

“A debut as impressive as Miss Cassidy herself!”
—AMIE KAUFMAN, internationally bestselling author
of *The Other Side of the Sky*



THE
FORMIDABLE
MISS
CASSIDY



MEIHAN BOEY

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THE
FORMIDABLE
MISS
CASSIDY

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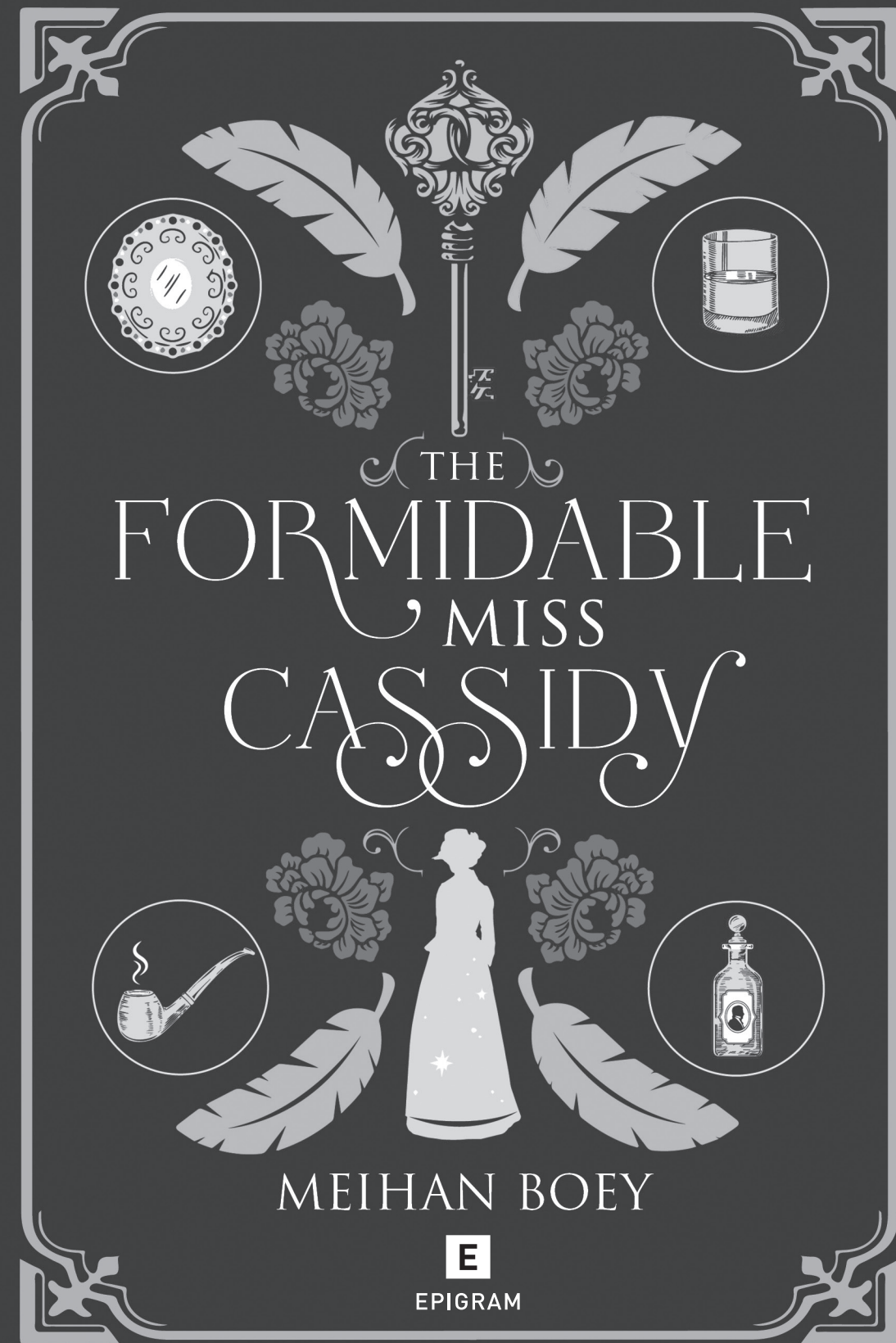
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For my husband Steven, always a "kilty" pleasure

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PART ONE

1895

THE BENDEMEER
HOUSE PONTIANAK

CHAPTER I
MISS CASSIDY ARRIVES

“I’M SURE WE will be very good friends,” said Miss Cassidy brightly.

