

# THE

# JAVA

# ENIGMA

**"A globe-trotting,  
treasure-hunting  
thriller...a fascinating  
read from start to finish."**

—Neil Humphreys, bestselling  
author of *Marina Bay Sins*

# ERNI

# SALLEH



“With so much colourful and eclectic history on Singapore’s doorstep, I have often wondered why a code-cracking, historical adventure hasn’t been written about the region. Finally, *The Java Enigma* has plugged the gap. With a splash of Dan Brown and a quirky dash of Indiana Jones, Erni Salleh has written a globe-trotting, treasure-hunting thriller that is a fascinating read from start to finish.”

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“A riveting read of archaeological and historical mystery. *The Java Enigma* takes you on a journey across Southeast Asia and into the hidden depths of the monuments, languages and cultures of the Old Malay World—all while unravelling the inherent interconnections in and among them, and in a way, among us all.”

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“A well-written Southeast Asian *Da Vinci Code*-type mystery. Secrets buried and hidden...with a degree of scholarly detail all through the narrative.”

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# **THE JAVA ENIGMA**

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# THE JAVA ENIGMA ERNI SALLEH



**EPIGRAM**  
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*In memory of my father, whose tales of salvage dives and rescues were animated to me, always lovingly and never without a cup of teh tarik in hand. I've missed you dearly and hope this novel does your stories justice.*



BANGLADESH

CHINA

TAIWAN

MYANMAR

LAOS

LUZON STRAIT

ANDAMAN SEA

THAILAND

VIETNAM

LUZON

PHILIPPINE SEA

CAMBODIA

SOUTH CHINA SEA

HO CHI MINH CITY (SAIGON)

PHILIPPINES

GULF OF THAILAND

SULU SEA

PACIFIC OCEAN

STRAIT OF MALACCA

ACEH

BRUNEI

LANGSA

MALAYSIA

CELEBES SEA

KUALA LUMPUR

MALACCA

JOHOR

SINGAPORE

BORNEO

EQUATOR

EQUATOR

SUMATRA

CELEBES

NEW GUINEA

JAVA SEA

INDIAN OCEAN

BANDA SEA

SEMARANG ●  
BOROBUDUR ●  
YOGYAKARTA ●

FLORES SEA

JAVA

INDONESIA

EAST TIMOR

ARAFURA SEA

TIMOR SEA

# CHAPTER 1

**“WE ARE NOW** standing in front of Borobudur, a Buddhist temple from the eighth and ninth centuries, one of the oldest in Central Java,” said a passing tour guide, holding up a red flag to draw the attention of her flock of thirty or so sightseers. “You might have heard it commonly described in Hindu-Buddhist cosmology as mirroring the universe. But why?”

“If you get a chance to see it from above, Borobudur actually forms a mandala, which means ‘circle’ in Sanskrit and, in Buddhism, can represent many things—from the wheel of life to a symbol of perfection, and even as a tunnel between this world and the next.”

My ears perked up at the commentary. Even as the tourist group tottered away towards the base of the monument, I could still hear the guide blaring from the loudhailer about Borobudur as a pilgrimage site and how the various themes—of punishment and reward, the life of Buddha and the search for the Highest Wisdom—guided devotees to the path of Enlightenment.

“Do watch your step,” she continued. “Hope you’re ready to climb up nine levels to the central dome at the top! Meanwhile, I’ll take you through the 1,460 relief panels, and at the end maybe we’ll do a quick quiz on how many Buddha statues you saw and how many different hand poses there are.”

Today, as with every other day in July, was blistering hot amid the incessant clamour of tourists, both domestic and international, whizzing past in a kaleidoscopic blur, most of them taking refuge from the sun under colourful umbrellas.

I didn't have that luxury. Since working on this project, I had changed the shade of my foundation three times, my tan nearly permanent now save the areas hidden by my daily uniform of Bermuda shorts and T-shirt. I'd sometimes chuckle to myself at how much I was starting to look like Ayah when he took off his shirt. All those years working on a ship and exposed to the sun had given my father stripes, or *belang-belang* as we used to say in Malay.

I should call him. We last spoke in February and had promised to meet. He had been excited to show me his new house that he and his wife had bought in Kuala Lumpur. From the pictures of his garden, I could tell that he was at peace. After all, he had always wanted space to plant fruit trees and vegetables, just as he and his father had done in their old house in Johor. Flats in Singapore, however, couldn't afford such indulgence.

