In August 1988 in the Netherlands, Maria, a 28 year old university librarian, attends the funeral of her father, Hermann, who had had passed away from complications of alcoholism at age 65. In his eulogy, the pastor struggles to celebrate Hermann’s legacy, but the attendees all know that his life had been one of tragically unfulfilled potential. In his youth, Hermann had been a skillful pilot and natural leader, on the fast track to become an Air Force general or commercial airline captain. But after his return from a tour of duty as a fighter pilot in the East Indies, Hermann had resigned his commission and abandoned aviation, settling on sporadic employment at undemanding jobs for the rest of his life.

After the funeral, Maria is introduced to Paul Verspoor, who had been Hermann’s squadron leader in Sumatra. Verspoor praises Hermann’s ability, claiming that he had been as skillful as Bob Freeberg, the American blockade runner acknowledged by friend and enemy as the best pilot in the region. In fact, Verspoor tells Maria, Hermann had been obsessed with capturing or shooting down RI-002, Freeberg’s Dakota, and had volunteered for any mission that might encounter the notorious blockade runner. When Maria tells Verspoor that her university is sending her to Indonesia to assist in setting up the new national library, Verspoor suggests she meet his old friend Alex Kawilarang.

A few weeks later, Maria begins work in Jakarta. Her task is to catalog thousands of documents acquired from small libraries scattered throughout Indonesia and consolidated in the climate-controlled environment of the new building. Her colleague is Bintang, a microfilming technician with dreams of pursuing a post-graduate degree. Their supervisor is Frans, a former journalist and photographer with extensive contacts throughout Indonesian society.

Maria does contact Alex soon after arriving in Indonesia, and meets him for dinner. Also there is Kawilarang’s frequent drinks-and-dinner companion, retired Air Force officer Petit Muharto. Maria learns that Muharto had been co-pilot on many RI-002 blockade runs. Muharto considers his adventures on RI-002 and close friendship with Freeberg to have been the defining period of his life, and was grief-stricken when the aircraft vanished while carrying a fortune in Republican gold. The discovery of the wreckage on RI-002 on a remote mountainside a few years before, with no gold or identifiable remains, drove Muharto to investigate the mystery.

To date, Muharto had little to show for his efforts. Military archives held little relevant information, and Air Force officers who investigated the crash site did not reply to his letters, or offered only vague comments. Considering her late father’s youthful obsession with Bob Freeberg, Maria feels that helping Muharto determine the fate of RI-002 might answer some of her own questions.

Muharto invites Maria to accompany him as he interviews veterans and others who had witnessed, supported, or participated in the RI-002 blockade runs. These interviews will evoke for Maria the adventure, bravery, honor, and pathos that accompanied the birth of Indonesia: dramatic escapes in the air and Machiavellian political machinations on the ground will counterpoint tales of resilience and resourcefulness as common Indonesians struggled with isolation and deprivation in their quest for freedom.

Most of the interviewees were men in their sixties, and all too willing to recount adventurous tales of their youth to a beautiful young foreigner. As library research progressed, Maria conducted several repeat interviews to clarify information gained from document research. Without Muharto being present, the interviewees spoke candidly, and presented a very different perspective of Freeberg. They described Freeberg’s clashes with his Air Force clients and of the financial, physical, and mental toll of his perilous missions. The RI-002 radio operator, whose lively sense of humor and impressive capacity for drink gained him full acceptance into the brotherhood of foreign aviators, revealed that, far from being a close friend, Freeberg had regarded Muharto with some condescension. He also reveals that Freeberg was under considerable financial pressure. The Indonesians owned him large sums for his back-to-back missions, and he was in constant legal battles with his erstwhile partner over ownership of RI-002.

There was also tension in the RI-002 cockpit. Bambang, an ambitious AURI pilot often assigned to RI-002, vied with Muharto to gain valuable training time in the co-pilot seat. Frustrated with Muharto continually pulling rank, Bambang reported a serious fight between Muharto and Freeberg to AURI high command, resulting in Muharto being transferred to a desk job.

Maria also conducts her own interviews. Frans introduces her to former members of the colonial government and military, both Indonesians and Europeans who had stayed on after independence. Through these interviews, Maria learns of the efforts to stop the blockade runners, often aided by the Americans, who wished for the Dutch to maintain control of the archipelago. Interviews with the Indonesian adjutant of General Simon Spoor, the commander of all colonial military forces, reveal that he firmly believed that Indonesians could not govern the sprawling, fractious archipelago. He despaired that a political solution could be found, and was suspected for organizing a military takeover of civilian government.

After months of interviews and document research, several possible solutions to the mystery emerged: Freeberg absconded with the gold himself, it was stolen by the Dutch in clandestine operation, or an army unit had found the crash site and carted it away.

Maria believes that Spoor had ordered RI-002 intercepted and the gold confiscated to finance a coup. As rumors of their findings spread through military and government, interviewees become more reluctant to offer their views. After losing control and badgering an interviewee whom she believes is withholding information, she is threatened with deportation.

Bintang, who believes that an elite army unit stole the gold, fares much worse. His father was driven out of business in an army drive to monopolize his industry segment, forcing Bintang to work as a menial library tech instead of pursuing a doctorate in public policy. To avenge his father, he wants to embarrass the army by exposing the fact that they had left the remains of national heroes to rot on a mountainside. But after repeatedly voicing his suspicions, Bintang is beaten by paramilitary thugs.

As a circumspect Indonesian of advanced years, Muharto does not experience repercussions from these investigative efforts. But he is devastated to reach the conclusion that Freeberg himself stole the gold, betraying their friendship and the ideals he cherished.

Bintang’s discovery of a photograph of RI-002 on a Dutch airfield sends him and Maria to an airstrip in rural Sumatra. They confirm that two locations are the same, narrowly escape capture by militray police, and interview a local who remembers RI-002 landing there and seeing the crew (including a foreigner) taken away under guard.

The visit to Karangendah confirms that Freeberg had not been a willing collaborator in the theft of the gold. The final key to mystery is revealed by Spoor’s bodyguard, who acted as confidant to the feared and friendless commander. He reveals that Spoor, a loyal soldier to the last, was actually investigating reports of corrupt sales of military firearms to the Republic. After Spoor died suddenly in May 1949, he suspected that his commander had been poisoned when he discovered that corrupt officers had stolen the RI-002 gold to buy firearms to be sold to the Republic.

After returning to the Netherlands, Maria again meets Verspoor. The former fighter pilot admits that he had known that Hermann had been one of the many officers who would have supported a coup. He had kept their secret for decades as he felt they were not traitors, but young men in a confusing situation who had made mistakes in judgment. Verspoor also knew that Hermann had flown a mission for which the flight logs had been destroyed during the week RI-002 had vanished. He surmises that after Spoor’s death Hermann had realized that is mission to capture RI-002 had not been patriotic disobedience, but an accessory to theft. To atone for his act, he resigned his commission and never flew again.