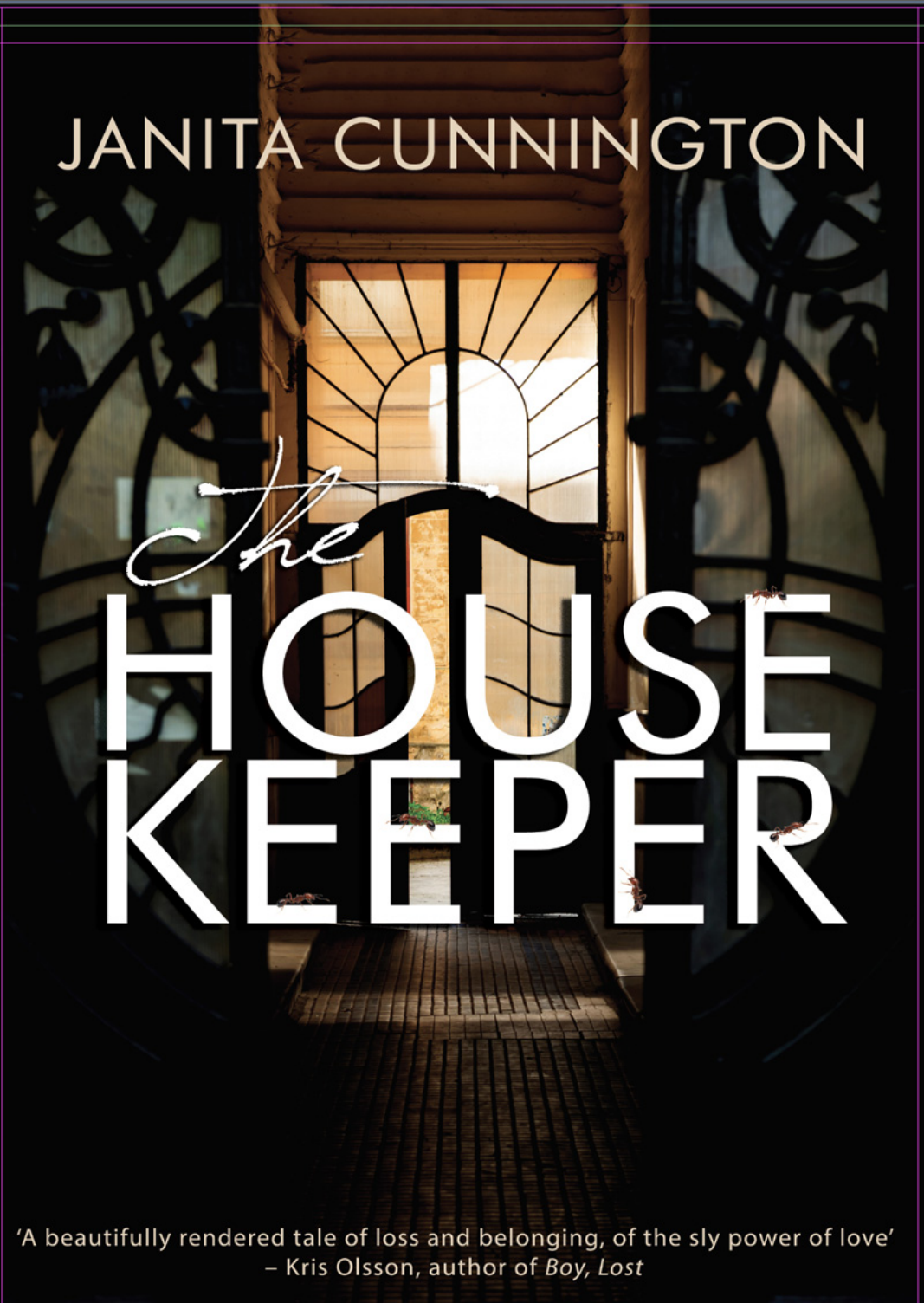




JANITA CUNNINGTON

The
**HOUSE
KEEPER**

'A beautifully rendered tale of loss and belonging, of the sly power of love'
– Kris Olsson, author of *Boy, Lost*

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One rainy day

When asked in their old age about their memory of that time, the children of Ardwyn would mention, among other things, the big dim kitchen smelling faintly of gas, scrubbed clean and cloistered by lattice from the glare outside. They might remark on the hot perfume of the Rangoon creeper, or the faint blue glow of the pilot light at night. And of course they remembered Myra.