Sarah Jane Bendemeer attempted a faint, polite smile. To be quite fair, it was very, very hot on Collyer Quay, and they were both looking terribly bedraggled. Miss Cassidy was seldom put out by long journeys, but it was an inhuman distance between Scotland and British Malaya, and even she was feeling somewhat less than all there.

Miss Cassidy jumped back, startled, as a small, grey, wizened man seized her trunk and loaded it onto his back, and scurried off without a word. “I say, should I be worried about that?” she asked as Sarah Jane listlessly fanned herself.

“What? Oh, no, no. That was Ah Kio.”

Miss Cassidy waited for further explanation, but Sarah Jane seemed to believe this was sufficient in itself, and began to drift away, muttering vague sounds of gratitude. So Miss Cassidy lifted her skirts and followed her. Several eyes followed her passage, but Miss Cassidy was not put out—apart from being tall and, well, of healthy build, she was also blessed with a head of brilliant flame-red hair, which seemed to glow under the tropical sun. She was used to being stared at.

Her surroundings were very interesting, and if she had not been so hot she would have felt an urgent need for her sketchbook. The quay was crowded and noisy. Around them surged the Chinese coolies, skinny, incredibly strong; unloading and loading sacks and crates and boxes as though they weighed nothing, though they certainly weighed more than the men carrying them.

“What do these fellows eat?” murmured Miss Cassidy as Sarah Jane, herself and her large poplar-wood trunk were loaded into a rickshaw, which was then dragged at a furious rate through the dusty, noisy streets by another skinny man whose waist was surely of less substance than Miss Cassidy’s thigh (admittedly, Miss Cassidy was a well-fed lass).

“Oh, rice and that sort of thing,” said Sarah Jane, unperturbed.

“They’re terribly strong.”

“Are they? I suppose it is what they are like.”

It was clear Sarah Jane was not of a descriptive bent, so Miss Cassidy, with neither sketchbook nor notebook to hand, tried her best to memorise what she was seeing, the better to write a nice juicy letter for poor Anna later on. The noise and bustle of the quay gave way now to a panoply of conflicting aromas: spices, mingled with dust and the perspiration off both bullocks and people. The faces had become more varied in colour, shape and dimension, as had the clothing; small women with very large voices lined the streets, bearing on their backs children, fresh produce, bricks and dirt, tiffins of food, buckets of water—sometimes all at the same time. It was most marvellous.

The squat little buildings with indecipherable Chinese characters over the doors began to dwindle away by and by. Sarah Jane did not know the names of the large European-looking buildings they passed, but Miss Cassidy recognised churches, mission schools and what were probably government buildings, not so very different from the ones she’d seen in London.

Her family had been horrified to hear that she had accepted a post

as a lady’s companion in British Malaya. “You will die of cholera within a year,” her sister Anna had exclaimed furiously, and nothing would convince her otherwise. It was no use telling her that Singapore was not the wilds of India or Africa, that she was not forging through the jungles (though that would have been a splendid option, had it come round), that the Bendemeers seemed a perfectly respectable family. Sarah Jane was said to have a docile and manageable temperament, and would not at all be a difficult charge.

Miss Cassidy had not told her own family that Sarah Jane was the last surviving child of Captain James Bendemeer, the rest of the family having perished from an unfortunate tropical fever. None of the other children had survived, and when Mrs Bendemeer herself was taken, Captain James had offered a considerable salary to any “decent, well-bred, good-tempered lady of middle age, widow or spinster” to sail to British Malaya and give “company and guidance” to a “poor forlorn child of fourteen”.

Sarah Jane was certainly docile, thought Miss Cassidy. Docile was too lively a word, even. Sarah Jane was...was...

The rickshaw stopped at the iron gates of a large compound. The grass around the gates was overgrown, and though there was a fine black-and-white bungalow visible beyond the path, raised up from the ground about seven feet, Miss Cassidy could see it had not been well-kept for a while. The view of the house was much obscured by a large rain tree with enormous spreading branches, some so heavy they hung nearly to the ground. Speckled here and there, in no particular sense of order, were trees and plants Miss Cassidy would later come to learn were largely banana, papaya and frangipani. The fragrance of frangipani flowers was thick in the hot heavy air, an odd, cloying, sugary scent.

Sarah Jane was getting out. “Will he not take us to the door?” asked Miss Cassidy in dismay, as Ah Kio—who had been clinging on to the back of the rickshaw—again shouldered Miss Cassidy’s trunk. The

rickshaw driver accepted coins in a rough palm, turned and left at high speed.