But work...

Well, that's what I told Ayah when I cancelled my visit to see him. Truth was, Ibu had called me from Singapore; she needed my help with a guy she was dating and honestly, it was hard choosing between my parents, especially when I only had four days to spend with either during my one trip home. I suppose it was obvious whom I chose.

"Ada orang telefon kamu tu. Bunyiknya brr brr gitu, ngak didengarin ka?"

I turned and squinted at Mia, who was squatting an arm's-length behind me. I swore she had ears more sensitive than a mouse's. How did she hear my phone vibrating in my back pocket when I didn't even feel it?

"If it's important, they'll call again," I replied, raising my gloved hands instead. I didn't want to go through the whole washing and sanitising ritual again. All I wanted was to finish cataloguing this particular piece of relief and head for lunch. I had been fretting over it for a few weeks and with our funding coming to an end, this was my prized possession. The motif on the block had broken off during a minor collapse following the 2017 earthquake, and for the restoration team to accurately replicate it, they needed to know what the original looked like. That was where I came in.

As a Unesco librarian, I had access to most research archives as well as public library collections, which made retrieving information not only quicker, but also more reliable. For example, this particular relief had required me to cross-reference photographs from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam with research papers housed at London's British Library and books shelved at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta. What would take a regular researcher weeks to gain approval for access to these rare materials had taken me days.

"You know, it's fine if you need to go and answer the call. I don't think Professor Volker will mind. We could take an early lunch together."

The shadow casting over me was slender, the voice gentle and kind. Looking up, I smiled. I clapped my dusty gloved hands together and stood up, coming eye to eye with Dr Harper, the supervising researcher for my unit. Technically, what he said was true. Professor Volker, the head of our restoration project, was fond of multiple breaks for kopi dan kretek himself, never refusing a cup of coffee or a cigarette when offered.

As if to convince me further, Dr Harper pointed to the pile of notes and photographs stacked on the makeshift table next to me.

"It'll be too hot to work outdoors by noon anyway, so you can start digitising and cataloguing those when we're back. I know Mia's team



would like to access them soon. Something about mapping the rock and soil formations of the area. From what I heard, she'll even let you organise the working paper by the DDC." He let out a snort when he heard my gasp. "Knew that'd get your attention. I swear, no one gets more excited at organising things than you."

Irin Omar, the record keeper—that's me all right. To properly catalogue any papers written or photos taken during this project, I created a record that gave bibliographic descriptions of the material followed by the key subject headings related to the item. Only then did I assign a classification or call number to the record—in this case, using the Dewey Decimal Classification system. Left to the researchers alone, this task would take secondary priority, making it hard for anyone—not just the public, but even themselves!—to access the information gathered.

"Hey, you used the magic word." Taking off my gloves, I walked over to the resident geographer, who had taken refuge in our tent, a glass of cold water in hand. "Mia, do you want to come eat with us? I can give you a heads-up about those rock and soil images over lunch."

She made a gagging action and rubbed her barely noticeable baby bump. That was dramatic code for "no". I looked at my watch; it was only 11.30am, which meant that the other half of my team would be arriving in half an hour and would have taken their lunch by then.

Dr Harper seemed to have come to the same conclusion. "Guess it's just you and me then. Come on. I hear Mbak Susi is doing her ayam geprek today as a special. My treat."

Was this the second or third time this week that Dr Harper had suggested lunch—and paid for it? Granted, bosses paid when we ate as a team, but since it was just the two of us, something must be up. But I decided not to dwell on that too much. I could only think of the fried chicken dish drenched in chilli paralysing my taste buds for hours.

Ordering iced drinks first as a precaution, we then took our seats on upside-down plastic crates that once carried glass Coca-Cola bottles. Yawning cats sauntered by, mimicking some of the stall owners whose business hadn't picked up yet for lunch.

"Have you ever thought of returning to academia?" Dr Harper's question took me by surprise. "My archaeology team could do with a PhD student. From the looks of it, Borobudur might not survive another volcanic eruption or earthquake. So whatever secrets we'd want to unearth about it has to be done within the next few years."

"I don't think the original builders had intended for it to exist this long," I murmured, just loud enough for my lunch companion to hear. "If Raffles hadn't stumbled upon it by accident, restoration work would never have even started."

