

SINISTER SENTIMENTS

A HORROR COLLECTION

BY

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THE GHOST OF A MELODY

It was the third time I had come to sit at the end of the small, private pier in the darkness. Twice before this night my acquaintances, the Asquiths, had held their charity galas up at the Big House, the Victorian splendour of the three-storey mansion overlooking its poor relation, the bayou below. In the daytime I'd sat at this same spot many times, with old friends and even older lovers, watching riverboats glide by as fish scurried into the reeds to take shelter from their assault. The Asquiths were meaningless to me, I didn't care about their charities or their good name back in the city, but whenever the invitation came for a night at the Big

House, I couldn't resist the chance to sneak down to the pier when the evening was drawing to a close.

That was where she could usually be found.

I think she must have been attracted by the music, the sound of Lady Asquith's preferred jazz band stomping out its eclectic mix of notes. At the start of the night they were a wild explosion of sounds that slowly dropped into a lazy, often mournful serenade as the hours of darkness crept by. It was that mournful part that drew her to the surface of the water, the vision I had seen the last two nights that I'd been here. Tonight I felt certain she would come again; the line of hairs on the back of my neck were standing rigid, even as I settled on the damp wood and hung my legs over the side. My polished black shoes were inches above the babbling current below.

I saw my reflection in the dark green water as I waited for her to come, my grey suit shining like the silver moon above. A bright white tie in an ascot knot set off my lightly tanned skin, making me look less pale in the stark moonbeam that illuminated the scene. Back at the Big House, the band had stepped up for a slow dance. A tenor saxophone rang out from the open conservatory doors, carrying its rich melody over the breeze that rustled the pondweed and sent a chill

through my bones. I stretched back and leant on my flattened palms, looking up to the circular moon as a sliver of cloud cut through its centre, casting a thick line of shadow on the flowing river ahead.

When my eyes came back to the water, she was there.

At first only her eyes and the crown of her head were visible; she bobbed like an alligator, watching me with those deep brown orbs, crystalline jewels plaited into her dark curls as they always were. My silvery suit was something new to her it seemed; she swayed in the water as she observed the whole of me from head to toe. Then, with an impossibly elegant gliding motion, she rose from the depths of the murky fluid, standing flat on the surface of the river and looking dry as a bone. Her sleek gown, the same shimmering shades as the moon and the water, fell about her perfect frame in elegant swathes. Her caramel skin glowed bright with life. She floated like a perfect paper lantern, illuminated like someone had struck a match inside her, and I wanted to catch her before she could fly away into the air.

She approached me over the water, small steps with pointed toes, her face an inviting mixture of sorrow and desire. She always looked as though she needed me, as if I was the very reason she appeared. I didn't know how many

other men had sat where I now sat, but when she let those dark eyes of hers claim me, I didn't care. The moment her hand reached out for mine I responded, leaning forward eagerly to accept her touch. Fingers of ice entwined with mine, reminding me that she couldn't possibly be an apparition. She was as solid as anyone I'd ever known: solid to touch, to see, to smell. The scent of candles burning filled my lungs as I leapt from the pier.

Where moments before I might have plunged into the midnight waters, now my feet hovered above them by her command. A silver mist rose about our feet to conceal the air on which we stood, extending out into the wider river as she led me farther from the safety of the pier. I took her other arm and set it to my shoulder, familiar with the dance from the dark moments we had shared before. She smiled, but did not speak, her full lips parted a touch, and her heart-shaped face tilted as she glanced over my shoulder up at the Big House, exhaling a sigh. I followed her gaze to the brightly lit mansion, our cheeks brushing together as I led her forward in the waltz.

A history book from the Town Hall had provided the answers I sought. She was what the locals called Gray Lady Grey, a slave-girl turned countess, married to the owner of the Big House back in 1818. He had fallen in love with her

against every restriction, elevated her from her humble roots to a life she was never meant to lead. At first, the girl had thought herself lucky, but the reality of being caught between two worlds was quick to set in. No longer accepted by her own kind, nor by the new acquaintance of her besotted beau, Lady Grey ran from her home in the midnight hour, along the rushes to find her way home. Now, a century later, her spirit wandered the waters of the bayou, where she had fallen in and drowned.

I wouldn't have thought it possible if I hadn't already seen it to be true. When we danced on the moonlit mist I felt her breathing against my neck, the sweet, warm vapour dampening my skin. The scent of deep red wine followed us and mixed with the candle smoke as I spun her in my arms and pulled her close. Her hands came to rest about my neck, toying with the back of my bright white tie as she smiled once more.

“Why won't you talk to me?” I asked.

