The SILK HOUSE

KAYTE NUNN

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For Charlotte,
who loves to scare me with her own stories.

‘Love, thieves and fear make ghosts.’

GERMAN PROVERB

ONE

Now

Thea heard the sound first, the ghostly echo of female voices raised in song. Soprano, alto and contralto effortlessly harmonising, a clear, pure stream that drifted from the open windows and across the slate rooftops, along the old red-brick walls worn smooth by centuries of wind and rain, over the manicured playing fields and towards the wide, tree-lined path where she stood. Gooseflesh rose on her arms as wind gusted around the corner of the building, bringing the sound closer, louder. As she glanced to her left she saw shadows, blurred shapes against square-paned windows. In the darkening gloom the effect was ethereal, other-worldly. An angelic choir. The words, 'and give you peace . . .' swirled around her, hanging in the air.

She stopped, pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose and gazed up at the edifice before her. It was everything she

had ever imagined an English public school to be, wearing the weight of its history in the honeyed stone, thick with ivy and wisteria, immaculately kept grass (doubtless tended by a phalanx of gardeners) bordered by neat rows of purple-faced pansies and white alyssum, the tall gates, the arched portico, the heavy oak door studded and banded with iron. The entire place reeked of tradition, privilege and money. Among such imposing buildings the feeling of being a slightly scruffy imposter was as sharp as a slap.

The singing stopped, and she carried on, dragging her suitcase behind her and cursing under her breath as it caught on the gravel.

The bus had dropped her off half an hour earlier in the town's wide, gently curving high street and she hadn't needed directions, having made a flying visit to the college for her interview three months ago. She was nearly there, but the gravel was making the final steps of her journey more difficult than they should have been. She suspected that most visitors arrived by car not, as she was, on foot, the drive crunching pleasingly under expensive tyres.

With a final yank of her suitcase, she reached the grand stone portico. She spotted a handle and grasped it, leaning her shoulder against the door as the catch released. The smell of beeswax, sweet lilies, old books and, faintly, sweaty gym shoes – her father would have called them plimsolls – was overwhelming.

As she walked in, the door closed behind her with a thud that reverberated down the vast hallway. She found herself standing in the high-ceilinged entry room. To one side was a rectangular table, polished to a high sheen, and on it sat the lilies she could smell, arranged in a tall cut-glass vase. The blooms were exquisitely

formed, petals curling outwards, creamy and unblemished, bright orange pollen balanced on each stamen. Another few days and they would have wilted, begun the journey towards decay, but for now they were perfection.

She looked past the flowers to the end of the hallway where a wide, curving stone staircase with an elaborate balustrade stretched upwards into darkness.

'You're late.'

The voice was low and ponderous as it boomed towards her out of the shadows. Thea strained to see where it had come from, and a moment later a tall, spare man with slicked-back hair and a face as runnelled as a dry riverbed emerged from the gloom. His old-fashioned frock coat hung on him as if it had been made for someone larger, but his tie was sharply knotted and high against a clean white collar. Heavy brows shaded his eyes, and his shoulders were hunched as if to ward off imaginary cold. He didn't meet her eye.

'Sorry . . . the bus was late leaving the station.' She checked her watch. 'But only by about fifteen minutes.'

'Of course, you're from the *colonies*,' he said, as if that explained everything. 'We were expecting you yesterday, Miss Rust.'

Thea bristled. 'I thought the students arrived tomorrow?'

'They do, but nevertheless we were expecting you yesterday,' he repeated slowly, as if she were dense as well as foreign.

She went to apologise again, but he had already disappeared into the gloom.

No sooner had she opened her mouth to call out than he returned, holding a heavy iron circle on which a set of keys were

strung. 'There are three of them. One for the front door, one the back, and the other . . . well, I expect you'll work it out. That's if you've got anything about you.' He held out the keys to her with one hand and rubbed his chin with the other. There was a rasp as flakes of skin drifted onto his lapels, and she suppressed a shudder.

'The *girls*' boarding house is back towards the high street, number fifty-eight.' There was a wince in his voice as he spoke, as if even uttering the word *girls* caused him physical pain. 'I have been reliably informed that you will be a guest there, for the first term at least.'

Boys – the sons of gentlemen, so the school's website boasted – had been educated at Oxleigh College since the mid-nineteenth century. According to her reading, it had been founded as a last-ditch effort to save the town. Once a popular stop on the road to Bath, Oxleigh went into a sharp decline when the railways proved to be a far quicker and more efficient means of transport from the capital to the spa town. A former coaching inn had become, and still was, the Master's House and the rest of the buildings grew up around it. Then, as the school thrived, so did the town once more.

This was the first year, however, that Oxleigh had deigned to admit girls. It had held out far longer than other schools of its ilk, which had begun accepting them several decades ago, but enrolments were dropping and the school had been forced to move with the times, or so Thea surmised. It was clear that this man, whoever he was, was far from happy about the situation.

