



(THE)
ENIGMATIC
MADAM
INGRAM



MEIHAN BOEY

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE FORMIDABLE MISS CASSIDY*

“A gripping and accomplished intertwining of mythology, battling Asian immortals and the eternal fight between good and evil. An ambitious and extraordinary book that sweeps you into its intricate world, riveting you there until the last page. Meihan Boey is a talent to watch.”

–**MEIRA CHAND**, internationally bestselling author
of A Different Sky

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–**NURALIAH NORASID**, award-winning author of *The Gatekeeper*

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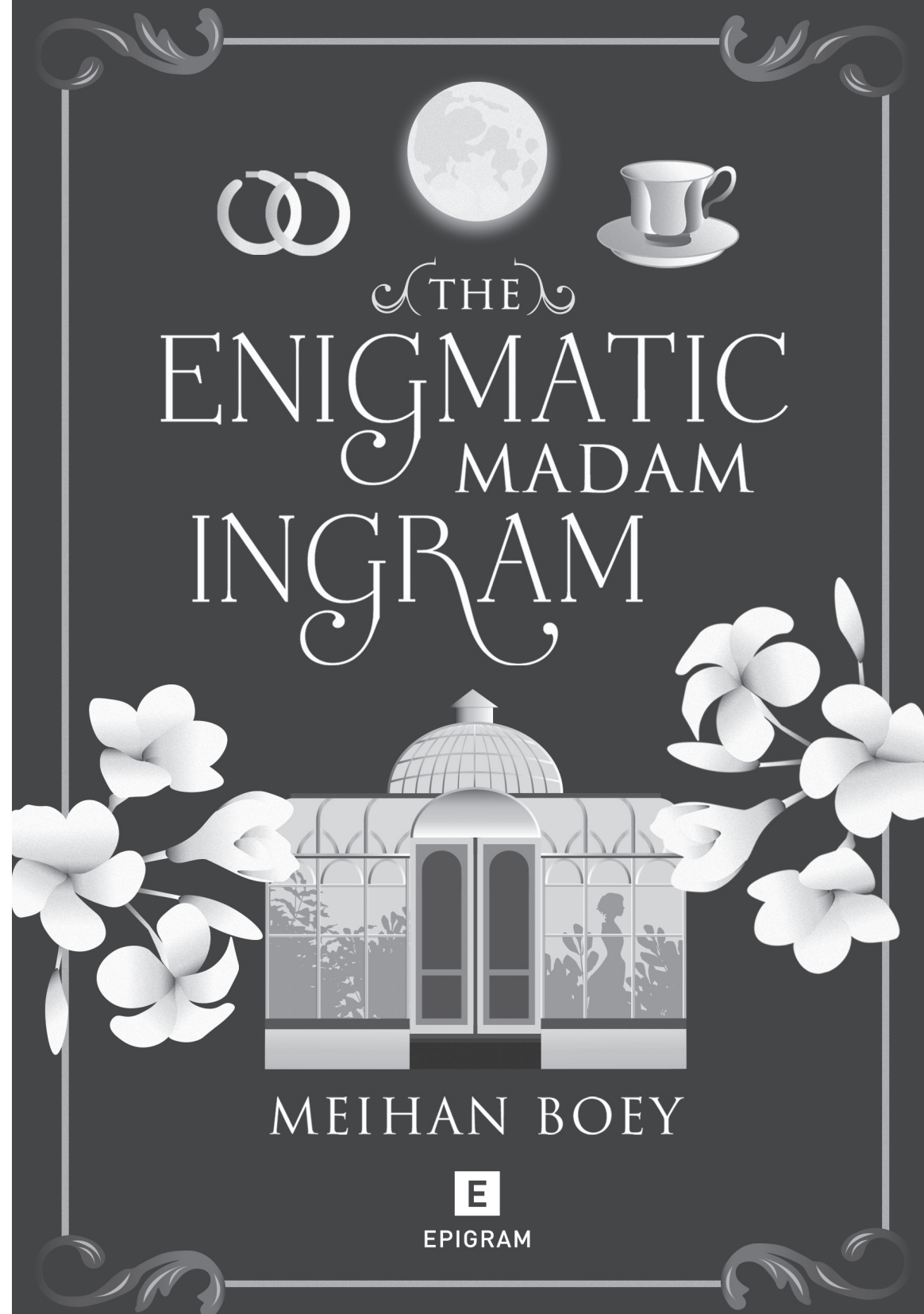
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either are the product of the author's imagination or are used
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events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For my late Ah Mah, who made a potent herbal brew

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PART ONE

1906/1850s

THE SCENT OF A PIPE

CHAPTER I
MRS KINGSBRIGHT ARRIVES

I ARRIVED IN Singapore on a day that somehow managed to be both very hot, and very wet—a raging storm, in fact. I am sure you will laugh, but I was awestruck—I had never seen such a storm before, with what felt like tepid bathwater pouring down from a frightful and spectacular sky.

You see, I am half Malayan, but till that day I had never been anywhere near the Malay Archipelago. I had lived all the years of my life in the coldest, most dreich, most windswept of the Scottish highlands. I had seen storms aplenty, and hail, sleet and snow. But I had never seen a monsoon storm.

To me, it seemed a miracle that the ship managed to dock at all, and that no one slid off during disembarkation and fell into the murky, churning water. Once on stable land, I must have stood agape for a good minute, amazed, while around me people ran for shelter, and dock workers shouted in a panoply of languages I did not know, dragging trunks and cargo. The mud ran thick and dank, flowing in a grey viscous river around my skirts.

