the Dahar."

"Captain, this is operations headquarters. We are calling to verify that you have an emergency in progress."

"Affirmative. This is not a false alarm." Rahal recited the code sequence verifying his identity. "Seven or eight armed men are preparing to board us."

"Understood. We have your position and will contact the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the Indonesian Sea and Coast Guard. Stay on the line as long as you can. Are there any ships in your vicinity that could render aid?"

"What do we have on our radar?" Rahal asked the XO.

The XO peered at the radar screen and shook his head in dismay. "The closest vessel looks to be a freighter thirty kilometers behind us."

"Even if we stop, it would take her two hours to get here," Rahal spoke into the phone. "What's my ETA on the Coast Guard?"

"The MMEA is scrambling a helicopter in Johor, but the soonest they'll make it to you is ninety minutes. Stay calm and do not resist the hijackers. Help is on the way."

Rahal smirked at the XO. "'Help is on the way,' he says."

"We're going to need it," the XO replied, pointing down at the deck.

The top of the ladder poked above the railing. Rahal dropped the phone and ran out to the bridge wing again. While some of the hijackers had their weapons trained on the railing in case anyone tried to push it away, others began climbing up, several of them carrying large backpacks in addition to their weapons. When seven of them were on deck, they ran toward the superstructure at the rear of the ship.

Rahal got back on the phone. "Headquarters, I have to hang up now. The hostiles are approaching the bridge."

"Good luck, Captain."

Rahal tried to calm himself for the sake of the rest of the bridge crew, but his insides felt like pudding. He hadn't been this shaken since the Iraqis invaded his native Kuwait when he was a teenager working on a fishing boat.

A few moments later, he heard feet pounding up the stairs.

"No sudden moves," Rahal said to his men.

The door was flung open, and three Southeast Asian men burst onto the bridge with their weapons at the ready.

"Don't shoot," Rahal said in English with his hands in the air. "We're unarmed."

A lean and wiry man with scarred flesh where his left ear should have been stepped forward with a menacing grin. He didn't have the rotted teeth of a drug-using robber. This man was a trained professional.

"You are Captain Rahal?" the man said in Indonesian-accented Arabic.

"Yes," Rahal replied in the same language, surprised that the man knew his name. "What do you want?"

"I want your ship. Now I have it."

"And my crew?"

One of the hijackers went to the controls and set the engines to full stop.

"If you and your crew behave, you will depart the ship with me, and we will ransom you. If no one pays, then we will kill you."

Rahal nodded. "We'll cooperate. And my company will pay your ransom."

"That's very good to hear," the scarred hijacker said. "Because if you give us any trouble, I'll leave all fifteen of you on board, and you can go down with your ship when I blow it up in the strait."

Two

Ravenhall, Australia

April Jin paced around her beat-up Ford as she waited in the parking lot of the Ravenhall Correctional Centre. Although the asphalt was already baking from the morning sun, there was no way she would set foot inside the prison doors again. She'd been coming here for three years now on weekly visits, and the sterile white walls inside reminded her of her own two-year stay at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre for women. Bile rose in her throat at the thought of ever walking back into the place.

The front doors of Ravenhall's main entrance finally opened, and she smiled when she saw Angus Polk strut out with a hardened look in his eyes. His erect posture and cropped hair hinted at his military background, marred only by the presence of a light beard. In his jeans and stretched T-shirt, he displayed a newfound bulk, thanks to his daily workouts in the yard, which had added definition to his tall frame. His face softened into a broad smile when he spotted his waiting wife.

Jin met her husband and melted into his arms. He lifted her from her feet as if she weighed nothing.

"You've lost weight," he said.

"Morning runs to stay in shape and light rations while dining alone."

Jin had a slim, slightly muscular figure. Her straight black hair was worn short, highlighting her lean face and dark, probing eyes.

After she gave Polk a long kiss, she said, "I can't believe they let you out."

"Free at last, thanks to my new favorite words-'early release.' Apparently all that good behavior inside paid off." They put their arms around each other and walked toward the car. "Thanks for coming to meet me," he said. "I'll be glad to get home . . . wherever that is."

"You may not like our flat much better than your cell. It's the size of a birdhouse."

"As long as you are there, it will feel like a palace." They stopped as they approached the car. "Have you been managing all right?"

"The money's been tough, I won't lie. No one wants to hire an ex-con who's sold out their government. I've found some freelance translation work, but it barely covers the bills."

"No support from our old patron?"

She shook her head. "Not a word."

"Some thanks. Well, I've got an old mate who left the service and started a small business. Maybe he'll give me some work until we sort things out." He patted the hood of the car. "Mind if I drive? I kind of missed it."

Before she could pass over the car keys, a limousine pulled into the lot and slowly cruised toward them.

"Now, that's how to depart the joint in style," Polk said.