She held out her left hand for the keys and then stuck out her right to shake his. 'Thea. New history teacher.'

'Of that I am well aware, Miss Rust,' he said with a withering tone, ignoring her outstretched hand. 'Battle. *Mr* Battle to you. Porter.'

'Yes, of course,' said Thea, withdrawing her hand as he turned, dismissing her.

'I'll head back to the high street then, shall I?' she said, keeping her tone light.

'It's the green door. Next but one to the George and Dragon. Don't get lost,' he muttered over his shoulder as he disappeared into the shadows again.

Instead of leaving the room right away, she took a step forward, curious to see a little more of her surroundings, for she had not had the chance to take in much on her previous visit. Her eyes had now adjusted to the dim light and she could make out several large oil paintings of learned-seeming men hanging from the wood-panelled walls. One, with a tonsure of short dark hair, was seated behind a desk and wore round wire-rimmed spectacles and sported a small moustache, a pen in his hand. Another wore an academic gown with a scarlet hood and a mortarboard atop his head. Yet another, more contemporary this time, showed a youngish, sandy-haired man sitting on a bench with a labrador at his feet, the college gardens and buildings behind him. She moved closer and read the inscriptions. All of them had the word 'Master' above their names, and then the dates they had served. The sandy-haired man, Dr Alexander Fox, was the present headmaster; *2011* was inscribed after his name but no end date. She had met him at her interview, and had liked his open face and unstuffy attitude.

Oxleigh College was a bastion of the British establishment in the heart of the English countryside, but Thea might as well have applied to teach on Mars, for she had no experience in such a place as this. She had been surprised to get past the first interview. There was, of course, another reason she had been looking at the college's website in the first place, had impulsively decided to apply for the job she'd seen advertised there. But now was not the time to dwell on that.

As she went to leave, she turned the keys over in her hand for a closer look. They were large and smooth, their metal surface worn, the result of many years of use. One had the shape of a pentacle, a pattern familiar to her, the points of a star enclosed in a circle at the top. The second featured maze-like intertwined circles with a star at their centre and the third a quiver of arrows with a twisted-thread effect along the shank. She ran her thumb over the pentacle and wondered briefly when it had first been made, why such designs would feature on this set of keys.

She stuffed them into her jacket pocket, shouldered her bag, grasped the handle of her suitcase and pulled the door open. The wind rustled the trees lining the grand avenue and her stomach growled in response. Lunch had been a plastic packet of sandwiches and a watery coffee on the train, many hours ago now. There was a chocolate bar somewhere in her bag, but she could hang on for a few more minutes. She should retrace her steps to the town and find her new lodgings.

The path to the school gates was illuminated by spotlights at ground level that cast long-fingered shadows from the trees across the gravel. The sound of cars from the road was a far-off murmur.

But there was something different now and at first she couldn't work out what it was. Then, the quiet struck her: the music had stopped. She recalled Mr Battle's words. If none of the students had arrived yet, then who had been singing?

TWO

September 1768, Oxleigh

The first thing Rowan noticed was the man's waistcoat, for it was embroidered with a pattern the like she had never before encountered: orange flower petals that glowed in the afternoon light, leaves in a twisting green curve. Then, breeches as snowy as the underside of a magpie, white stockings and polished leather shoes with shiny silver buckles. A wealthy gentleman, by all appearances.

He approached her with a swagger, pausing to stuff something in his pocket. She smoothed her skirts, applying a smile to her face and quelling the urge to run and hide. She wished her boots were not crusted with mud and her red cloak – once her mother's – not so tattered and patched. She hastily tucked her hands behind her, for they were streaked with green sap from the herbs she had picked on her journey, and cast her gaze to her feet.

'You, girl. Are you strong? Healthy?' he enquired, looking down, for she was slight and he stood a foot or more taller than her.

'Aye, sir.' She found her voice. 'Have been maid and laundress for a household of nine for the past two years.' Rowan omitted to mention that the household was that of her aunt and uncle and she had not been paid for her work. She wanted him to think her more experienced than she might appear. 'And not a day's sickness.'

'I had hoped for a manservant,' he sighed, casting a glance across to the other side of the village green where several people huddled in small groups, the women holding mops or brooms, the men scythes, hoes or shovels. Rowan noticed that scraps of bright blue ribbon were evident on the breasts of most of them – signs that they had already been hired. 'But it appears there are none to be had at this late hour.'