I realised by and by that I was getting in everyone's way, so I shook myself, and peered through the deluge. Seeing where I must go, I lifted

my skirts and made my way across the quay, towards the handsome young man in a very wet outfit that was some kind of cheaply made uniform, made nearly transparent in the wet. He carried a slate marked with the melting word **KINGSBRIGHT**.

He smiled brightly and unselfconsciously at me as I approached, notwithstanding his imminent nakedness. His teeth were brown with some sort of juice, but it was a warm and genuine smile that I responded to despite myself.

“You are my husband’s secretary, Mr Ahmad?”

He chuckled. “Not mister, just Ahmad. Tuan Kingsbright calls me a secretary, yes.”

I paused to control my expression. It had been a long time since I had met or spoken with my husband, James Henry Kingsbright, but I had heard many tales of him from other sources.

As far as I knew, James Henry—once a very unsatisfactory employee of the now-defunct East India Company—had no functional employment at present, nor any other kind of work or occupation. Nothing, in short, that would require a secretary. But he must have wanted the cachet of saying “my personal secretary”, and so had clearly decided any random male servant would do (without, presumably, the equivalent raise in pay). For Ahmad’s uniform was most certainly not that of a secretary, nor had he been granted any of the perks of that more important role—an umbrella of his own, for instance. The only one he carried, which he now popped open and raised over my head, was just large enough to shelter me.

Ahmad’s faint grin seemed to indicate that I had rather failed to hide my scorn.

But he only said, “Come this way, Puan—Mrs Kingsbright,” without further remark, carefully positioning the umbrella over me. It had a curious smell, made of some kind of leaf that had been dried, pleated and oiled. He shouted for my trunks to be brought, in Malay; I knew

a few words from my mama, and surprised the coolie who loaded my trunk by fumbling out, “Terima kasih.” He stared at me as if I had sprouted two heads, then scurried away before I could say any more alarming things.

It was unlikely that Mr Kingsbright, despite his long (and patchy) career here in the Malay Archipelago, had learnt any functional Malay himself. Indeed, he had probably learnt nothing functional at all. The last I had heard, from the Kingsbright family lawyer, was that James Henry Kingsbright had been quietly retired out of the East India Company years ago. But he had ever been a leech, a survivor at all costs. He managed to call himself “retired” rather than “disgracefully dismissed” (largely owing, I suspect, to his older brother’s efforts to keep their family name in decent standing). He still drew a pension, and the Company had apparently allowed him the use of one of their more unpopular properties, until such time as they could get rid of it.

On the ride there, Ahmad described my marital home to me as a bedraggled bungalow overgrown with jungle shrubs and wild banana trees. It was called Bendemeer House, after the last family to live there. I was intrigued, and asked more about it, and why the EIC seemed not to wish to lease it to someone who could, well, pay for it.

Ahmad chattered on, apparently entirely unperturbed by his precarious position: hanging off the back of the rickshaw with one hand, and holding the umbrella over my trunks with the other. Ahmad’s physical position made conversation difficult, but fortunately he had a strident, ringing voice (he had been a street vendor for most of his childhood, he explained) and I managed to learn a great deal, despite the noise and confusion and driving rain.

“It is haunted,” he said matter-of-factly of Bendemeer House. “Has been haunted a very long time. That is why no one wants to live in it; everyone leaves after a month or two, but Tuan doesn’t really have any other choice.”

“Who were the Bendemeers, then? How is it that they lived there long enough to give their name to the house?”

Ahmad laughed. “Why do you think it is haunted? Captain Bendemeer came to Singapore with a wife and seven children. When he left, only one daughter remained alive. The rest all died. They say the children’s sprits are still there, wandering the grounds.”

“Do you believe they are?”

“Oh! Well, they do not bother me,” he said easily. “No one knows what keeps them there, but they come and go and disturb nobody—I think they just want to play. There are much worse things, you know, than the ghosts of lonely children. Ten years ago, when I was still a child myself, I never dared go past the front gate of Bendemeer House, even to sell my kacang. But now I live there. There is nothing there that is harmful now, not to folks like me.”

I wanted very much to continue this fascinating conversation, but just then the rickshaw turned into what I now know was Smith Street, and I was very much distracted.

I had lived almost all my life on a distant and lonely moor, in the highlands of Scotland. In my earliest childhood, my parents had brought me to London during the social season; but naturally, being a very young child, I was largely confined to the nursery, or taken on brief walks in the park.

I had never seen a red-light district, until the rickshaw turned down Smith Street.

There were women of unmistakeable profession sitting within the threshold of brightly painted shophouses. They were perhaps not all at work at that moment, but it was still impossible not to realise what services they provided, in their colourful dresses and glittering jewellery. Most sat smoking and chatting in the doorways, enjoying the breeze that the storm had brought forth; some peeped out from shuttered windows, yawning, brushing their hair. Many looked up as I passed, and stared

curiously—as curiously, I suppose, as I was staring at them, although I was conveniently veiled for the purpose.

“I suppose not many women pass through here?” I asked Ahmad.

“Oh, in the daytime it is all right,” he said unperturbedly. “They don’t see Western women very much, but local women come down here all the time. There are a lot of shops, you know; the ladies bring so many customers to these streets. Tailors and fortune-tellers and food stalls. I used to pull my kacang cart here, and the men would buy snacks to have with their beer. See, there is a medical hall—very famous one there, Tong Brothers.”

