

# THE WITCH DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER



KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

“A deeply moving tale of female self-discovery, and also a Brunei that I never knew existed—a society in the 90s shaped by relative poverty, animist tradition, religious flexibility, the wilderness of the jungles, the freedom of the waters and, above all, the strange and not-completely-untraumatic process of blossoming into a modern, developed nation.”

—NG YI-SHENG, multi-award-winning author of *Lion City*

“I couldn’t put down Kathrina Mohd Daud’s beautiful, exuberant coming-of-age tale. Safiyya is a heroine for all of us: unruly, brilliant and absorbing as she grapples with indigenous beliefs and modern knowledge, going between the jungle and the Water Village. I was riveted.”

—SUNISA MANNING, author of *A Good True Thai*

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DOCTOR'S  
DAUGHTER

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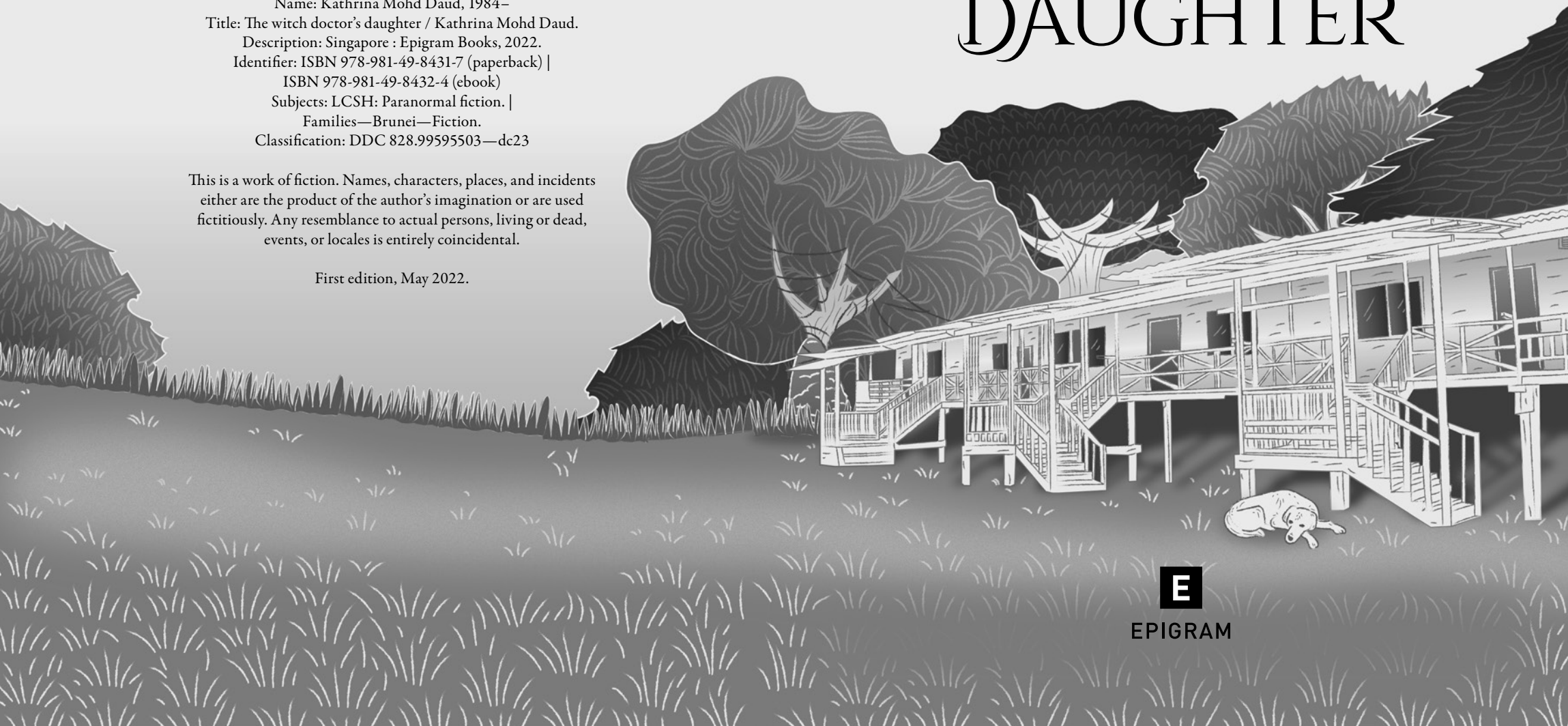
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