Sarah Jane shook her head. "They do not like our house."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

But once again Sarah Jane did not answer, silently drifting in through the old iron gates, leaving Miss Cassidy no option again but to follow. Ah Kio, despite his load, was running on ahead of them with the trunk.

An elderly Chinese lady in a white Chinese blouse and black trousers stood at the steps. She had a long grey braid, a gold tooth and a welcoming smile. "Ah Nai," said Sarah Jane, with the first genuine joy Miss Cassidy had seen her produce. "This is Miss Cassidy, from Scotland. Miss Cassidy, Ah Nai was my nanny, and is our family's bondservant. She'll take care of you."

"Bondservant?" No—it was no use. Sarah Jane had already entered the house without a further word of explanation.

"The Captain will see you tonight," said Ah Nai, in carefully enunciated syllables. "I will show you to your room. Hoi!" The last strident holler was not directed at Miss Cassidy, but at Ah Kio, followed by a fiery stream of hard consonants that, Miss Cassidy assumed, were instructions to bring her trunk.

The house was like nothing Miss Cassidy had ever seen. She had some experience of the tropics, having been a governess in India briefly (before that family perished from a combination of malaria and the Sepoy Mutiny), but this was something entirely different. The floors were polished wood, the ceilings were high and the windows were numerous and large, allowing for some much-needed ventilation. The furniture was of some kind of dark woven wood, upholstered in plain cotton. There were no heavy draperies and deep carpets and brilliant bejewelled knick-knacks here. Perhaps the Bendemeers couldn't afford to maintain the upkeep of unnecessary decorations. Or perhaps, reflected Miss Cassidy, it was just too hot to do so.

Every room was big, bright and well-aired, and Miss Cassidy was

pleased to find that her little annexe was no different: a small cosy room with a large window whose wooden shutters had been propped open all day for air. A white netting hung over her bed, a mosquito net; she'd had one in India as well. Fragrant leaves had been bound to the window frame.

"Pandan leaves," explained Ah Nai. "To keep insects away."

"Lovely! I do like how that smells. Tell me, Ah Nai—where can I buy some cloth? Cotton or muslin..." Miss Cassidy thought a while, as Ah Nai looked faintly puzzled. "Well...you see, I need to make another dress. I brought along the dress I usually wore in India, but even that will not be cool enough."

"Ah! You can make Western dresses!"

Miss Cassidy blinked, then laughed. "Oh, I forget! Most of the white ladies here are wealthy, aren't they? They have dressmakers. I make my own clothes, Ah Nai. We all do, back home. I can make men's shirts as well, and bake bread, and kill a pig, and roast a fowl."

Ah Nai grinned, her gold tooth gleaming. "Perhaps you can teach Miss Sarah Jane."

"Goodness gracious, no. I will teach her embroidery, dancing, and French or German."

Miss Cassidy and Ah Nai looked at each other a moment. Then they both began to giggle. Then they were boisterously laughing. Miss Cassidy couldn't think why it was so funny, all of a sudden. It was quite literally true that these were the skills she had been hired to educate young ladies in. She had never found it funny before.

The sun set.

Miss Cassidy had changed into her India frock, which was of pale grey poplin; she had left out the petticoat. She did not have corsetry—ever

since India, she had done without them. Nobody looked at a middle-aged governess anyway, and corsets were wildly uncomfortable in hot climates.

Sarah Jane had drifted in to the annexe. “You are well-settled?” she asked politely.

“Indeed, yes, I am very comfortable,” was the cheerful reply. “It is hot, but I am used to that from India. Have you ever been there?”

“To India? No.”

“You would find it fascinating. Tell me, is Singapore an Indian name? It is very similar to the names of many Indian cities.”

“It is in some old language,” said Sarah Jane disinterestedly. “I think the ‘pore’ means ‘city’.”

“Ah! So it is also Sanskrit. And the Singa?”

“Means lion.”

“Well! But there are no lions here—why is this place called Lion City?”

“I suppose lions are important in some way,” was the vague response. Before Miss Cassidy could continue the conversation (which she personally found quite interesting), Sarah Jane had drifted back out the door again.

“I think she might not be keen on having a companion,” Miss Cassidy remarked to Ah Nai when the old lady later brought her tea and biscuits. It was the finest Lapsang tea, and the alien-looking biscuits speckled with little black seeds turned out to be most delicious.

“Oh, no, it is not that,” said Ah Nai. “You see, Miss Cassidy, this house is haunted.”