Having read the various Unesco reports that had been compiled since 1969, I was aware of how much correction had been made over the years to the leaning and sagging walls. Some parts of the balustrades had been dismantled to ease the load on the foundations and reduce any risk of collapse. The problem was, only a small part of the entire monument was built upon compact volcanic soil; the majority rested on soil of varying thickness and permeability. And with water seeping through, it was only a matter of time before Borobudur would collapse inwards into itself.

"It's a Unesco World Heritage site now," he reminded me. "Whether we like it or not, some of us will have to continue preserving this monument. Surely that's why you volunteered for this deployment, right? Not many librarians I know would work outside the comforts of their air-conditioned archives."

"But at what price?"

My question was met with a long sigh, the usual sign that he was opting not to engage in our never-ending debate. The last time we had disagreed, we had argued from lunch to supper.

Unlike me, Dr Harper was a conservationist, which meant his views often ignored the fact that Borobudur should be understood beyond this singular monument. Its landscape included the people who lived there, their acts, memories, relations and histories. Despite being the only ancient Buddhist monument of its kind on the island, Borobudur had been named and treated by the locals like any other candi in Java—with quiet reverence. Except in this case, Candi Borobudur no longer provided them the space to worship; the people relegated to the food stalls clustered at the rear, along with the hawkers of crafts and souvenirs. If you have ever seen a Javanese person place unobtrusive offerings in a temple, you'd understand the horror of having a sacred place commodified into this tourist attraction.

The librarian in me understood the importance of this segregation but I still sympathised with the vendors who could only tempt weary tourists at the end of their visit, an unavoidable and sometimes unwelcome sight for those exiting the archaeological park. Local activists were working to change that, but by the looks of it, this might not happen before my time here was up. Speaking of which—

I peeked at my missed call from earlier and saw that the number started with +60. The only person who would call me from Malaysia was Ayah—must be urgent. He usually texted me. Getting up, I inched the laminated menu on our table closer to Dr Harper.

“Why don't you order first? I'll just return this call and think about what I feel like eating today.”

I waved off his protest and headed to a corner behind the stalls, close to the edge of the fence. The chatter of tourists and shopkeepers still buzzed in the background but it was slightly more muted. Sighing at the potential overseas phone charge I was about to incur, I redialled.

“In...” An unfamiliar female voice, whispering my familiar name—a shortened version of my name that only my family used. “Ayah, dia...”

Unease. Sniffing on the other end. Sweat dripping down my back. “What's wrong?” I asked. “Is he sick? Is that why you're calling me using Ayah's number?”

“No, In. Ayah sudah takde... Dia meninggal pagi tadi. Cikkejutkan dia untuk solat subuh tapi dia sudah sejuk!”

No more. Passed away. Morning. Body cold.

I felt the silence all around me, the sound of the caller's cries and my own beating heart muffled. Surely I had to be dreaming. Ayah had texted me just days ago, joking that I might never come back because Yogyakarta was amazing. He told me he wanted to fly to Leiden, in the Netherlands, to see his Captain, and I had suggested we do a trip together.

No.

Squatting, with my back against the fence, I said nothing, simply gripping the phone tightly.

“Kita mesti kebumikan jenazah lepas zuhur. Ayah keeps talking about you. Please come.”

I ended the call. Zuhur was the first afternoon prayer and it would commence in about two hours. The body would be buried immediately, and there was no way I could make it to the airport, fly to Kuala Lumpur and drive to his house within that time. By the time I got there, it would be close to midnight and they would have already buried his body.

I must have sat there by the fence for nearly an hour; Dr Harper looked aghast and ready for a verbal battle when he found me much later.

“You know my bahasa isn't any good. I nearly died of embarrassment back there—” Squatting to my level, he frowned. “What's wrong? Are you ill?” The back of his warm hand rested against my forehead. “Jesus, Irin, you're cold! We'd better let the medic take a look at you.”

He must have dragged or carried me—not sure which, didn't care—

but next thing I knew I was seated on another inverted crate with a thermometer stuck under my armpit. Someone—a woman by the sound of it—was wiping my forehead and gathering my hair back from my face.

“Hey, hey. Come on, wake up. Drink this.” A straw. Something sweet as I took a sip. Chocolatey. “Milo will bring your blood sugar up. Aduh, this girl!”