I sat up instantly. The Tong Brothers Medical Hall was the very reason I had crossed the seas—not to see James Henry, whom I did not miss a jot, but for the famous lady medium and physician who worked from the Tong Brothers Medical Hall. She was married to one of the Tong Brothers, but was referred to as Madam Kay, using her maiden name.

“Is that where I would find Madam Kay?”

Ahmad seemed surprised, as well he might be. “You know about Madam Kay? Yes, though you would need an appointment to see her. She is very popular, you know.”

“How would I get an appointment?”

“Oh, I can get you one! I know Madam Kay of old—we have a mutual friend.” I couldn’t see Ahmad, but I thought he was grinning again. “Tell me when you would like to see her, and I will arrange it. You must pay her, of course. Look, there she is now, showing a customer out.”

It was hard to see through such rain, but I could just make out a woman—a far younger one than I expected, in a well-tailored dark blue blouse and black trousers, with neat black hair twisted in a bun, seeing off another lady at the door.

My idea of a medium was derived from foolish novels and credulous articles in British newspapers. Madam Kay looked nothing like the mysterious, smoke-wreathed, bead-rattling image of a Chinese spirit

medium these poor sources had conjured up. She looked, instead, like a respectable shopkeeper, just plump enough to advertise her success, not old enough yet to have lost a certain youthful spring in her step.

Some might have been disappointed by this; I was reassured. A quack would have tried harder to cultivate a mysterious air. If she was a genuine psychic, she would have no need to overly advertise the fact—so she did not. Thus I reasoned, and felt a keen desire to see Madam Kay as soon as I possibly could.

My husband did not greet me at the gate. Ahmad said Tuan was ill and would see me when he was feeling better.

I said, “I smell opium. Is that what he is ill with?”

Ahmad blinked a moment. Then he shrugged, and nodded. “Yes, chandu, you mean? Yes, well...the chandu is his medicine. The illness, he says,” Ahmad coughed, “it is gout.”

“I see. Bring me to him now, will you, Ahmad?”

“I cannot, madam. He will ask Muru to beat me. The groundskeeper,” Ahmad explained, pointing to a hefty man in a lungi, squatting in the shade of a spreading rain tree, gathering dead leaves. Ahmad waved to him, and Muru waved back. “He is shy,” explained Ahmad, “he will not speak to you.”

“But he beats you...?”

“Oh, not because he wants to! We are good friends, Muru and I, but Tuan is always asking one of us to beat the other, since he cannot do it himself. We do it as lightly as we can, but Tuan likes to inspect the wound to make sure there is blood, so we cannot strike too gently.”

I shuddered inwardly at the horrible little man I had allowed to become my spouse. But I had married James Henry Kingsbright for a purpose, and he had served that purpose well. He had wasted every

cent of Papa and Mama’s ill-gotten gains on gambling, women, abysmal investments from shady sources, and now, it seemed, on illicit drugs. My own financial portion remained safe with me, and had kept me alive (if not precisely living) in decent form till now. I would not judge James Henry for who he was; he was exactly as he had always been, and there was no use in giving the man further grief now.

I asked Ahmad to point me in the right direction. After I saw my trunk safely conducted to a bright, clean chamber Ahmad had clearly taken the trouble to prepare (I doubt it had crossed my husband’s mind that I would require a room, a bed, clean linens and so forth), I ventured across the hall to the room that was filling the house with the distinctive odour of Monopoly-brand opium.

The door was closed, but not locked, and I easily entered. It was dark and fetid. The solid furniture, expensive curtains and pretty hangings had all been fouled with a dreadful stink, of which the opium pipe’s smoke was the least objectionable. I had visited many asylums across Europe, in search of a cure for my sickness, and James Henry’s room had the same distinct odour of the most miserable of the inmates. Chamberpots filled with the effluvia of a decomposing living body. Weeping sores that would not heal, that only multiplied and ate away fingers and toes. The lingering miasma of a slow and horrible death, not by gout, but by syphilis.

James Henry had always been a rather fat man; he had become positively corpulent, I had heard, in his last position in Singapore, where he had frittered away the fortune I had signed over to him on expensive luxuries. Now, however, the creature lying on the rosewood opium bed in the darkest corner of the room put me in mind of a swollen corpse. His limbs had wasted away to twigs, but his torso and head were like deflated bladders, loose unhealthy skin marked with lesions.

He reclined with his opium pipe, his shirt open so that I could see clearly the ravages of disease upon his body. Beside him, preparing

another sticky ball for the pipe, was a woman of worn and grey aspect, who appeared to be at least fifty years of age. She wore a local mode of dress comprising a tight-fitted blouse and narrow batik skirt, her feet bare. I recognised the fabric and its pattern, for my mama had worn batik sometimes too.

The batik-clad lady nodded to me, seeming entirely unsurprised. She shook James Henry gently. He seemed to rouse a little from his stupor, and reached out blindly and mindlessly to seize this woman's breast. Completely unperturbed, she removed his hand, and spoke to him in a low voice.

He sat up, stared at me. Something like a smile tried to assemble itself on his face; I stopped him with an upraised hand.

"You need not trouble yourself," I said quietly. "I wished only to tell you that I have arrived, and I will take care of my needs on my own. I will not disturb you further than I have today."

James Henry emitted a kind of groan. The woman beside him made some soothing sounds to settle him.

"Is he in pain?" I asked her, for clearly he could not speak for himself.

"He is always in pain now, unless he has chandu," she answered. "I have seen it often enough. The girl he caught it from, before me—she is dead. I helped send her things back to Amakusa."

James Henry gave a great, wet cough, and cried out, "Gout! It is gout!"