Miss Cassidy sipped her tea, put down her biscuit and said, “Eh?”

Ah Nai nodded in a matter-of-fact way. “There are many mok-mok in this area. We stay indoors at night. If you smell frangipani, don’t step outside. If you see a beautiful woman standing under a banana tree, don’t speak to her. We are safe, for they haunt menfolk, mostly, but do not tread on her ground.”

“Her ground? Whose ground?”

“The pontianak.” Ah Nai smiled warmly at her. “I am glad you have

come, Miss Cassidy. Miss Sarah Jane has been very lonely.”

“Hmm,” said Miss Cassidy, but Ah Nai had hurried off to some other task.

Miss Cassidy carefully finished her tea, then peered with interest into the grounds. “Hmm,” she said again, more sharply, to herself.

The house was very dark after sunset. Ah Nai lit the way to Captain Bendemeer’s study with a kerosene lamp; Ah Kio was busy burning what Miss Cassidy at first thought was some fancy form of incense, but turned out to be mosquito coils. It was a strong scent, but not unpleasant.

The study was surely the darkest room in the house. Sarah Jane sat in a low woven rattan chair, reading a small Bible by the light of a gas lamp. Seated beside her, but slightly turned away, was Captain Bendemeer.

Miss Cassidy’s immediate impression was that Captain Bendemeer was not long for this world. Sallow, with bruises under his eyes, he barely filled out the shoulders of his coat, and he seemed to shiver even in the oppressive heat. He must have once had sandy thick hair and lush whiskers, but everything was now in patches and knots.

“Miss Cassidy, I am pleased to meet you,” he said slowly, his voice hoarse. “I hope you have had a comfortable journey. It is a long way to travel, and I am grateful you have undertaken such a passage for the sake of my dear Sarah Jane.”

His dear Sarah Jane turned her face away from the light, as if she might have spoken, but didn’t.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Bendemeer, and anxious to know how I might best be of service to you and Miss Sarah.”

“I should think that plain. As you can see, we are rather isolated here. There is no one to keep Sarah Jane company except old Ah Nai, and that will not do for a girl of fourteen. She has not had a respectable chaperone

since her Mama died. Now, with you, she may go out visiting again, and to dances, and whatever it is girls must do these days.”

“I should be quite satisfied to stay home with you, Papa,” said Sarah Jane.

“Now, I cannot allow that,” said Miss Cassidy briskly. “A girl may be close to her Papa without being a nun. You are terribly low of spirits as it is, Miss Sarah Jane. I will undertake to remedy that. We will have walks, and picnics, and visits to friends.”

“Excellent,” murmured Captain Bendemeer, interrupting Sarah Jane’s faint protest. “Miss Cassidy—pardon me, your first name is...?”

“Leda, Captain Bendemeer.”

“Unusual name. Is it Irish? Cassidy is an Irish name, is it not?”

Miss Cassidy raised one eyebrow just a touch. “Cassidy is, indeed, of Gaelic origin, Captain. You have an unusual family name yourself, I think. I have never heard it before.”

“It was a different name two generations ago, Miss Cassidy. There were...difficult circumstances.”

“I see. Well, we have some things in common, Captain. Now, Sarah Jane,” and Miss Cassidy turned to her charge, who flinched somewhat under the forthright gaze, “tomorrow morning we shall take a long brisk walk up to the town, and you will tell me all about it. What can you be about, to live in such a fascinating place and have nothing to say about it, I do not know. You will show me where you purchase your things, so that I may run your errands for you. Have you any friends of your age in these parts?”

“No, I am the only English girl of my age.”

“Are there no good families among the local folk here, who might visit with you?”

There was a pause.

“The local folk will not come here,” said Captain Bendemeer. “I suppose Ah Nai will have told you. Some superstition about the house.”

“Indeed! You must tell me more about this superstition. I make no sense of it.”

Captain Bendemeer turned away. Sarah Jane fingered her Bible.

Miss Cassidy tapped an impatient fingernail upon the arm of her chair and then asked, “What is a pontianak?”

A cold wind wafted through the room, redolent with the fragrance of frangipani. Captain Bendemeer shivered again. The leaves of the banana trees rustled and whispered.

“A pontianak,” said Sarah Jane in a low voice, “is a kind of...I suppose we would call it a vampyr. It is a monster they have around these parts. A demon woman who hunts men and drinks their blood.”

“And is there one meant to haunt the house?”

“Yes.”