She put a dark finger to my lips, shaking her curls to and fro. The mist grew higher, hiding our bodies up to the hip as she pulled me back into another rotation of our dance. The old histories spoke of her dancing as the stuff of legend, painting her as a lonely ballerina spotted by drunkards and

madmen out on the water. I was fairly certain that I was neither of those things, and she didn't look all that lonely in my arms. Aside from those glances she sometimes gave the grand house that overlooked our rendezvous, her lips were curled in joy, rounded and full. Tempting too.

The first time she had claimed me for dancing, I was too astounded to do much else, captivated by her perfect, ethereal sway. The second time, I had studied her face, memorising every detail, and rushed to the Town Hall to investigate her source. This time, I knew who she was, knew that she could not be here, and could not be causing the chill in my body as her lithe torso brushed against my chest, her curving hips mere inches from my own.

“Say something,” I pleaded. “At least give me your name.”

She shook her head, the silver wisps of fabric that clung to her shoulders slipped lower, revealing yet more of her russet skin. We pivoted out in an arc that took our feet into the centre of the flowing river, all the while her deep eyes locked with mine.

“I know who you are,” I whispered over the babbling waters. “I know that you want to go home.”

The dark beauty gazed from the Big House down the river's path: the reedy swamp that led to the clearings where the slaves of a hundred years ago had made their dwellings. She put her head down on my shoulder, clasping me until a pin could hardly pass between our bodies and a tiny sob escaped her lips. If she could speak, then she chose not to; her cry was enough for me to understand her. I held her tightly, our feet still keeping step with the ghost of a melody. I let one hand rise out of place to stroke her obsidian ringlets, soft and so very real beneath my fingertips.

“I'd take you home with me, if I could.”

No sooner had the words escaped me than she pulled back her head, her eyes glowing silver as they caught the reflection of the moon. She shook her head again, but this time much faster, more eager somehow. Her elbows hooked around my neck and she hugged my face close, a sweet aroma tempting me nearer to her lips. I kissed her without delay, feeling her cold skin, the rush of air that swept around us and tousled my suit upon the impact. Lingering moments passed as I stayed locked in her embrace, never wanting the moment to vanish, the way I knew that she herself soon would. She had never stayed this long before, never let me reach the end of the dance, or this moment I had wanted from the instant I beheld her.

When she pulled her lips away, I opened my eyes to a new vista. A faint green light surrounded us and the world became a dark blur the farther I tried to see into the distance. The bubble of air we were bathed in slowed my realisation that she had taken me under the water, but when I looked upwards I could just make out the moon. It was a much smaller circle in the midnight sky than it had been moments before. I held onto her waist tightly and studied her smiling face.

“Or perhaps you could take me home with you?” I asked with a tremble.

Her smile fell slowly, the corners of her mouth drooping into a frown.

“I have no home,” she sighed.

And then she was nothing once more. The water hit me like a frozen gust of wind, smashing into my body from all sides where the protective layer of air had once been. I scrambled in the murky darkness, my eyes stinging as I looked up for the sight of the moon. I was a long way down, kicking and paddling violently, my lungs burning with the strain of holding back the torrent of fetid water that was waiting to devour me.

I emerged with an inhuman gasp in the river, forcing my way upstream and back towards the pier. The silver smoke that had lit our dancefloor was gone, and by the time I reached the wet wood of the little jetty, the moon had clouded over and deserted me too. As the sound of my own breathing slowed to a more normal rate, I noticed that silence had fallen upon the Big House. The music had stopped. I climbed up onto the pier in my soaked suit, now dull as charcoal where the water had seeped in and destroyed its delicate threads.

My white tie was missing from my damp neck. When I turned back to the river, I could see it floating some way off by a patch of reeds. But, within seconds, a caramel hand slunk out of the water and grasped it with long, elegant fingers, pulling it down into the impenetrable darkness below. I stepped back a few paces, listening to my own damp feet squelching along the tired wood, watching for any other signs that she was still waiting nearby. When none came, I exhaled a nervous breath, turning on shaking legs to return to some semblance of normality.

“Will you come back for it?”

Her voice echoed on the water, babbling in every trickle of the river behind me. I didn't slow my pace or even look back to find her. There was no need.

She already knew the answer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



K. C. Finn was born and raised in Cardiff, South Wales, where her love for storytelling grew at a precociously young age. After developing the medical condition M.E. / C.F.S., Kim turned to writing to escape the pressures of disabled living, only to become hooked on the incredible world of publishing.

As an author for Clean Teen Publishing and Crushing Hearts and Black Butterfly Press, Kim spends most of her time locked in the writing cave with an obscenely large mug of tea. When not writing, she can be found studying for her MA in Linguistics, watching classic British comedy, or concocting evil schemes in the secret laboratory in her attic.