"Of course it is," she said, in the placating tone one used for a child. "Take your pipe now, come."

"Are you...his nurse?" I asked, watching as she expertly crooned James Henry back into his stupor.

"I am now, Puan," she answered. "They call me Kak Lallang, but I was from Amakusa, also, long ago. Tuan purchased me from Malabar Street. I was cheap, because I am old, but he is beyond caring."

"You do not mind this work?"

She focused a slow, quiet gaze at me. "I am grateful to have a bed to

die in, when the time comes, Puan. I would rather earn it this way, than the way I was doing it before. You will forgive me if I do not speak more of it, to a lady of your respectable upbringing." So saying, she turned back to her patient.

I left the room and immediately hurried to the garden, to take in great breaths of clean, warm air. The garden was overgrown with wild banana trees (I sheltered from the rain beneath one, which seemed to have bits of pink thread tangled amid its roots) and flowering shrubs of some kind; Muru had made some effort to keep the grass neat, so that one could walk among the trees. But there was no escaping the mosquitos and other insects, nor the sweltering heat; besides, the storm had formed muddy puddles everywhere.

Ahmad met me at the door, slightly drier than he had been before (he was, at least, in clothes that showed far less of him). He smiled at me and asked, "Do you need anything for now, madam? We will have tea and sandwiches sent up to you in a moment, and I can heat water if you would like a bath."

I was not hungry, and while a bath sounded splendid, all I could think of was Madam Kay. I felt like I would not be able to rest, eat, or indeed breathe freely until I knew I could see her.

"Will you go now to Madam Kay," I said, not without a pang of conscience that Ahmad had only just dried off, and I was sending him back into the storm, "and ask when I may see her? I will pay for your rickshaw."

Ahmad laughed. "Rickshaw! For me? No, madam, I will run there, if you let me have the umbrella. I will go now." And he added, quite kindly, "Try to make yourself comfortable." So saying, with no further preamble, off he ran once more, into the pelting rain.

CHAPTER II
MR KAY HAS A SECRET

NOT LONG AFTER Mr Kay Wing Tong, retired businessman and once a prominent member of the Straits Steamship Company, had met the mysterious Madam Ingram, it was a warm evening, and the insects were shrill in the undergrowth.

Mr Kay, still known as Kay Loban to many (his oldest son was now “Boss Kay”, but Mr Kay Wing Tong had been Kay Loban for nigh on twenty years, and habits were hard to break), was to all intents and purposes a perfectly ordinary Chinese gentleman, albeit one of significant personal wealth. He was a widower, by now somewhat past his vigorous prime. He was tall, for a Chinese man. Thin, though not unwholesomely so; this thinness gave a severe cast to his face, belying his generally mild-mannered nature. He lived simply, in his retirement, having moved to a small cottage by the seaside, and took great pleasure in daily long walks, occasional sweet treats and peaceful evenings with tea and tobacco.

Mr Kay, however, had a secret.

Once a month, when the moon was full over Singapore, a secret path opened between two little islands across the world—one warm and muggy, on the equator that divided north and south; one cold and

blustery, off Scotland’s northernmost shore—both full of interesting secrets. This, however, was a particularly dangerous secret—the path that Mr Kay’s spirit traversed across unmortal lands, to visit his friend Miss Cassidy.

There were no sinister intentions behind this unheard-of arrangement, made possible only through the intervention of Miss Cassidy’s favourite sister Anna. Anna—once known as Innana, in lands so old that living memory just barely contained their record—was a being of ancient power and, more to the point, infinite meddlesomeness. It was she who had opened this route through long-forgotten realms, pulling Mr Kay’s ka—or soul, as Miss Cassidy called it, or semangat, as Mr Kay referred to it—into an entirely different physical location, while his living mortal body slept.

Mr Kay did not bother to keep the secret very well—he told anyone who asked, that he sometimes had a “little chat” with a “friend in Scotland”, and she had said such-and-such and this-and-that. Fortunately, however, he didn’t have that many people to tell, and those he did speak to largely dismissed his conversation as the ramblings of an old man. (He was not, in fact, so very old—just a little past fifty—but he certainly did ramble.)

Fortunately for Miss Cassidy’s peace of mind, Mr Kay had long since left the sprawling family mansion of Pandan Villa, and retired to his neat little seaside cottage, in blessed peace and solitude. He had once been surrounded by family—two sons, their respective wives and children, his twin daughters, and the extended family which often included lifelong employees like the family amah, Yoke Jie (now long since gone to her eternal rest); the chauffeur, Mat, who still came round occasionally in the automobile now used by Mr Kay’s oldest son; and of course, the family’s English tutoress, Miss Cassidy.

By the time Miss Cassidy joined the Kay household in 1897, nearly a decade ago now, ostensibly as the live-in English teacher for the twins, Mr Kay had been a widower for a long time. As a successful businessman

in good standing, scandal did not easily attach to him, even though it was well known that Mr Kay was cursed with the third eye—the ability to see ghosts.

After living in Singapore a while—and furthermore having come there by way of India—Miss Cassidy understood that this was not uncommon in the East. It was something merely remarked upon in passing—“So-and-so has bought a new pair of shoes, they are very fine! Did you know he can see ghosts?”

So it was accepted as a part of daily life for some people, to be able to see into another world; but, at least among the Chinese of the East Indies, it was certainly not considered lucky. Doing business with Mr Kay, marrying into or out of his family, and joining his household in any capacity were all considered to be risky undertakings, notwithstanding the Kay family’s obvious material success.