But they would not think to mention the ants. This was an oversight, for the ants, intent though they were on their own business, had a part to play in the history of those looming, booming presences among which they plied their trade. In the cool of the morning or the still of noon, they seeped from under the skirting board in a thin stream and made for points of interest—the crack in the marble slab where traces of dough could be found; the upturned slops bucket drying in the sun; a saucer of pawpaw seeds saved for planting, which they examined with their feelers. They gathered at a drop on the draining board, forming a neat circle like tiny wildlife coming at dusk to drink at a waterhole. Very often they trickled into the pantry, where the food safe stood with its feet in small Bakelite cups filled with white powder.

On a rainy autumn afternoon in the year 1947, Myra took a cinnamon-dusted sago pudding from the windowsill where it had been cooling and set it on the bottom shelf of the safe. The gauze would keep it from the flies, the white powder from the ants. She turned the wooden latch that held the safe door fast. Bent down. Reached out an unsure hand as if to coax a cat...

Some of the white powder stayed on her fingertip. She sniffed it, eyed it. Hesitated. And, knowing it was borax, not arsenic, put it to her tongue.

Chapter 1

Her mother was calling. She could hear her far away, calling Myra, Myra. Something was hindering her, some thickness of air or understanding. But, yes, there over her shoulder was home, same as always, only it was troubling, having a darkness to it, and her mother calling Myra was not far away, but close, and her voice was not her voice but as deep as a man's.

It wasn't her mother. It was the judge, and she was not a child but a grown woman, in her bed out in the annexe on a very hot night, and the judge was standing in her doorway in the darkness, saying her name.

'I need you,' he said when she stirred.

Her heart beat hard with the strangeness of his words, but that was just what she had made of them, because now he was explaining something and turning away, expecting her to follow him. She freed herself from the tangled bedclothes and threw a shawl around her shoulders for modesty, only it was that sticky—

Shadows lying crisscross on the verandah floorboards leapt to the judge's back as he padded before her. It was the lattice that threw them. The electric light was on in the bedroom wing and it was reaching its rays across the gulf between.

Now they were in the house proper. She went by touch and memory—also, at the back of her mind, by smell, for the dark of the kitchen held a trace of gas, and the dark of the passage of machine oil and wintergreen. He was in his fawn cotton pyjamas. She knew them well. They were too long in the leg for him. He would be treading the cuffs under his heels, heedless, groping in the gloom for walls and doorways.

'Damn fool thing!' he grumbled as they felt their way through the dark house. 'Caught itself on the bedknob somehow and there's a rip as big as your head. I'm being eaten alive.' He came to a sudden standstill

and she almost bumped into him. 'Have you got the wherewithal?'

'The...?'

'Theequipment, Myra. The needle and thread. How do you propose to get the job done without them?'

She backtracked to her room, accustomed now to the dark, and felt in a drawer for her sewing kit, still shaking off the dream—dream hens scratching, dream smoke rising...

The judge was waiting for her at his bedroom door. By the electric light she could dimly see the net-draped bedstead. Something—a breeze, perhaps, starting up at this late hour and coming in the window—had disturbed the net, and it and deep shadows in the corners were ever so slightly moving. Mosquitoes drifted across her vision like floaters in her inward eye.

Now he was beckoning her over closer to show her the rent in the net, poking his hand right through it and wagging his fingers so that she would see how big it was. Then he climbed aboard the bed, inside the net, where he stood unsteadily with his head thrown back, gazing up.

Myra fingered the hole, blinking away sleep. He could've just tied a knot in it, she thought. But no, he had to go and drag her from her bed, just so she could be made to suffer too. She moistened the end of the thread between her lips and held the needle up to the light so she could see the eye. All this fuss in the middle of the night. Now here she was, trying to thread a needle in the dim bedroom light, having to breathe through her mouth for the reek of his pot.