“Have you seen it?”

The banana leaves rustled again, more loudly, and Sarah Jane said, “Miss Cassidy, I beg you not to trouble yourself with these native superstitions. You will probably come across many of them in the time you are here with us. We just...we learn to live with...them.”

“I see,” said Miss Cassidy, and asked no more.

It was nearly three in the morning when Miss Cassidy woke up. The old iron key she had hung over her window carefully, on a particular bit of string, was gently swinging, striking the wooden shutter in a rhythmic fashion.

There were a few things Miss Cassidy never travelled without. Iron was one of those things. She found it most practical in the shape of a nice big skeleton key. Nobody questioned the possession of an iron key upon someone always attended by a trunk.

She also carried a salt shaker, a piece of blackboard chalk and a ball

of string, generally wool. They were handy for practical reasons (such as flavouring soup), apart from their original purpose. Miss Cassidy always liked things to have more than one use to them.

But she didn't need any of them at the moment. Ah Nai had given her a cotton sarong; she now used it as a wrapper, not for warmth but for camouflage. Taking the key down from the hook, she poked the shutter open a small crack, and peered out.

Leaves rustled through the branches of the sprawling rain tree. In the deep moving darkness, Miss Cassidy saw Captain Bendemeer walking up and down his untidy garden, making slow circles along the line of banana trees. The big floppy leaves brushed his shoulders as he passed.

Miss Cassidy said, "Hmph."

There was a glass of water she'd placed at her bedside earlier. Carefully she picked it up, tapped it three times, then lifted it and looked out at the world through the glass and its contents.

And she saw the pontianak.

Miss Cassidy had never seen anything like it—and she had seen quite a lot. It was indeed a woman. She appeared to be unclothed; her body was pale and flawless, moonlit and gleaming. Her hair was very long and very dark, drifting around her as if she were immersed in deep water. She moved without movement; it was as if the shadows were carrying her, and she went gliding between the banana trees like a fish through water. She hovered over Captain Bendemeer's shoulder, whispered to him, hissed, smiled, blinked great dark sleepy eyes.

Then she opened her mouth massively wide, filled with an impossible number of incredibly sharp teeth, and clamped down over his left eye.

The Captain merely stood there, absolutely still, as the creature seemed to drink from him, greedily. Blood trickled down his cheeks, which she licked up hungrily.

Miss Cassidy had seen enough. Silently she closed her shutter. Silently she put away the glass and the key.

"Well," she said after a moment to herself, "I can do nothing of use now. We shall see about it in the morning."

She went back to bed, and fell soundly asleep.

CHAPTER II

MISS CASSIDY & THE BANANA TREE

“HM,” SAID MISS Cassidy the next morning.

The banana tree looked no different from any other in the brilliant light of day. It was perhaps a particularly lush specimen, with unusually bright green leaves; but it was in no way more interesting or sinister than any other in the compound, except that a length of bright pink silk had been tied around it.

Miss Cassidy fingered the silk—it had probably once been some young lady’s headscarf, but was now ragged and threadbare. When the fabric touched Miss Cassidy’s fingertips, she winced slightly. This might perhaps be more difficult than she had first imagined.

“Miss Cassidy, do be careful.” Sarah Jane’s voice listlessly drifted towards her. “Ah Nai doesn’t like us touching the banana trees.”

“Ah, and do you know why this bit of cloth is here?”

“To scare off the monkeys, perhaps. There are a lot of monkeys here, and they are quite fearless.”

“I see,” murmured Miss Cassidy.

“Can we go back inside now?” asked Sarah Jane, with the first touch of temper Miss Cassidy had seen her exhibit. “We have walked ten

rounds, exactly as you wanted, and it is very hot. I want a glass of water.”

“Certainly we may go in,” said Miss Cassidy briskly, tearing herself away from the tree and its odd decoration, and taking Sarah Jane firmly by the elbow. “I think we are quite done here.”

After Sarah Jane had gone off to her room to lie down and recover from her “strenuous” twenty-minute stroll (although to be quite fair, the garden path was not easy to traverse in skirts and petticoats), Miss Cassidy sought out Ah Nai in the kitchens. “Give me something to do,” she said cheerfully to the somewhat startled old servant. “Sarah Jane is done with her lessons and her exercise.”

Ah Nai, who was fanning a coal fire upon which a clay pot was bubbling, thought a little. “Will you mend?” she asked, mimicking a needle and thread to express herself clearly.

“Yes, if that is what you need.”