Even so, Miss Cassidy knew that a few tongues wagged when Mr Kay was seen to enjoy her company. Who was this middle-aged Scots spinster of no remarkable personal attractiveness, and no family of any standing (in human terms, anyway)? This was especially so when, well, Miss Cassidy had to leave Singapore very suddenly and under mysterious circumstances, and Mr Kay shortly afterward decided to retire and hand over the reins of his business to his oldest son.

The seaside cottage he now lived in had once belonged to a British land surveyor, long dead. The house, built rather ambitiously in the style of an actual English seaside cottage, fireplace and all, had been left to crumble after its owner died, due to its insalubrious location close to a mangrove swamp, its inaccessibility (the only road was a dirt track that went winding picturesquely, but very inefficiently, around the homes and shops of a nearby kampong) and the difficulty of putting it back into decent shape.

Mr Kay, however, loved his new home. Long hours of conversation—precious hours, hard won with magic spun by a powerful goddess—

had been devoted to Mr Kay describing, in lush (and to Miss Cassidy, unnecessary) detail, the perfection of this pretty cottage. He repeatedly waxed lyrical about its isolated location, its quiet comforts and (with great emphasis) the fact that nobody ever disturbed his peace. Only those whom he truly loved would make the effort to visit him, because it was so difficult to get to.

This was all quite true. The land surveyor’s house had been built in the days before there was even a kampong close by to mark a dirt track; its original owner could only leave or return to it at high tide, taking a sampan from Johnston’s Pier. This had clearly suited the grumpy old Brit who once lived in it; and it suited Mr Kay just as well. He seemed, therefore, adamant in convincing Miss Cassidy that it would suit her also, disregarding her exasperated protest: “Mr Kay, I live in Scotland.”

Miss Cassidy knew that all Mr Kay described was quite true; and even though it was not possible, she even suspected sometimes that he had chosen that particular cottage purely for its suitability in hosting a guest who did not care to be easily seen. But it was surely not the case—Mr Kay had purchased the cottage long before he renewed contact with Miss Cassidy, in their particular and unique correspondence.

But it was undoubtedly a handy spot for keeping secrets. There were no public thoroughfares nearby; no passers-by to peer into the windows and be flabbergasted by Mr Kay getting carefully dressed under the light of the midnight moon, as if going to a party; combing his greying hair, putting on an expensive-looking grey silk jacket (surely it was too hot for a jacket?), even putting on shoes, although he was indoors. Mr Kay hired women from the kampong to clean for him; the ladies were always mystified why he particularly wanted the house to be absolutely sparkling the day before the full moon, and then never had any visitors over.

Miss Cassidy bore the burden of opening the gateway for Mr Kay, a complex ritual that was part summoning, part spell, and all made up off the cuff by Anna the day they made their first successful attempt. Mr

Kay could not participate effectively in his own summoning, so he only had to do one thing—get nicely dressed (entirely optional, but Mr Kay always availed himself of the option) and wait to be summoned. He then sat down in an armchair by the fire...and went to sleep.

At least, that was what any nosey observer, peering in through a handy window, might have seen. Anyone hoping to spot something interestingly supernatural—Mr Kay sleepwalking about the room, or the spectre of Miss Cassidy dancing in the nude around him, or something else of the sort—would have been sorely disappointed.

Mr Kay would appear to be asleep by the fire for many hours, under the light of the full moon. On the other side of the world, at least from Miss Cassidy's personal viewpoint, he spent all of those hours—most of them in bright daylight on her side of the world, all precious time Miss Cassidy took out of her busy days—apparently trying as hard as possible to make her lose her temper.

On this particular evening, not long after he had met the enigmatic Mrs Kingsbright, Mr Kay's physical body was again sleeping peacefully in its chair, while his living and very vital soul was in Miss Cassidy's parlour.

He was engaged in making (to her) terribly rude remarks while poking about her pantry in a most meddlesome way. He was, of course, entirely insubstantial, and fortunately could not actually move or displace anything, but it was still an aggravating experience to have even a ghostly mature-aged gentleman observing the state of one's sugar jar ("You are running out! You should not eat so much sugar."), candle box ("You should use beeswax—tallow has such a dreadful smell.") and soup pot ("You ought to give this a good scour more often.").

He had just moved on to remarking on Miss Cassidy's physical appearance ("I see your freckles have run rampant this summer, Miss

Cassidy! They say a good remedy is...") when she finally cut him off, tossing aside her darning, which was growing more and more untidy and pointless as the visitation progressed.

"...lemon juice," continued Mr Kay as a faint smile crept over his features. Miss Cassidy had leapt to her feet and was heading towards him, brandishing a large darning needle in a militant sort of way. Normally, Miss Cassidy kept a polite and decorous distance between them, even though Mr Kay's physical body was not actually in her parlour and he could not in any way breach the rules of propriety. Mr Kay's not-so-subtle way of subverting this was to enrage her enough that she approached *him*.

She did so now with alacrity, waving the point of her darning needle under his nose, in a manner that would have been exceedingly dangerous if he had flesh and blood to endanger in that moment. "Mr Kay, enough!" she growled, as his grin grew ever wider. "You have something to ask me today, that much is clear, so ask and stop making a nuisance of yourself."

"I am offended."

"You are not—not a jot. You are doing this because I have made very clear that I will not participate in any sort of shenanigans—"

"You call them shenanigans, do you?"