The judge lumbered about on the bed, searching the higher reaches up under the tester, clapping and grunting and making the bed springs squeak.

Fool notions ran in her head, she being half in a dream that muddled squeak with smell, even as she stood by the bed in her bare feet, holding the net up to the light, stitching the edges of the hole together. *He* wasn't helping. How could a body do neat work with him jumping around like that? Wasn't he ashamed, with his belly on show and his fly gaping?

She sighed. She would have to unpick it all and redo it properly in the morning. Or was it tomorrow already? She glanced towards the

window, but there was no clue there. Just a few blossoms of the golden shower tree catching the electric light. Otherwise blackness. Not a breath now. So hot and still there could be a storm before morning.

The valance over the tester was Irish lace, which Mrs Reece had brought with her as a bride. Kitty Singleton as was. It was snowy white in those days. Years, it must be, since it had a wash. It had slipped her mind until this very moment, when she looked up and saw it there gathering dust.

Well, she had that many jobs. Not that *he'd* notice anyway. Why should she worry?

It pricked, but. It pinched like an ill-fitting shoe. Well, all in good time. Come winter, she'd get it down and give it a launder with Lux, taking care to make it only a real gentle squeeze-out, no wringing, old lace was that fragile. Blue in the last rinse. Get it hung in the morning sun before the breeze got up, and clear-starched so there'd be no clag. Roll it up in a linen cloth, then a careful press with the electric iron... And there she was for a moment, testing the heat of the iron with a tongue-moistened finger, easing the lace on the board.

I was fast asleep then, she thought.

Myra sighed and shifted her weight to the other leg. She needed to sit. A big rent it was, and the light poor. There was a chair in the corner, but she couldn't reach it without letting go of the needle, which she was loath to do with the judge still lurching around, making everything bounce and strain. She edged over and stretched out a leg, thinking to hook the chair nearer with her toe. Too far away. She could just perch on the edge of the bed...

'Watch out, woman!' the judge said. 'You'll have the whole blasted thing down!'

She would have said something sharp, even if he was the judge, but she was biting the thread after finishing that seam so that she could start on the crosswise bit. She got to her feet again and turned her work to the light.

A possum crashed through the trees and landed with a thump on the roof.

Brazen as monkeys, those possums, tearing the bird netting to get at the pears and stealing quinces from the basket. Myra would

sometimes catch them waddling pigeon-toed along the verandah railing outside her room, and she'd shine a torch on them, and they'd stare with round, impudent eyes.

'You just about done?' asked the judge, climbing out. 'We both need to get some sleep.'

'Just about,' said Myra. She backstitched securely, bit the thread and jabbed her needle into the felt in its case. *Etui*. That's what Kitty used to say (still calling her Kitty in her head though it had always been Mrs Reece to her face). Myra arranged her lips to mouth the word as she smoothed the sheets and tidied the net. *Etui*.

*

For the rest of the night her sleep was disturbed by half-dreams of the judge. Sometimes he was stern and silent, reading his mail as he put his teacup to his lips, but mostly he was stumbling about, his face upturned, whacking at things that no one could see.

Chapter 2

The storm hit before first light, so blurring the distinction between night and day that Myra overslept. Even as she slept on, she worried about the rain sweeping in over the verandahs and wetting everything, about the brittle branches of the pear tree loaded with pears, about the windows in the library because that rattle... By the time she woke she had a crick in her neck, the rain had gone, and leaves and twigs littered the yard.

She'd do the rounds with a rake later on. The judge would be shaving and dressing and wanting his breakfast inside of an hour and she hadn't even emptied the pots.

No stockings; she had to hurry. Just house slippers for now. Her little black Chinese slippers.

She pulled them on.

From the window above the kitchen sink, Myra could see out over the clothesline and the back fence and into the Harpers' yard, where there had been a commotion a week or so before. She leaned forward, looking, tying the strings of her apron (all quiet now, only the doves settling and cooing on the roof) and thinking that those vegetables they took such a pride in—posting their girls around the plots to keep the fowls off and giving 'em curry if one snuck through—they would be flattened, she shouldn't wonder.