If there was one thing Miss Cassidy was good at, it was waiting. Of course, she was good at many (many, many) things, but she had perfected patience to an art.

However Miss Cassidy’s patience was not of that tranquil sort that allows venerable religious teachers to sit under a tree for outrageous lengths of time. Generally, when Miss Cassidy waited, she was also watching, and listening, and taking note of things and people around her, with an insight particular to a lady of her unique talents. By and by, she would hum a little, and chuckle a little, and drop an interesting observation or humorous word, and by dint of these little incursions, those around her found themselves compelled to engage with her.

Thus it was that, while Miss Cassidy sat comfortably at the kitchen door (for the sake of the breeze), mending one of the Captain’s shirts, and Ah Nai brewed her curious concoction, and despite the relative silence in which they did both tasks...in some curious way, they quietly became firm friends.

“So that is a tonic of some sort,” said Miss Cassidy with interest, as

strong, bitter scents filled the kitchen from Ah Nai's clay pot.

Ah Nai nodded. "For the Captain. For his health."

"Hm. His health is certainly poor. Tell me, Ah Nai," said Miss Cassidy casually as she busily stitched away, "what ails him? Is it this house? Why do they not simply leave it, and move to a healthier clime?"

The story unfolded at a gentle pace, punctuated by the bubbling of the pot. When Ah Nai had come to the family, the Captain was a happy, healthy, strong man—a sailor of humble background who had risen to become captain of his own vessel. His wife, Maria, was a striking beauty: tall, proud, raven-haired and exotic, born in the West Indies somewhere (Ah Nai could not remember the name of the island, but Maria apparently spoke both Spanish and French fluently, and it seemed likely she was from either Jamaica or Haiti). She was an ambitious woman, asking her husband to leave the seas and take up a position in the British East India Company, in order to better their position in society. When they arrived in Singapore, they already had their first child with them—the infant Sarah Jane.

They were given these splendid quarters which they renamed, simply, Bendemeer House. The couple did well at first; the Captain proved himself a much-valued employee, with his extensive knowledge of the sea (more to the point, he was also familiar with pirate routes and routines, and adept at plotting paths to avoid them). Maria added to their family every other year, and though she was a firm and rather imposing Mama, nevertheless the children were healthy, strong and intelligent, and all seemed to be well.

Then came that one dreadful year. First Mrs Bendemeer fell ill, then her husband, then the children, in quick succession, including Sarah Jane. Ah Nai herself nursed them as best she could, but she herself became ill. She recovered only in time to help Sarah Jane—the only surviving child—arrange the funerals.

Ah Nai paused over the fire to gently beat her chest with her hand,

and Miss Cassidy understood that this was the old woman's way of keeping her emotions in check. She let the quiet moment draw out a little before asking gently, "And what disease was this, Ah Nai?"

Ah Nai shook her head. The doctor was a white man; she didn't understand what he had written down. In any case, she knew the symptoms: fever, flux and rash; she had seen many people die like this, especially those living close to the jungle or wetlands. And Bendemeer House was situated right up against the jungle, amid wild banana trees. The Bendemeers had had difficulty finding servants when they first arrived because of that.

"Hm," said Miss Cassidy. "How long have the trees been there?"

Ah Nai shook her head. Longer than the house, for certain; these wild trees had always been part of the jungle, till the British cleared the land to build the bungalow.

"And did no one, well, cleanse the house?"

Ah Nai knew what she meant, and took it matter-of-factly. "There was a priest," the amah said, somewhat obliquely. "The Captain would not allow... anyone else."

"And the priest was ineffective?"

"He was young," said Ah Nai gently.

"And he faced something ancient? I see."

Ah Nai shrugged, indulgent of the white man's ignorance. "It was all right for a while."

"Until it wasn't." Miss Cassidy put in a few more neat stitches. "And what do you do with the bananas from these fearful trees, Ah Nai?"

Ah Nai looked surprised. "We eat them," she said.

"I have brought you your tea, Captain," said Miss Cassidy cheerfully.

Captain Bendemeer looked up from his papers. For a moment he

seemed puzzled, as if he did not recognise her; then, as she entered, his vision cleared. “Ah, thank you, Miss Cassidy. You can leave these tasks to Ah Nai, you know.”

“Oh, it is no trouble, I assure you, Captain,” she said briskly as she set down the tray. “This daily tonic you drink—how did you come by the recipe?”