"And what do you call it, this insistence on telling me tall tales—"

"They are not tall tales, Miss Cassidy. They are genuine problems that I have encountered—woeful tales of wronged, innocent souls, who could do with a little help from a more capable source than I—"

"I am *not* coming back to Singapore," said Miss Cassidy, her darning needle now vigorously piercing Mr Kay in the right nostril. "It matters not how many tragic sob stories you bring me. I was able to help the Bendemeers, just barely. I was able to be of assistance to your own family. But there it must end. I put too many people in danger, and there must be no more of this. Now I am enjoying a peaceful period of rest and recuperation—"

“You are bored out of your wits.”

The darning needle now jabbed Mr Kay in the left temple. “I am perfectly *happy* and *content*,” she retorted emphatically. “And I am not going back to Singapore, to embroil myself in yet another—”

“So!” he interrupted determinedly, “I have been seeing a ghost. Repeatedly. The same one, over and over, for about a week now.”

The darning needle paused for a moment in its murderous trajectory, and Miss Cassidy glared at Mr Kay, who shook his head. “Not the ordinary types I always see,” he added. “I know you think I am embellishing in order to entice you into returning to Singapore, and helping another sad soul, but I assure you I am not. I have never seen a hantu quite like this one. She is...she has...” He paused, and then, with a odd little flick of his wrist, and a faint frown on his face, he said, “She dances.”

“But Mr Kay, you see ghosts all the time. You are famous for it.”

“Certainly,” he said easily, waving away the darning needle. “Hantus and momoks galore. They float. They hide and jump out at me from dark corners. They elongate their tongues, or waggle long fingernails, or make unsettling noises. I am used to all that. But this one...”

Mr Kay thought for a minute. Beneath him, Miss Cassidy’s cat (her name was Miss Turkey) yawned, and flicked her tail. Miss Turkey served as a kind of anchor point for Mr Kay’s presence; she, like most cats, could see spectres. She followed him about, and if anyone were to take a peek into the parlour, they would see Miss Cassidy eccentrically having an earnest conversation with her cat. No doubt, some of them might consider this odd, but it was still far less startling than apparently talking to thin air.

“Did you ever see a wayang kulit, when you were in Singapore, Miss Cassidy?”

“A shadow-puppet play? A little. I remember bringing your grandchildren to see one, along with the twins. It was the story of a princess on a mountain, who demanded of her suitor some extraordinary

things—a thousand mosquito hearts, I believe, was one of the demands.”

“Puteri Gunung Ledang, yes. Sensible woman. All girls about to be married should make impossible demands, and see how their suitors react. Thoroughly test their mettle.”

“Mr Kay...”

“Yes, well! You saw how the puppets move? With their joints...like so...”

Mr Kay raised his arms and bent them at right angles at the elbows and wrists, affecting an expression of blank and goggle-eyed impassivity. Miss Cassidy tried very hard to keep her stern demeanour unmoved.

“She moves like that,” he said, after keenly observing her for a moment, during which Miss Cassidy successfully suppressed all signs of wild laughter. “Like she is dancing in a wayang kulit, all the time.”

“And what does she do to you? Does she approach you, or call to you?”

“No. That is the thing. I cannot even tell if she realises I can see her. She is just there, dancing.”

“Where is ‘there?’”

He shrugged. “Oh, anywhere. Sometimes she is just on the street. Sometimes in my garden. Sometimes, at night, I see her under the coconut trees by the beach. A young woman, I think, but old and grey and hollow to look at, if you know what I mean? And I cannot see her eyes. I think perhaps she has none. And she is dressed like the dancers in a Malay dance, the kind which tells a story, you know?”

Miss Cassidy didn’t know, but she gestured for him to go on nonetheless.

“Malay dance is usually graceful, but she moves like a puppet, all angles and joints; I think because she cannot quite move the way she is meant to, in the form she is in. She dances like she wants to tell me something, but she will not, or cannot, look at me. Sometimes she is wearing what look like the rags of a Malay dance costume, with the headdress and the baju; other times she is wearing an old-fashioned European gown, with a

full-skirted dress that looks like it has been scorched; and sometimes she even seems to be wearing some kind of saree. I am truly flummoxed, Miss Cassidy,” he said, throwing up his hands in a gesture of rather theatrical despair. “When I try to approach her, she vanishes. Then, when I am minding my own business, smoking my pipe or going for my morning walk or just having breakfast with a friend, up she pops in a stray shadow or behind a door, dancing, dancing, like a particularly frightful shadow puppet.”

Miss Cassidy pondered, thoughtfully tapping her darning needle upon her lower lip. “Certainly it seems she wishes to tell you something, but for some reason cannot directly speak to you. That is not all that unusual...”

“No, it is not, but mainly those who are silenced—for whatever reason—attempt to write. They leave cryptic and foreboding messages on windows and mirrors, or bleed onto my notepaper, or whatever. I have never encountered a poor hantu trying to dance a message.”

“You speak with sympathy—you think she intends no harm?”

He shrugged again, now with a faint smile. “I have no way to tell for sure. But she looks to me to be only a young woman, not so very much older than my own girls are now. And she is a horrific sight, but she does not seem to be deliberately trying to frighten me.”

Miss Cassidy nodded encouragingly. Privately, however, a faint shiver was running up her spine. As Mr Kay described this dancing ghost, with her odd and ever-changing costume, something was flickering in the depths of Miss Cassidy’s awareness. A memory, lost and buried, struggling to come to the fore, to warn her. Mr Kay kept talking, but Miss Cassidy was no longer listening. She was trying to seize hold of a thought that kept slipping away...

“Red flowers,” she said suddenly, then wondered why she had blurted such a strange and random thing.