Typical of Mia to fuss over me. She was only seven years older but it felt like twenty years sometimes. Funny how pregnancy and having kids can change you. I wouldn’t know, seeing that I hadn’t had either experience and would never get the chance to share this with—

“My father. He passed away.”

Mia’s hand stilled. Then the towel on my face was thrown to the ground.

“Buat apa lagi di sini! You need to go now.” Her eyes widened in exasperation when I refused to budge. “Dr Harper, come here! You see this girl. She don’t want go home!”

Ah, now she’d done it. She’d called the boss over. No doubt he would want me to go home too. Dr Harper did not take illness lightly.

“Do you want to go home? The medic is still on the way if you want to wait.” When I shook my head, he let out a sigh. “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off, then? You’re so pale, I don’t think it’s a good idea to work out here in the sun.”

I didn’t go to work the next day or the next.

Not crying. Planning.

I first contacted my brother to break the news to him. He was as rational as I was, and processed the emotions quickly so that he could take the next steps. I held back as long as I could before calling my

mother, knowing the news would crush her most. It did.

On the third day, I simply waited for the phone to ring.

The woman who had called me two days ago was once again on the line, using my father’s phone to contact me. Anita. Ayah’s wife.

“In, when are you coming to KL?” she asked. “We need to discuss your inheritance. I wasn’t...aware that you had a brother.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. But inheritance-wise, I didn’t see what there was to discuss. Everything would have been sorted according to Syariah law and I would be debited whatever was calculated for me.

But there was something else.

“It’s his debt, isn’t it?” I asked. Ayah was fond of credit cards but not of the discipline required to pay their bills. “How much?”

She rattled on. I sighed, jotting down the various amounts, ticking the ones I was willing to help with and crossing out the ones I wasn’t. Ayah had been extravagant in his retirement years, using credit to build a luxurious house and to buy expensive cars. Would seem a shame for my brother and I to use all of our inheritance to pay for assets neither of us benefited from.

“That’s not all,” she continued. “There is a bank deposit in Singapore that I cannot access. Only you can.”

Finding out that my father had a stash of money hidden was not surprising. Finding out that it required my access was. When did he even open this? I had to have been too young to not be aware of it.

Reassuring her that I would be flying to Singapore in a few days’ time, I hung up.

What was in this bank account? Money? From where? How much was there? The conversation and a gnawing curiosity stayed with me for the rest of the day.

I always thought I knew the man I called my father. But everyone had secrets. It seemed, so did he.

## CHAPTER 2

**ON HAPPIER OCCASIONS**, I would have taken the time to roam my beloved Changi Airport and see the indoor waterfall at Jewel, but not today. I had a mission and, boy, was it full of obstacles.

First on the list was my own mother, whom I had to lie to about my flight time so she wouldn't accost me at the arrivals hall. Ever since I told her about repaying some of Ayah's debt, she had been anxious, concerned that her children would not have much of their inheritance—a memory of their father—left. That and the knowledge of the secret bank deposit, which Ayah had certainly done behind her back, would devastate her. Which was why I only had today to head to the bank and sort out whatever it was he had kept hidden from all of us.

Anita hadn't been specific when she said "bank deposit" but if I had to guess, he probably got himself a safe deposit box at a branch close to Clementi, where Ayah and Ibu used to live and where I grew up. There was only one bank that had been there since the eighties and a quick check on the internet confirmed that the branch was still there. Knowing my parents, they would not have opened an account with any other bank but this one—the same one their parents trusted.

Of course, in the event I was wrong, that would leave me with three other major banks and a few hundred possible branch locations around the island.

I wasn't wrong.

"Hello, Miss Irin. Could I have your identification card or passport for verification please?" The bank teller took my ID with both hands, her radiant smile starting to make me uneasy. "Oh, it says here that it requires a fingerprint verification. Seems you were not old enough to have an ID card when you first opened it."

When *I* opened it? Surely, she meant my father had opened it for me.

"I'm sorry, but could you check whose name the box is registered under? I had assumed it was my father's."

"Certainly!" she chimed, that smile broadening even more. A few clicks later, she looked up, smiling until her eyes were two half crescents. "It is definitely under your name. Annual fee payment was made in cash but no withdrawals or deposits have been made in the last thirty years. Would you still like to make a withdrawal?"

I had a hunch that Ayah had tried to avoid a paper trail because my mother kept all our bank books and would have known if any cash transfers, withdrawals or deposits were made.