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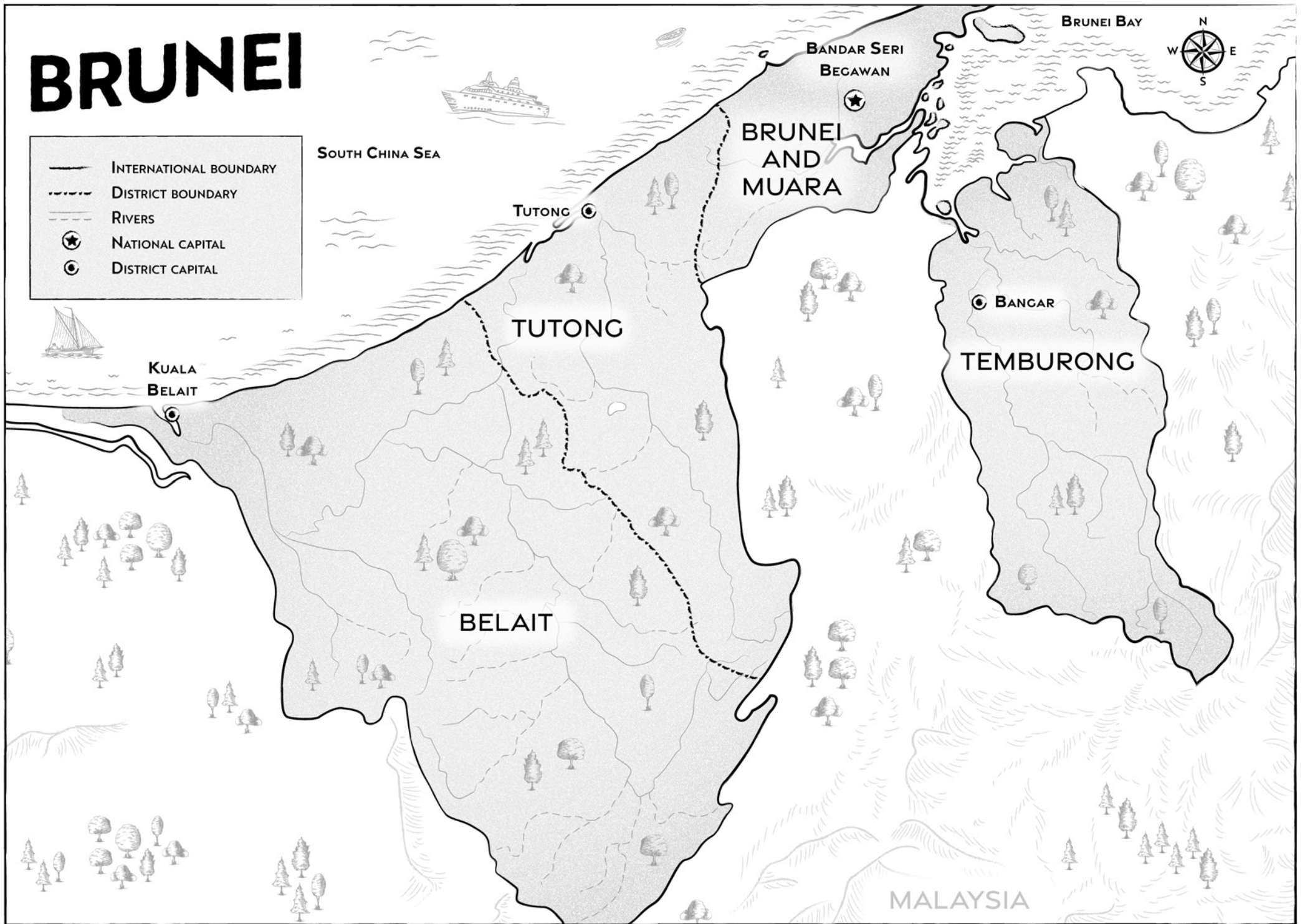
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EPIGRAM

*In loving memory of  
Francis Heng Kuang Teck and Mary Chiuh Nyuk Lin  
and all the stories you lived,  
known and unknown,  
told and untold*



# BRUNEI

- INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY
- - - DISTRICT BOUNDARY
- RIVERS
- ★ NATIONAL CAPITAL
- ⊙ DISTRICT CAPITAL



## PROLOGUE

My mother has had a nasi pusu stall in the Kianggeh market on the Brunei River for as long as I can remember—since I was in primary school, at least. She makes the deep orange-red sambal, boils the eggs and fries the anchovies in bulk on the weekends and sometimes in the evenings, and then gets up in the early morning to make the rice and wrap everything into packets of waxed brown paper to take to the market to sell. Sometimes, when I was younger, she would wake me up on my days off from school and tell me to get ready, and we would climb into the boat where my father would already be waiting with plastic containers filled with nasi pusu packets. In the blue-black of predawn, in the few minutes after the azan for Subuh prayer lingered in the air, the salt-sprayed silence of those boat rides always felt like something close to perfect happiness—my father at the helm, me nestled into my mother’s warm side.