To Jin's surprise, it stopped right in front of them. The chauffeur got out and opened the rear door for a man in a tailored pin-striped suit. An attorney for sure. Jin had seen enough in her life to spot one instantly.

He held out a card. "Mr. Polk and Ms. Jin, I'm William Campbell."

He didn't ask if that was who they were. He knew.

"What's this about?" Polk asked as he took the card.

"I represent the estate of Lu Yang. Would you please join me?" He gestured for them to get in the limo.

"Did you say 'the estate' of Lu Yang?" Jin asked.

"Yes. I'm afraid he recently passed."

Jin and Polk looked at each other in surprise.

"I'm afraid I can't discuss any details here," Campbell said. "But I can assure you that this does not concern any of your criminal matters. In fact, I believe you will find the reason for our meeting most beneficial."

Jin looked at her battered truck, and Campbell said, "If you like, we can have your vehicle towed to a car lot for sale. When our business is concluded, you will no longer need it. Alternatively, you may drive to our offices on your own, but I think you will find the limousine more comfortable."

Jin and Polk looked around. Their past dealings with Lu Yang had always been highly secretive, and always through a third party. Sending a limo to pick them up, in front of a prison no less, was highly out of character. But then again, the man was now dead.

Jin and Polk climbed into the limo, settling into the luxurious leather seats across from Campbell.

As it drove off, Polk leaned over and asked his wife, "Did you know Lu Yang was ill?"

She shook her head. For ten years, her mother had been married to the Chinese tech mogul, though he didn't come into his extreme wealth until after they'd divorced. Jin's ex-stepfather had taken care of her mother, though, and supported Jin from afar, grooming her skills until he could put them to use for his benefit.

"When did he die?" Jin asked Campbell.

"He tragically passed away just a few days ago. More will be explained to you both when we reach Melbourne."

Jin glanced at Polk and saw a hopeful gaze in his eyes. He knew just as well as she did what that meant.

They were going to a reading of her stepfather's will.

It took thirty minutes to reach downtown Melbourne, where they stopped in front of one of its glistening towers. An elevator whisked them to the fiftieth floor. Campbell ushered them into a posh conference room, where they had an expansive view of the city skyline. He pushed a button, and wall panels folded back to reveal a huge TV.

"Please," Campbell said, indicating chairs along the mahogany conference table. A silver pitcher of ice water and some glasses had been set out for them. He handed Jin a remote and a sealed envelope with her name on it. "Once I leave the room, just press play. You'll be asked for a code, which is contained in that envelope."

"You're not reading his will?" Polk asked.

"I'm afraid not. The video will explain everything."

He nodded and closed the door behind him as he left.

Polk turned to his wife and said, "What's going on here?"

"Let's find out." Jin opened the envelope and found a note card with nothing on it but a sixteen-digit number written by hand. She pressed PLAY on the remote and was prompted to enter the code.

When she did, an image of an elegant office came on the screen. At the center of the screen, seated at a desk, was Lu Yang. Jin felt her breath catch at seeing him, but she quickly saw that he was no longer the stern and strong disciplinarian she remembered.

Instead, his eyes were sunken, his hair was stringy, and the hands tented on the desk were skeletal.

"Hello, April," Lu said in English with a soft Shanghai accent, sending a jolt down her spine. "Mr. Polk, you must be there, too, as I'd required. We never met in person, but my name is Lu Yang. As you know by now, I am dead."

Jin reached for Polk's hand to steady herself.

"I realize the past few years have been difficult for you both, on account of a breach in security that was not of your doing. As you know, one of our operatives turned informant to the Australian Federal Police. He was eliminated before revealing the full extent of my operations in the country, but regrettably disclosed your respective data-gathering activities in the military's defense technology and intelligence arenas. Up till now, it has forced me to sever communications between us, for everyone's security. While you may have felt abandoned, that was not actually the case. Your defense attorneys were the best in the land, paid at my expense. And your respective early releases were no fluke. Let's just say that several members of the parole review board are sitting on thicker wallets today. But that is all in the past. Today, I need you, April. You and your husband are the only ones I can count on to carry out my last wishes."

"You're asking a lot, after what we've been through," Jin muttered.

"I realize you may be reluctant to do so," Lu said as if to answer her. "But you need me as much as I need you. Possibly more. Just five years ago, you were both models of your professions. Mr. Polk was a veteran of the Special Operations Command and a senior analyst in the Department of Defence. And

April was Lieutenant Jin, an Intelligence Officer in the Royal Australian Navy, well on her way to attaining flag rank. You were both outstanding undercover operatives, acquiring the latest technological data for my company, and for China. But because those activities were exposed, you were stripped of your titles, fired from your jobs, and spent years in prison. This has left you destitute, with little, perhaps, except your fondness for each other. I intend to remedy that, but require a final request."

Lu began coughing and paused to take a sip of water, and Polk pointed irritably at the screen. "We know what happened. Are we just here to receive a lecture and another opportunity to get sold down the river?"