Offering my thumb as consent, I watched the teller press it against a cold, sterile scanner, leaving a mark on the glass surface. She then told me to wait for an armed escort to follow us into the deposits chamber. I recalled every bank-robbery movie I'd ever watched and felt increasingly uncomfortable at being ushered into a confined space.

"All right, this way, Miss."

We stepped into a room with rows and rows of titanium-looking boxes, each with a golden dial and number plate on the front. When we came to box No. 19901, she looked over cheerily at me.

"When you're ready, just input the code and it will open. We will wait for you outside." She pointed to the glass wall secured by an RFID lock.

I maintained an impassive face, lest she realised that I had no idea what the code was. Staring at the knob, I saw twenty-six letters,

instead of ten numerals. This meant that the code had to be a word—but what?

It wouldn't be my name; that would be too obvious. Neither would it be Ayah's or any of our family members'. I considered my grandparents' names but they had passed away when I was ten, so their names would not have been significant at the time he got the safe.

"Sorry to bother you." Knocking on the glass, I pointed to the intercom next to the RFID lock. "Do you know the year this safe was opened? I was only a child and I cannot remember."

The teller's smile vanished.

"I would have to go up and check, if you don't mind waiting?" A small line started to form on her forehead. "But I believe it could be 1990. Your box was the first in its year, that's why it was assigned the number one. I'll confirm it."

She hurried away, leaving the guard staring at me. Right, I'd better not screw this up. My question had probably sent the teller into a panic.

Walking back to the deposit box, I felt at a loss. What could a tiny box, no more than twelve centimetres all around, possibly hold? Certainly not the mountain of money I was expecting. Furthermore, if it was opened in 1990 and never touched since, it could not be a thumb drive, since they did not exist then, nor a cheque, for it would be invalid by now. What, then?

The intercom buzzed and the teller's voice echoed, "Miss Irin, I am confirming that it was opened on 19 January 1990. Please do let me know if you need further assistance."

She spoke brusquely and I knew it conveyed annoyance, anxiety or both seeing that I was taking so long. However, she needn't worry. I knew what the code was.

Placing my hand on the golden knob, I moved the marker first to B, then I, then R, T and H—and stopped. No, this couldn't be it.

The date was my birthday but why wait three years after I was born to open the deposit box? Insignificant.

I returned the knob to the starting position and took a deep breath. What happened in 1990? I would have been three and my mother would have just found out she was pregnant with my younger brother. However, as I had thought earlier, the code would not be a name. What else, then?

Closing my eyes, I pictured our old flat in Clementi, recalling every single detail locked in my memory palace. The wooden door we repainted three times, the mirrors we hung on the walls to create an illusion of space, the narrow living room that fit three small rattan sofas, our TV and a piece of coral—

Yes, that's it.

Ayah stopped working as a salvage diver when I turned two, moving up to the ship deck to man the cranes.

He had a code name.

A code.

Heart pounding, I held the knob once more but this time with more certainty.

E-A-S-Y-C-H-A-I-N

An audible click and the door disengaged.

"Three-seven-six-seven-eight. A combination lock? Whatever for?" Andi Danial, my younger brother, pushed across the table the palm-sized block of steel displaying the five numbers on separate dials. We were huddled in my old room, and it felt like old times when we'd tinker and bicker over this very desk—my room somehow the de facto meeting place when hiding from the prying eyes and ears of our parents. It was also where I'd secretly sought his help on the puzzles

and codes Ayah used to ask me to solve; Dan had a knack for patterns and numbers whereas I excelled in word games. Still, whenever I asked Ayah why he wouldn't give Dan his own puzzles to solve, his reason was always that my brother was too fragile for such an arduous task. Looking at Dan now, no one would believe that this workout enthusiast had spent a good part of his infancy in intensive care. He wheezes now and again but nothing his Ventolin inhaler couldn't fix.

"Dan, do you think this lock is some kind of antique?" I asked. "Something he found during his old diving days?" Sure enough, there was ample rust on it to suggest it wasn't new, but locks like these were so commercially available, it wouldn't even be valuable back in the eighties. "Or perhaps from a more recent salvage. Maybe the code opens another safe deposit box?"

Dan shrugged but I could see him contemplating the possibility. He had that same look on his face just before he attempted to solve one of his many varieties of Rubik's cubes.

"Or we're supposed to enter another combination to unlock it. That new code might mean something else." He was about to fidget with the dials when I snatched it from him.