And then, as we came closer to Kianggeh market, we would start

to see more and more boats on the water, and the colourful, ragged tents of other sellers would start to brighten under a warming sky. By the time my father pulled up to the steps leading to the market, I would be fully awake and ready to help my mother set out her signs and the food. Once we were settled, she would give me a packet to eat and fifty cents for a drink. For the rest of my life, my mother's sambal will be the taste of home.

And this is even though, to be honest, my mother's sambal is not that good. It is too sweet, and sometimes it is too thick or too runny with oil. It is not consistent, which is really the biggest draw of good nasi pusu. But it doesn't matter, because it is not for her skill in the kitchen that people come to her stall.

Because there are other things that my mother puts out: two small pink plastic trays with neatly stacked teabags meant for digestion, for post-partum health, for migraines and for slimming. Beside these trays, a few bottles of what looks like water, but which buyers use to help their children or themselves with everything from bad dreams to exams. Beside these bottles, smaller bottles of brackish liquid, and small dented tins filled with pungent pastes, ointments, unguents. Everything in these trays, apart from the water, was, until this year, supplied by one of my mother's relatives, usually Uncle Salleh, who is a cousin of some kind, or occasionally my grandmother on one of her infrequent visits. For as long as I can remember, my mother has used these treatments on me as well, whenever I have had a minor digestive complaint or pain during that time of the month.

And although there is a steady stream of customers for these items, it is not for these treatments, either, that people come to Khadijah Abdullah's stall.

They come looking for a sign, and they find it: a small, worn white sign with my father's name and our home phone number. They come for a quiet, trembling word with my mother, who will listen and hear words like *jinn* and *disturbance* and *help*, and she will nod and say that she is normally home from 2pm onwards.

This is what I remember. When I was younger, I would be in the living room doing my homework in front of the TV, watching afternoon dramas with my mother, waiting for the Hong Kong serials to come on from four to five, just before dinner, just before Maghrib, when the phone call would come. My mother would pick up the phone and listen, and my father would find his satchel. She would kiss me on the forehead and tell me to go next door and stay with the neighbours until they came back—they wouldn't be long—to finish my homework and not to wait up in the meantime.

Sometimes, they would be back by the eight o'clock news, sometimes by the ten o'clock news. Other times, I would wake up, disoriented, to my father's quietly brisk, "Let's go home now, Safiyya," in the middle of the night, and he would carry me home to my own bed, and I would be asleep again before he had finished drawing the curtains. He would smell of incense and other people's homes. My mother would be murmuring in the background, and her feet would be damp from being freshly washed.

In the morning, my mother would wake me up for school before she left for Kianggeh market, and she would look a bit more tired than usual, but other than that, there would be no sign that anything out of the ordinary had happened. And to her, it hadn't. This was my mother's world, and although I could not see it the way she did, it was my world too.



So no, people did not—do not—come to my mother’s stall for nasi pusu. People come to Khadijah Abdullah’s stall for Khadijah Abdullah herself, for her calm face and deep eyes, and for her ability to see and reach out to another world, one that sits beside ours, as close to us as a breath and, to most of us, just as invisible.



Only a few people remember that before my mother was Khadijah Abdullah, she was Bulan. She changed her name in 1986, when I was ten, and when my father decided that converting to Islam would be good for the family business.

It would give it a legitimacy we lacked as non-Malays, he said thoughtfully. Then he went to the library.

Before that, I had never worried about religion, although I was curious about the way that my classmates would fold their hands together in a shallow, tilted cup lifted to the sky, after the national anthem was sung and before classes began. It seemed a pretty gesture—I liked to see how some of my friends would immediately bow their heads quietly when the “Bismillah” began, while others, usually the boys, would continue to kick and snicker, even while their hands locked together obediently. Not all of my classmates, of course—there were some, like me, who were not Brunei Malay, who were Iban or Chinese, who were Malay but not Muslim, who were Dusun or Murut. There had even been a few Christians in the school, though they had moved ashore when I was older—before secondary school had started.

I remember the conversion ceremony only faintly—in a new white

baju kurung, sitting cross-legged on the floor to say my syahadah in front of a handful of officials from the Pusat Dakwah. My father studied for a few weeks, after bringing back books from the library. An entire bag of dusty books, some well worn, some that had clearly never been read, with uncracked spines despite yellowed pages. A few days before the representatives from the Pusat Dakwah were to come, he sat my mother and me down, and distilled what he had read.