Again it seemed to take a moment for the words to filter through to the Captain. “Maria—Mrs Bendemeer, my late wife. A family recipe, I believe. She makes us all drink it—well, she used to,” he corrected himself with a wry smile. “I apologise—she has been gone a long while, but I still feel her presence in this house.”

“Is that why you stay here? It seems a very large house for a family of two.”

“Well, we were a family of nine before...before that year.” He shook his head. “I am sorry, Miss Cassidy, but I have much work to do. Just leave the tray there, and I will help myself. I thank you for your assistance.”

Miss Cassidy was a woman who knew what the looming ubiety of death felt like. It was not a terrifying thing to her—all mortal creatures must die—and there was no place in the world where she did not feel its presence. Sometimes it was a low, gentle undercurrent, as it was in most places rich with life; other times it was a roar that drowned out all else, on battlefields, in the dark places of the world, where light and warmth and growing things had fled.

She was also not unacquainted with the beings who existed in-between life and death. For the most part, they did not trouble her—she was not their prey, and Miss Cassidy was of the opinion that creatures which did not trouble her, and did no harm to others, were best left alone.

But the farther east she went in the world (east, that is, from where she originated), the more difficult it became to avoid the ones who passed between worlds, especially since Miss Cassidy’s path often crossed somewhat through their realm. Generally they ignored one another—

the neutral coexistence of those who moved through shadow depended on them all being able to actively ignore one another, no matter how startling the appearance or menacing the aspect. Miss Cassidy was consequently not easily frightened.

Indeed, she was not afraid now, but she was troubled. Bendemeer House was echoing empty, yet its stark and scrupulously cleaned rooms, with their abandoned children’s cribs and trunks filled with toys and camphor, clamoured noisily with the weight of angry memory. Death still clung to every corner; not the sad, gentle death of recently lost loved ones, but something far older, darker and more dangerous.

Ordinarily, Miss Cassidy would have tried to bide her time a little. Information was necessary, but Sarah Jane and her Papa were clearly not the sort to instantly take Miss Cassidy into their confidence, or to pour out their troubles in a flash. They would need many months to warm to her, and Miss Cassidy was quite certain the Captain did not have months to wait.

“I suppose I will have to make time,” she murmured to herself.

“What?”

Miss Cassidy blinked. Sarah Jane looked at her, and for a moment both ladies were frozen, caught in the middle of their respective reveries; looking into Sarah Jane’s pale blue eyes, Miss Cassidy saw straight into her soul, and was...well, surprised. She was not sure yet if the surprise was pleasant, but it was at least something to consider.

“I will have to make time to write letters,” Miss Cassidy said cheerfully, taking Sarah Jane’s arm as they continued their promenade (very reluctantly, on Sarah Jane’s part) on the manicured lawns of the Botanic Gardens. “I notice you do not write many yourself, Sarah Jane?”

“I have no one to write to,” she said, trying in vain to adjust her hat

to keep the sun off her pale face. Miss Cassidy's insistence on a vigorous daily walk was very trying to the languid girl, but she had at least given up protesting.

It had been three weeks now, since Miss Cassidy had landed at Collyer Quay. The small household had grown accustomed to her very quickly. Miss Cassidy was like a rushing river—bright, sparkling and inexorable in its passage—so people generally found it easier to paddle their boat to the impetus of her current. This was certainly true of Ah Nai, who had come to enjoy both Miss Cassidy's company as well as her strong arms, and stomach; Miss Cassidy had once been a nurse, among other things, and chamber pots, spittoons and soiled intimates did not faze her. So much did Ah Nai already trust her, Miss Cassidy had now taken over the brewing of Captain Bendemeer's daily tonic, and if it had a slightly different flavour since the pot's watcher had changed, Captain Bendemeer never noticed the difference—in this, or anything else.

Sarah Jane, however, had. "Papa sleeps better these days," she remarked as they marched along, Sarah Jane perspiring under her parasol, Miss Cassidy looking as fresh and cool as if the sun's worst rays were simply sliding off her skin like silk.

"He certainly sleeps more *soundly*," said Miss Cassidy carefully. There were many ways to induce in someone a sleep so deep *nothing* could possibly wake them; some skirted very close to simply having the sleeper never wake again. "I have convinced him to keep the windows closed and the shades drawn. The room may seem a bit stifling, but I believe it is better for him."

"I have heard that the night air in the tropics carries a miasma," said Sarah Jane doubtfully.

"Well, it certainly carries mosquitoes, and they are not pleasant evening guests either."

"In any case, I am glad he seems better. He is the only family I have now."