"I'd say leave it as it is. The current position of the numbers could mean something or not. I don't know. What I do know is that the lock itself has to be a clue. Maybe it represents something it's supposed to be locking." Judging by the size of the combination lock, it might have been for a gate. "Maybe he unleashed some crazy demon—"

"Shh!" Dan hissed, nodding towards the door. "Don't let Ibu hear you say that! You know she believes in spirits."

Not two seconds after I stepped into her flat did she remind me not to offend my father's spirit, who, according to her, was still roaming around since it was not aware that the body had died. She repeatedly told me that she was "visited" by his spirit at night and asked if I had experienced the same. I doubt I'd get much sleep knowing this. I wasn't

being dismissive nor saying it was superstitious nonsense but one had to wonder, right? At what point does reality intersect with imagination?

"How is she anyway? I'm sorry I had to leave it to you to handle her. You know I'm not good with all this emotion stuff and Ibu is... dramatic."

Dan rolled his eyes at me. "Like I'm any better. Well, she cried, of course. Said that even though they're not together anymore, they were married for a long time. Death is always sad, especially when it happens too soon."

I nodded. Just in April I had wished our father a happy sixtieth, after which he replied that he was officially an old cock—referring to his Chinese zodiac, of course. This sentence was always followed with, "But your mother's a snake, that's why she's so sneaky." Ironic, seeing that he was the one sneaking around most of the time. Not cheating, no. Just keeping secrets—if the safe deposit box was any indicator.

As I sipped my coffee slowly, my attention returned to the lock, sitting like a stone between us. Why would someone hide a combination lock inside a safe deposit box unless it was valuable?

"Do you remember the flat at Stirling Road? Our paternal grandparents lived there after relocating from Pulau Bukom. I think Ayah and Ibu stayed there for a while too until they found their own flat." I turned the lock this way and that, hoping for another clue. "I feel like this could have been an actual lock from one of his past homes. Certainly looks old enough."

Dan shrugged then leaned back into his seat, unfazed by the lack of recollection. "I always thought we grew up in Clementi—wait, shit man, I don't even remember that. I only remember us lying on the floor with the aircon when we first moved here from Choa Chu Kang."

My favourite memory. The both of us in this very room, enjoying cold air blowing directly at us for the first time.

“Or perhaps the kampung house in Johor?” I used to have a blue passport for entry only into West Malaysia. I’d spend whole weekends and holidays there, playing amongst the rambutan trees and watching my grandfather build things in his shed. “Ayah had taken care of the house after our grandparents passed. Maybe he kept something there?”

Dan made a face.

I kept forgetting how young he would have been then. He probably never even stepped foot in that house.

“You know, we still haven’t touched Ayah’s things in his study.” He gave me a small smile. “Do you want to have a look?”

I knew what he was talking about. “Ibu still hasn’t got rid of that corner, huh?”

She had relegated most of Ayah’s things to a corner of the study, transforming the other parts into her personal craft space. From the looks of it, she had left his desk, notes and corkboards relatively untouched, a layer of dust evidence of the passing time.

“She’s not going to like us messing about here,” said Dan, peeking outside to ensure that our mother was still resting in her own room. “I can always continue when she’s not home and send you whatever I think is helpful.”

Too late. I was already elbow deep in a leather briefcase and pulling out what looked like yellowed newspaper clippings. Holding one up, I twitched my nose in the cloud of dust as I tried to make out the faded ink.

“Where’d he even get these?” I wondered out loud, looking at the dates at the top—the oldest was at least two hundred years old. “They’re not even microfilmed copies. These are originals.”

“What are they about?” Dan peered over my shoulder.

I wasn’t sure yet. I laid out the ten articles on the floor, rearranging them by date then by country of origin.

“They’re generally news reports about shipwrecks,” I murmured,

scanning through the other articles in the stack. “Wait, no, not all of them. Look here.”

I pulled out another cluster of yellowed papers. These were typewritten and looked like Morse-code exchanges.

“What in the world?” Dan grabbed the papers from me, excitement in his eyes as he flipped page after page. “I’ve got to run this through an encoder to be sure, but I think it’s in French—or Spanish, one of the Latin languages. These are symbols for letters with diacritics! See here, the letter ‘e’ is usually represented by a dot but this is an ‘é’. You see the two dots, one dash and two dots?”