Mr Kay stopped talking, regarding her with surprise. “Red flowers? Are you asking me to bring you flowers, Miss Cassidy? I certainly would

be happy to, the next time we meet in person, for you know it would be a waste to try it now. Be sure that the moment you step off the boat bringing you back to Singapore,” he continued cheerfully, “I will be there with an armload of the reddest flowers you can imagine.”

Miss Cassidy tried to ignore him, but it was no use—the thought, the image of flowers speckled with deep crimson, had rapidly faded.

She sighed. Abruptly, she became aware that Mr Kay was regarding her intently, and that she was standing very close to him. Instantly she skipped several steps backwards, retreating to her chair by the fireplace, where her discarded half-darned wool sock was dangling reproachfully from the armrest.

“What sort of red flowers, exactly, Miss Cassidy?” he asked with interest.

“I have no particular penchant for red flowers, Mr Kay,” she replied, sitting down and bending assiduously over the darning once again.

“Indeed! You seemed quite excited about them, moments ago. Although since you have red hair—orange hair, in fact—and an inordinate number of freckles, I would not recommend red flowers for you. Blue, perhaps,” he murmured introspectively as Miss Cassidy quietly seethed. “Yezi recently helped a red-haired lady tailor a very lovely blue dress. Of course, she was a much younger lady than you. Slim as a reed, only freckled on the nose.”

“Mr Kay,” began Miss Cassidy in a dangerous voice.

“White flowers would be elegant also. It has been very educational,” he remarked thoughtfully, “having a daughter in the fashion business. Speaking of my daughters,” he added, perking up again, “I wish to tell you about a most interesting client they have just met...a lady called Madam Ingram, also from Scotland! And if you hear me out, you will find her so intriguing, Miss Cassidy, that you will perforce feel the need to get on a ship straight away and—”

“I think our time is nearly up,” said Miss Cassidy, and if she seemed to growl the words, Mr Kay did not appear to notice. “I will see you, Mr

Kay, next month.”

There was no reply. Miss Cassidy looked up; the little parlour was empty. Mr Kay was gone.

After each session, Miss Cassidy was always relieved, to an extent, that the summoning had gone undetected once more by those who might disapprove (which was, to be frank, rather a lot of beings). And she was always exasperated, to an even greater extent, because that was the overriding emotion Mr Kay’s extended conversation tended to engender.

And then, as his presence—and the scent of his tobacco smoke, wafting from his pipe in the middle of her kitchen table, amid a strange jumble of paraphernalia—faded away, she would find herself fighting off a reluctant sense of sadness.

One more month, she would firmly remind herself. Only one more month.

And then she would be annoyed at herself for counting down the days, in this ridiculous manner. Shaking herself a little, she would put on a cheerful smile, and bustle off to greet her class for the day.

Only one more month before we speak again.

CHAPTER III

MADAM INGRAM MEETS A MEDIUM

MADAM KAY WAS not like anything I had expected.

The Chinese medical hall in itself was quite a place. I could not recognise anything I saw, pickled in vast glass jars, dried in folds of paper, roots and seeds and mushrooms and the body parts of animals that seemed to have come from a child’s fantasy book. I swear I saw a shop assistant scooping dried black ants into a customer’s paper packet, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. The place smelled strange and earthy; not unpleasant, but distinctly alien to me.

My appointment was not with Madam Kay. It was with Physician Tong, her brother-in-law, who would first examine me to locate a physical reason for my malady. It was only when Physician Tong could not help a patient that Madam Kay was summoned to see if she could assist. Otherwise, Ahmad explained, everyone would go straight to Madam Kay first, always ready to blame a ghost or spirit for ailments that were due more to unsanitary conditions, overwork, carelessness or sheer misfortune.

The two Tong brothers were well-respected members of the community. Tong Wang, the older, was the physician, trained in Beijing;

he was to be addressed as Tong Sifu, or Master Tong. Madam Kay's husband was the younger, Tong Yang, usually known as Tong Loban, Boss Tong. He had some training, but it seemed he was largely in charge of the business side of things, as well as the dispensary.

It was Tong Loban who came to greet me as I ventured hesitantly through the threshold of the medicine hall. Astonished faces turned towards me. I could not tell if they were surprised that a veiled woman in Western dress was coming into a Chinese medicine hall, or that she—I—was clearly not, well, entirely Western.

Tong Loban, however, greeted me in fluent English, as if there were nothing at all untoward. "You must be Madam Ingram! This way; watch your step, the floor is uneven."

I had decided that, as much as possible while I was in Singapore, I would use my maiden name, uncertain if "Mrs Kingsbright" might conjure up any unpleasant feelings among those who had once dealt with my husband.

Tong Loban was a friendly, charming, good-looking fellow with a ready smile; like his wife, whom I had seen from a distance, he had the comfortable plumpness of a successful businessman. He led me up the narrow stairs to the second floor, where a sign in three languages—Malay, English and some other characters I could not decipher—read Examination Room.

The second floor was divided into two sections; beyond a latched metal grille, I caught a glimpse of the Tong family home. Seated around a low table were three little children, having their midday meal, white rice stuck to their cheeks and mouth. One of the little creatures cried out, "Papa! Dai jie da ngor!"

A plump white hand reached out from beyond my vision, and gave this child a firm tap on the back of the head. "Papa zo gung," a woman's voice scolded sternly. "Guai guai sek fun." A soft, masculine chuckle followed—a visiting relative, perhaps—and the faint scent of tobacco

reached me. It was not like ordinary tobacco—there was a curious, sweet note that I found I rather liked. The scent reminded me of...of...