My father would have made a brilliant teacher had he ever been so inclined to so honest a pursuit. He made the teachings of Islam come alive for us both, flinging up story threads of the noble warrior Prophet who wept at his first wife’s grave, cherished children, cried out afraid that he had been forsaken and was going mad, and rode into battle in the desert dust fearlessly, fiercely. Then, before the threads could fall onto the ground, my father caught them and swiftly wove others into them, glittering fabrics of the five pillars of Islam: prayer, pilgrimage, charity, fasting and the most important of all, the bearing of witness to Islam’s truth through the syahadah. My mother and I sat, spellbound, as he intoned solemnly, and I think that my father must have enjoyed himself immensely too. I remember his eyes glittering in the dim dust of the room, the late afternoon sun falling sweet and warm across the white robes and fabric he must have borrowed to fashion his jubah and his turban. The flash of his easy, charming smile as he demonstrated the movements of the obligatory prayer for us, looking up as he prostrated to give me a wink. And then, when I wanted to try it out myself, his encouraging cries, my mother watching curiously.

He had been so fascinating, so convincing, that the only time I balked, in fact, was when he said we would all have to change our

names. I loved my name—it meant *star* in Malay, and every teacher I ever met said, “What a pretty name!” It was different—no one else was named Bintang, while in my class alone there were multiple Sitis and Nuruls.

It was maybe the first time my father’s explanations were unable to satisfy me, even though he put the force of all his considerable charisma behind them. “We must all change our names,” he said gravely, his eyes trained on mine, sad, persuasive, compelling. I remember being mesmerised at their power, different from the queer magic of my mother’s. My father’s eyes are a deep, dark brown that swallow your thoughts and reflect only what is most pleasing to you. “It is to show how we are no longer the same people. See the name I have chosen for you—Safiyya. Safiyya was the Jewish wife of our beloved Prophet—and her loyalty was questioned many times. And do you know what our Prophet said? He said, ‘Your father was the Prophet Aaron, your uncle was the Prophet Musa, and you are married to a Prophet. What is there in that to be scornful towards you?’ Ah! The understanding! The benevolence! Magnificent. Will you not take up this name, Bintang?”

I finally agreed, unable to withstand the strength of my father’s will pitted against my own. But later in the evening, when my father left, triumphant, to return the borrowed robes, my mother drew me aside, as if she knew I would have second thoughts when my father was not there to keep me steady in the persuasiveness of his presence. “You’re not losing your name,” Bulan said to me gently. “You’re simply putting it somewhere safe for a while so no one can touch it, so it can remain special and clean, resting until you decide to take it out.”

I looked at her, troubled. “But what if I forget it?”

Bulan cocked her head a little to one side, as if listening to somebody. “Come,” she said, drawing me to the windows that overlooked the river. It was a still, familiar night, an old friend visiting before dawn. “Let’s put it somewhere safe. Say your name into your hand and close it quickly so it can’t escape. Like this.” Bulan breathed her name lightly into her open palm.

“Be careful!” I cried, suddenly afraid that it would escape.

“I’m holding it tight,” Bulan said soothingly, and she was, knuckles clenched firm and sure. “See how I lift my hand to the moon, how it is resting on my hand?”

Indeed, it looked as if the lazy moon was sleeping happily on my mother’s fist. Opening it, my mother blew gently across her palm, and we watched as her name drifted away.

“And now,” my mother said, no longer Bulan, but Khadijah, “the moon will keep my name safe until it is time for me to take it back.”

My eyes were wide as I watched the moon, and I nodded.

“Now, your turn.” My mother took my hand and lifted it to my mouth. “Say it strong and clear, so there will be no mistake, and then close your hand tight.”

“Bintang,” I said, overcloud in my anxiety, clenching my fist as soon as it was said. It lay warm and moist in my hidden palm, like a small, still-throbbing piece of my heart. Afraid, I laid my left hand on top of the closed one, keeping the name safe.

“Choose a star,” Khadijah said.

I knew, of course, which star to choose. The North Star, the star that everyone turned to, that had guided fishermen and sailors and the devout for centuries. It was shining brightly that night, and

although it was big and grand, I knew that it would keep my name safe and guide it home, when it was time.

Carefully, so carefully, I lined my palm up with the star and then swiftly opened my hand and blew. The coolness on my skin was a tiny, hard loss, but I felt comforted knowing my name was far away where nobody could touch it.

“And now,” Khadijah said, “you are Safiyya.”

Years later, after my parents gave up the pretence of being Muslim in anything but name, I came across a verse in the Qur’an. “And it is He who created the stars for you, that you may be guided by them in the deep darkness of land and sea...”