I looked at the binary symbols my brother was pointing to. Neither of us knew if Ayah could speak French, much less read it!

“Did you do a uni module on this or what?” I asked. “I mean, I remembered Ayah trying to teach us Morse code when we were kids but as I recall, you’d run off every time he gave us homework. Even then, we only got as far as A to Z and one to nine.”

Dan flashed a toothy grin. “Doesn’t mean I wasn’t paying attention. Besides, aren’t you glad I can be of service now?”

I got Dan working on encoding the dashes and dots into actual words while I continued separating the remaining articles into piles.

“They’re about research teams uncovering unusual items,” I concluded. “Clusters in Luzon, Ayutthaya and—”

“Saigon?” Dan finished my sentence, showing me the first sentence he had successfully encoded into French. “Au large de Saigon.”

“They found something off the coast of Saigon,” I translated, immediately picking up the pile I had made for the French Indochinese reports. “This one says there was a dispute between the EFEO Director—that’s the French School of the Far East—and a few of the locals who had discovered what looked like the base of a temple. But it was so significantly destroyed that the school refused to pursue it.”

Dan frowned, thumbing through the other articles on the matter. “I find that strange. Maybe on a scale of grandeur, it could not outshine Angkor Wat? I know they tried to replicate—”

“You mean steal,” I corrected.

“—yes, parts of the Angkor to bring back for the Paris fair.”

I beamed at my younger brother. So he had been paying attention in History class after all. He might not have taken the subject as far as specialising in it at university, as his sister had, but he was certainly not ignorant of the past—Ayah made sure of it. However, finding these articles led us no further in understanding the significance of the lock. If anything, it only reminded me of how little I knew about my father, his interests, his pet projects, his secrets.

“All right, promise me that you won’t tell Ibu about this,” I reminded Dan. “I’m going to head off and contact Anita and see if she can help. You know how much they hate each other.”

Dan made a zipping motion over his lips. “I’ll see if I can find out more from these articles,” he said. “Good luck.”

Not sure when I’d see him next, I gave my brother a hug and snuck out of the house.

## CHAPTER 3

**BEFORE SAYING ANYTHING** else, Anita accused me of being an unfilial daughter for not attending my father’s funeral.

“It’s been nearly twenty years since everyone saw you and your family,” she said on the phone. “The least you could do was to turn up for the prayers after the funeral.”

I wanted to remind her that by the time we would’ve crossed the border on a seven-hour bus journey from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, the prayers would have been over. It would have been another story if someone had at least offered my mother and brother a flight...

However, I hadn’t called to place blame or apologise for anything. “I need to know if Ayah had any other credit cards billed to the Stirling Road address. If there is, I’d like to go pick it up please.”

Growing up, I knew that Ayah often redirected mail to the Queenstown flat after his family was uprooted from Pulau Bukom. It was the only way Ibu would not find out about his excessive spending.

Laughter on the other end was not what I expected to hear. “See, this is why you should have kept in touch with your father’s family a bit more.” Apparently, the flat had gone to waste after my grandmother passed away, then my father’s siblings had sold it. “I moved most of the things to the house in JB. I’ll be heading there this weekend...if you want to come. I text you the directions?”



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

While partly based on real-life characters and actual historical data, this novel is purely fictional and is a result of ruminations, the what-ifs in the history of Southeast Asia. Research was conducted using the following sources:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erni Salleh completed her Master's in Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, where her interest in colonial maps, art, religion and ancient kingdoms of the region first began. A librarian by profession and a self-professed antiques aficionado, she travels around Southeast Asia collecting bits of the past—from eighth-century Buddha statues in Myanmar to generations-old kerises in a remote village in Yogyakarta. When she's not writing, Erni continues telling stories as a librarian, be it to a room full of toddlers and parents, or storyboarding a puzzle adventure book for tweens. She currently manages the National Library Board's Mobile Library Services, affectionately known as Molly. *The Java Enigma* is her first novel.



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—Nuraliah Norasid, award-winning author of *The Gatekeeper*

An orderly librarian's life with the Borobudur restoration project is turned upside down after her father dies.

Irin Omar inherits a mysterious combination lock that sends her on a thrilling journey across Asia to locate pieces of an ancient map. With the help of her father's old captain and a dashing salvage diver, Irin finds past and present colliding as she uncovers some of the archipelago's biggest hidden secrets, while discovering a few familial skeletons of her own.

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