I frowned. The recollection had faded. I shook myself, and tried to pay attention. Tong Loban directed me to the Examination Room, where Tong Sifu sat waiting.

Tong Sifu looked quite different from his brother; thin and a little stooped, with a kindly smile. He too spoke good English, as he invited me to sit and asked me to place my hand, wrist up, upon a small pink cushion set on the desk for that purpose. I did so, wondering; he put two fingers upon my wrist to check my pulse.

I waited in silence. I had been examined by many physicians, seeking a cure for what ailed me. It was always a gamble, guessing what my diagnosis would be. Some doctors (and I use the term loosely) would not touch me, and would only make me answer a barrage of invasive and humiliating questions, or seek to hypnotise me by a variety of means. Others, differing diametrically in their opinion of what was causing my episodes, asked me to disrobe, and would poke and prod and mangle me, take measurements of the bumps in my skull, examine my teeth as if I were a horse, or probe my private parts to see if they could find out where my womb had wandered off to. One doctor insisted that I required regular "pelvic massages" to induce "hysterical paroxysms", kindly offering his services for the purpose, "in the comfort of your own home, madam".

"Female hysteria" was the most common diagnosis I heard. I considered this complete rubbish, but as yet no doctor had offered any better opinion.

Tong Sifu, however, merely frowned faintly as he took my pulse. He asked me to open my mouth, felt my neck and forehead, and all the while kept up a gentle stream of what seemed like quiet chit-chat. "What is the weather like where you are from? What do you have for breakfast? Do you take exercise?"

After answering him, I said, “I would like to see Madam Kay. You are very kind, but I think only she can help me.”

He did not seem offended. Instead, he regarded me for a moment, and finally replied, “Wait here.”

I waited. It was very hot in the room; woven rattan hand fans had been provided for clients, neatly stacked on a side table. A pot of tea gave off a bitter, floral scent. I wondered who would drink hot tea in such weather, but a stack of used cups waiting to be washed clearly indicated that there were plenty who did.

A child sent up a wail, and was soundly silenced. The metal grille rumbled. I heard quick footsteps; a female voice calling to her children, “Guai guai sek fun ah!” Then the door opened, and Madam Kay stepped into the room.

She was far younger than I expected, even after that earlier glimpse of her. Her soft rosy face still had a dimple in one cheek; her black eyes were clear and bright; the thick hair wound into a bun, held in place with a brown jade pin, was still jet-black and glossy. It reminded me of my mama’s hair, black as a mirror, black as night.

She was dressed like a respectable Chinese matron, in a blue silk blouse beautifully fitted and trimmed, and black trousers. Gold jewellery winked in her ears, and a fine bangle of brilliant green jade was on one wrist. On the collar of her blouse was pinned an elaborate decorative knot, with a shining black bead; for some reason I found myself staring at this in trepidation, though I had no idea why.

Madam Kay looked at me. Then—and I have no other way to put this, for nothing physically changed about her—she looked *through* me.

She gasped—a sharp intake of breath, an expression of shock. And I—I, whom no one had ever believed, who everyone had decided was simply delusional, hysterical, mad—I found myself crying out, “Help me. Oh, help me!”

And then what I had dreaded most began to happen. The dark fog

started to come over me. My vision blurred. My heart raced. I cried out in terror, but my tongue could no longer form words.

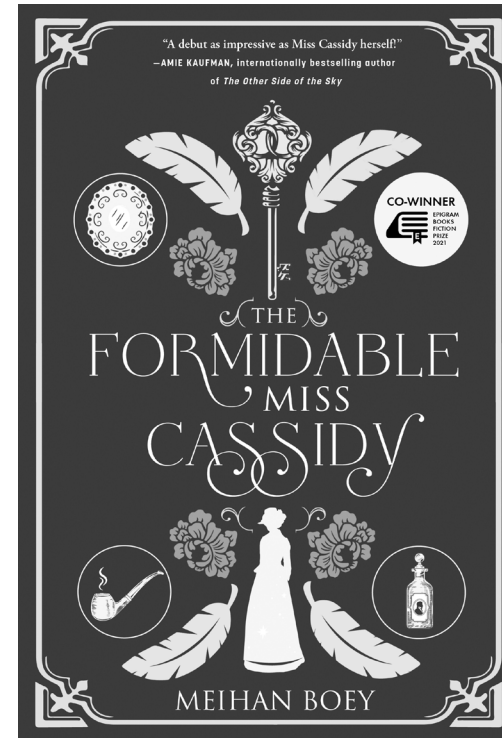
I remember Madam Kay reaching out for me, shouting sharply for help. And then the darkness took me.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meihan Boey is the author of *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* (co-winner of the 2021 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and winner of the 2022 Singapore Book Award for Best Literary Work), and science fiction novella *The Messiah Virus*. Her work has appeared in *Fish Eats Lion Redux*, *Fright 1*, the inaugural issue of *Sploosh* and the sixth volume of *Best New Singaporean Short Stories*. She was a writer-in-residence in June 2023 at the National Writing Centre in Norwich, UK, where she worked on the third book in this series. She is also the vice president of the Association of Comic Artists of Singapore and has scripted several comics, including *Supacross* and *The Once and Marvellous DKD*. She is a dedicated comic book and manga fan, an enthusiastic gamer, a persistent triathlete, and not yet a Super Saiyan, though she keeps trying.

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Author Meihan Boey illustrates the lengths Letty will go to in order to save her own soul, and reveals how Miss Cassidy’s past has caught up with her, in the shape of a worthy opponent: a terrifying jungle spirit the native folk call the Bungadarah.

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