Which made her think about her rosella bushes, whether the stakes had held, and what other damage there was. Still and all, there could be more mushrooms on the flat tomorrow.

Before doing anything else, she moved the billycan from the top step to the ice chest to get the milk chilled quick as she could. She would pour it into jugs later, when she had a spare moment.

For now she worked between kitchen and breakfast room, setting the table (the small Madeira cloth, not the damask; plates, cutlery, napkins, silver cruet; gooseberry jam, covered against flies), then back

to the kitchen to start on the breakfast. Milk and butter could stop in the ice chest until the last minute in this weather. She filled the kettle for tea and gazed out the window.

The McPhersons' yard probably had branches down, but it was that overgrown who could tell? Quiet there too. That day of the commotion Myra heard Dulcie McPherson's carrying drawl and at first she thought she was reciting poetry. Then she saw her and Doug over in the Harpers' yard, the flats of their hands held out like waiters with invisible trays, with Mr Harper standing four-square and Mrs watching from the top of the stairs with her brood lined up below her, watching too, and then all of them gave a little jerk as if pulled by a string and went off around the side to look. The trouble, Myra decided when the wind brought hints, was a septic tank, and that *o-v-e-r-f-l-o-w* thing she heard Dulcie saying—one side of Myra's mouth went down in a wry smile—that had nothing to do with Clancy.

This would not have mattered much except for it being known for a fact that Dulcie and Doug McPherson were Communists, who, it was rumoured, held meetings in their living room and went barefoot to the shop. Now this incident. It would sour neighbourly relations even more. Not saying Dulcie wasn't nice enough when Kitty was ill. To be fair.

Doug McPherson was in the printing trade and half deaf as a result, according to Dulcie; the machines made such a racket. 'More likely the howitzers,' said Doug, making a rare correction, for against all reason he had been in the war—and wiser for it, so he said.

He was a peaceable man, Douglas McPherson, admiring his wife with contented, crinkled-up eyes, but his ways were not dainty. Out of shyness, he hawked phlegm from his throat and spat politely to the side. He reeked of roll-your-owns, his teeth, moustache and fingers were tobacco-cured and his nails were black with printer's ink. When his mouth was not occupied with a smoke, his tongue darted out for the ends of his ragged moustache, which he drew into his mouth and chewed.

The McPhersons made their presence felt around the neighbourhood. Even at Ardwyn. Dulcie cosying up to Kitty, and the children too. Well, not the boys, maybe, but Sylvia, yes. Some years

ago, when she was still a pasty-faced girl, she had fallen under the McPherson influence and come home with pamphlets, with which she tried to persuade Myra that she—Myra—was unhappy. She followed Myra into the kitchen, pointing at words like ‘menial’ and ‘chains’ and looking earnestly into Myra’s eyes, wrinkling her nose to counter the slippage of her glasses. This was a habit of hers when she could not spare a finger to give the glasses a push, and it was all Myra could do to stop herself slapping the girl’s wrist to try to break her of it. With her bookish ways and her queer excitements she was not a bit like her brothers, that pair of nut-brown scamps forever stealing strawberries and falling out of trees. Their father, well, he just pulled on his pipe and ruffled their hair when by rights he should have been giving them a smart smack on the bottom.

Myra had a nice cutlet for him this morning, to be cooked up with yesterday’s mushrooms and a dash of cream skimmed off the top of the milk. She’d save the tail and a couple of mushrooms for herself, though what she enjoyed most was toast and butter—not sitting down with the judge like she was now expected to do, but, when all that palaver was over, standing where she had a view down to the laneway gate, a cup of hot tea to hand, munching a slice of toast with slabs of fresh, dewy butter.

Seven o’clock chimed, and Myra started to listen for the crunch-crunch-crunch of boots on the gravel driveway, though she’d accepted for years that it would not be Andy running around the corner with his grapple and hook and the block of ice steaming on his shoulder, but some panting young fella with red hands, breathing through his mouth as he waited to be paid. And here he came. That same old smell. It took her back. Male sweat, oilskin, damp, mouldy sugar-bag. Myra counted the change out into the lad’s clammy hand. Heaved the ice into its compartment in the chest. Hung the sugar-bag over the verandah rail. Emptied the drip tray.