They walked a little more, and in the shade of a glorious spreading rain

tree, Miss Cassidy allowed her charge to sink gratefully into a welcoming bench. "I am so thirsty," sighed Sarah Jane.

"I have the very thing," said Miss Cassidy brightly, and produced from her deep pockets a handful of brilliant pink fruit. "Ah Nai says these are called water apples. They are full of juice."

"I have never had them." Heat and thirst overcame Sarah Jane's usual reluctance to try new things, and she took a fruit, carefully wiped it and bit into it. The look of relief and surprise on her face cheered Miss Cassidy up considerably—it was rare to see Sarah Jane enjoy anything, even something as simple as a cool fruit on a hot day. "Why, they are delicious!"

"You grew up here—did you never have these?"

"Mama was careful with what we ate. She didn't want us being too... oh, I don't know. Too 'native', I suppose."

"Your Mama, bless her soul, must have been a...firm sort of woman."

Sarah Jane bit her lip, and after a moment murmured, "Mama meant everything for the best. She wanted us to grow up to be a credit to Papa's name—to be proud, fine and strong. I am the oldest—was the oldest—and Mama always insisted I must lead the way, make a good marriage, become a fine lady."

"And what did you think about that?"

"It was harder on my younger sisters, I think. But Mama meant it for the best," repeated Sarah Jane quietly. "We were always rather afraid of her; she had such a temper. She had this sewing kit that was always on her lap. It was full of huge, black pins and needles and scissors that she had brought over from the West Indies."

"She must have been very attached to this sewing kit, to have carried it across the sea."

"I suppose so. She used to make little dolls, and perfumed sachets and suchlike, which we put with our things to keep the insects out. I never liked them; I thought they smelled odd. But when we were naughty, she

would threaten to stitch our mouths shut, or rub chilli seeds in our eyes, or poke us with her needle—and they were all such enormous needles. Of course she didn't truly mean it, but it still used to frighten us, and we would run to Papa to hide.”

“I see,” said Miss Cassidy carefully. “And what happened to the little dolls and bags your Mama made for you?”

“They were burned...with all the sheets and things. It was after all—everyone—John and Emily and Charles and...everyone...” Sarah Jane subsided, wringing her hands in her lap. “It was the fever...they said we should burn everything.”

Miss Cassidy was quiet, taking Sarah Jane's hand to soothe her restlessness. “What a racket those birds make,” she said after a moment, cheerfully.

“I like them,” said Sarah Jane wistfully. “We don't get so many birds around Bendemeer House.”

“Mm, I have noticed that. Now, shall we go and see the orchids? I am curious about this Miss Agnes Joaquim—they say she has created a new type of flower. Isn't that marvellous?”

Sarah Jane did not seem to think much of this feat, but she stood, and allowed herself to be gently guided away.

CHAPTER III

MISS CASSIDY & THE CHINESE WEDDING

MISS CASSIDY ADJUSTED Sarah Jane's hat, then stepped back to view the results with satisfaction.

Sarah Jane was actually a rather pretty girl, merely pale in her colouring. Her white-blonde hair and washed-out blue eyes gave her an unfortunate pallor. But the addition of rose-coloured ribbons and a charming hat had worked wonders, and Miss Cassidy and Ah Nai had worked hard to refresh some of Sarah Jane's dresses. Without her keen-eyed Mama, Sarah Jane had been left to run to seed, fashion-wise.

“Lovely,” said Miss Cassidy.

“Yes, lovely,” echoed Ah Nai, and only then did Sarah Jane smile. Miss Cassidy had learnt, after only being in the house a week, that Sarah Jane adored her amah, and would do anything to please her. Except for that one day in the Botanic Gardens, Sarah Jane did not speak of her own Mama much, though that lady's photograph took pride of place on the family mantle (under which there was no fireplace). Maria Bendemeer had certainly had a forbidding look about her.

Miss Cassidy had learnt now that Ah Nai's place in the family was beyond that of a nursemaid or servant. An amah considered herself



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meihan Boey is the author of a science fiction novella, *The Messiah Virus* (2019). She is also the vice president of the Association of Comic Artists (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. *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* is her first novel.



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In 1890's Singapore, the formidable Miss Leda Cassidy arrives as paid companion to Sarah Jane Bendemeer, whose family suffers under the thrall of Southeast Asia's most terrifying hantu. But there's more to Miss Cassidy than meets the eye, and she's faced down worse in her life than a pontianak.

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 learned to love.

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