*I could have stayed Bintang*, I thought.

# PART ONE

## KAMPONG AYER

# ONE

I smell the incense and sigh. I know even before I open the front door what I will see.

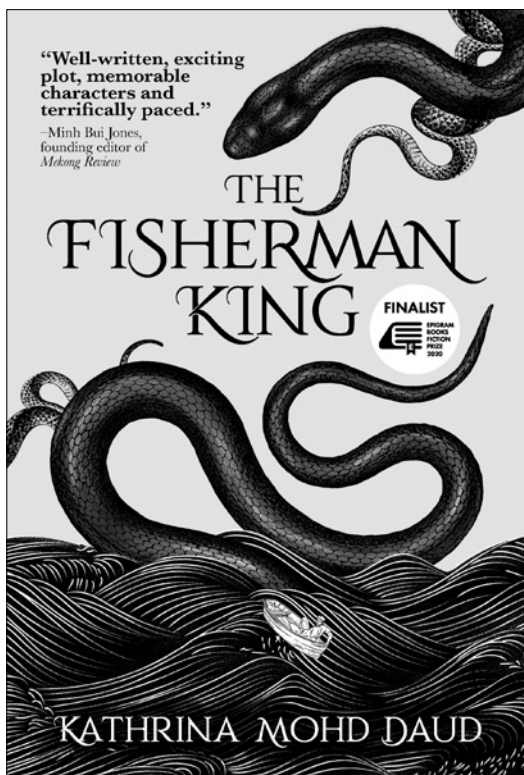
Wooden boards creak under my feet, and my father glances up momentarily, a brief annoyance flitting over his face before it is swallowed up by the emotions of the character he is playing today, the concerned and benevolent Haji Umar. The *Haji*, an honorific that is given to those who have made the holy pilgrimage to Makkah, is about as false as everything else about the character. My father did board the plane to Makkah shortly after we converted—eleven years ago now—but as far as I know, he got bored of the “incessant praying” in Madinah, and traipsed off to some other Middle Eastern country, Iran or Jordan, coming back to Makkah just in time to get on the plane back to Brunei. He’s never told me what he did, but I did notice that after his return, these performances of his took on more of a distinctly Arabic flavour. Sufi mysticism, if I had to



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**K**athrina Mohd Daud lives and writes in Brunei Darussalam. She is the author of *The Fisherman King* (finalist for the 2020 Epigram Books Fiction Prize) and *The Halfling King* (2017). She holds a PhD in Writing from the University of Manchester (2011), and is currently an Assistant Professor in Universiti Brunei Darussalam's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

ALSO BY KATHRINA MOHD DAUD



THE FISHERMAN KING  
KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

Eight years ago, Lisan the fisherman, who has always believed he was descended from royalty, left his wife and the Water Village. Now he's back, and he says he can prove it. Six hundred years ago, a forbidden relationship between the royal children of Brunei set into motion a chain of events that will end with the death of a king...or the death of a god. As the story of Lisan's true intentions—and what he was really doing in those years away—unravels, the story of those doomed royal children also spins to its inevitable conclusion.

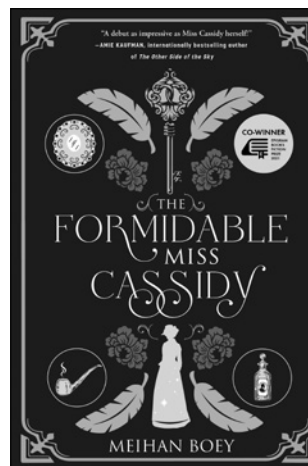
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However, she may have met her match in the indefatigable businessman, Mr Kay Wing Tong, whose large and constantly growing family clearly requires female supervision—especially of the particular kind Miss Cassidy can provide. Ill omens and strange happenings surround Mr Kay and his colourful family, and Miss Cassidy must find a way to defend the ones she has learnt to love.

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**“A deeply moving tale of female self-discovery, and also a Brunei that I never knew existed.”**

–Ng Yi-Sheng, multi-award-winning author of *Lion City*

**“I couldn’t put down Kathrina Mohd Daud’s beautiful, exuberant coming-of-age tale. I was riveted.”**

–Sunisa Manning, author of *A Good True Thai*



Safiyya loves her charlatan parents, but after years of watching the heartbroken and grieving come to them for fake and futile spiritual aid, she has had enough. So she leaves the Water Village to stay with her mother’s people at the longhouse in the jungle, where she learns traditional medicine, meets an enigmatic linguist and finds herself caring for an orphaned newborn. Along the way, Safiyya must discover what she truly wants from life.

FICTION

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