Already the flies were a bother, buzzing around the meat as she seasoned it and settling stickily on her skin.

Her mind went back, while she turned the cutlet, to following the judge in his pyjamas through the dark house, and then to the pile of magazines she came across once behind the old lav. At first she

thought they must have belonged to Mr Jennings, the newspaper man who had the place behind, but then she wondered. The magazines were rain-damaged, the covers curled and mildewed, the pages stuck together. She went to gather them up, dirty though they were, and dump them in the bin, but when, out of curiosity, she opened one up she felt her cheeks burn and she slapped it shut. In the end she locked herself in the lav, making sure the door was firmly latched, sat on the closed lid and, in the dim, spidery light with the smell of sawdust and shit in her nostrils and her heart slurry within her, received an education in the minds of men.

She was still turning the cutlet when the judge put his head around the kitchen door. He pulled the pipe from his mouth to say, 'Don't bother about breakfast for me this morning, Myra. I'll be in chambers,' returned it, and patted his breast and his hips in search of some pocketed thing.

'But it's ready,' Myra objected. 'Veal cutlet and mushrooms.'

Through the teeth gritted on his pipe, the judge said, 'I'll have it cold for tea,' and withdrew his head.

Well! said Myra to herself.

Making the point, with a wag of the head, that it wouldn't be the same, she transferred the cutlet to a dish, covered it with a plate and found space for it in the ice chest, all the while listening for the garage door to creak, the car door to slam, the motor to fire up, chug agreeably, and change in due course to a low throb. By moving between the window over the sink and the window over the marble slab, she could watch the shiny, plum-dark car back out under the poinciana tree, progress slowly along the gravel drive and pass out of sight around the corner of the house.

As soon as it had gone, Myra made herself a slice of toast, buttered it liberally, kicked off a slipper and stood like a warrior, foot braced against knee, crunching her toast and looking down to where the gate opened into the tree-hung lane.

The judge was distant in his manner after that. There was no familiar word in passing, no remark about the day's weather over the dinner table. Just nods and good mornings and particular requests. He took to working late in the library, blinking in a fug of pipe smoke and barely touching the supper she'd bring him before she turned in.

So it was all the more surprising when he knocked at the annexe door late one evening when she was unpinning her hair and said, 'Oh. I wonder if when you've finished doing that you'd come to my room.' And left.

Myra sat and looked at herself in the mirror, at the light cotton shift she made do with in this weather, how it clung to the small mound of her belly. A dark hint of crotch below. What was she expected to do? Couldn't he see she was ready for bed? Was she supposed to get dressed again? Well, she wasn't going to go to that trouble just for one of his freaks.

She put her hair in a loose plait, threw a shawl around her shoulders and made her way through the quiet house to the judge's room.

There was a scent of cologne in the air when she entered. The judge, now in his pyjamas, was standing at the window, watching the blossoms of the golden shower tree silently falling.

He glanced around as Myra entered, said, 'Come in,' and went back to studying the fall of the blossoms. Myra waited in the doorway until he turned to her again and, without meeting her eyes, started towards her.

'Please, come in. Here, allow me...' He removed the shawl from her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor, groped for her hand and, before she could take a step backwards, pressed in close to her and held her there, so that her chin was at his shoulder and, through the sweaty cling of her shift and his pyjamas, their fronts touched all the way down. She could feel the living heat of him, his bumps and hollows, his trembling leg, the hammering of his heart.

'You are not uneasy?' he croaked over her head. 'Myra?'

She had no answer for him. It could not be said she was at ease—she was too hot about the ears—but she did not pull away.

He broke from the embrace to hold the mosquito net back for her until he had seen her in. Then he switched off the electric light.

Throughout the big house, darkness.

He clambered in after her. With him came vapours of sweat and cologne. On his breath, spirits. Bitter ash.

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