The town held an annual Michaelmas Mop Fair, drawing those in need of employment from near and far in the hopes of securing a year's work, and Rowan had made the two-day journey on foot from her village of Inkpen, sleeping in a hollow by the roadside as night fell and continuing on as dawn broke. The sun was now well past its zenith, and she had been standing beside the green since early that morning, but so far those who had come in search of maids, washerwomen and cooks had caught sight of her face, the scarred left eye that drooped at the outside edge, and moved swiftly on. She wondered why this gentleman had not been among them, but thanked her stars that he had not, for the hollow ache in her stomach reminded her of the grave nature of her situation. If she were not hired, she had not the fortitude for the long walk back to her aunt's house, nor would

she be offered a welcome there if she did return, for she had been sent to earn a wage to pay for her brothers' keep there.

From where she stood, Rowan had a view of almost the entire town of Oxleigh spread below her. It was the largest place she had ever seen: so many houses, one after another, of all types and sizes fitted together like pieces of a puzzle, many of them brick, with sturdy tile roofs, not wattle and daub and thatch as the cottages of her village were. The high street was wider even than any river she could imagine and curved gently downhill like the peel of an apple. She was awed by the size of it, much as she was by the gentleman standing before her.

'I suppose a housemaid will suffice.' His words brought her back to where she stood and she allowed a small hope to grow. He paused, considering her, and she tried not to flinch under his gaze, to meet it with a steadfastness she did not feel, for her heart was racing faster than if she had run a mile. He made no sign that he had noticed her ruined face, the spider's web of lines that radiated out from the corner of her eye.

'If my wife is in agreement. Come.' He motioned to her and she gathered her bundle containing a spare set of clothes and a few small treasures – everything she owned – scrambling to follow him as he paced in the direction of the main street. A market threaded its way along the centre and she took in the swarm of people, stepping quickly out of the way to avoid being jostled as they examined fat marrows, cabbages larger than a baby's head, baskets of eggs, heavy sacks of grain and malt, towers of apples, chickens with necks twisted but feathers and feet still attached.

Being sure to keep the man firmly in her sights, she dodged tables laden with blocks of butter, curds and whey and all manner

of cheeses, spotted a hover of trout, their eyes bright, skin stippled and silver-brown, bunches of watercress, herbs and flowers, crocks of honey, folded lengths of ribbon. She spied courting couples sidling near a fiddler working his instrument into a flashing blur. He was a good one, judging by the crowd that had gathered around him, tapping their feet and swaying to the music. Here were people of all types and sizes: short and broad like a bread oven, round like a wheel of Wiltshire loaf or thin as a pane of glass.

She almost tripped over the crust of a pie, discarded on the ground, missed by the press of boots. It had been a very long time since her breakfast the day before. Glancing around to make certain no one saw her, she ducked down, plucking the pastry seconds before it was ground into the cobbles and cramming it into her mouth before anyone noticed. When she rose again, she had almost lost sight of the man in the bright waistcoat and had to force her way through the crowd to catch up with him.

She was fair dizzy with the industry of the town, the foreign aromas and strange calls, the noise, snippets of conversation as tantalising as the smell of a stew on a cold day. In Inkpen, she had recognised the face of everyone, known them all by name and they her, but now . . . who knew there could be this many unfamiliar souls contained in one place? She caught a glimpse of a butcher's boy, running errands through the throng, his handcart laden with joints of meat, strings of sausages, a flitch of bacon. Something in the turn of his head, the curve of his jaw reminded her of Will, the eldest of her brothers, and she felt a sudden pang of homesickness for the cottage she had left behind and the quiet of her village.

The man stopped suddenly at a large dwelling set back from the road and she halted a pace behind him. 'Here we are,' he said, a note of pride evident in his voice. 'Hollander's Fine Silks.'

Rowan stared at the house. It was bounded by two smaller dwellings that leaned up against it like buttresses. As wide as it was tall – which was plenty – it was made of red brick with a steeply gabled tiled roof. Two large square-paned bay windows looked out from either side of a broad wooden door and a painted sign depicting a pair of shears swung above the lintel. Even from her swift survey, it was clear it was one of the town's most impressive buildings.

The ground floor was a shopfront, and displayed in the window to her left were bolts of fine cloth: plain, striped and some that were richly woven with exotic birds and flowers. It was to be several months before she would learn that the colours that so delighted her were turquoise, chartreuse, violet and vermilion, but only a few weeks before she would feel fine silk fabric between fingers that had previously only known coarse linen and broadcloth.

Rowan dragged her gaze away from the fabrics and craned her neck skywards. The house was so tall it seemed to touch the sky. She counted three sets of windows, one atop another, the first floor paned with diamond-shaped glass. There were six chimneypots and four dormers jutting out of the pitched roof, and she knew from the height of it that there would be a great many stairs to reach the very top.

The man retrieved a set of keys from the pocket of his coat and led her into a small entranceway. Doors led off it to the left and right and a passage continued on towards the back of

the house, which was dim and shadowed. 'We live at the back and upstairs,' he explained. 'Your room – if you meet with my wife's approval – will be at the top of the house, with Alice. Now follow me, for Mistress Hollander should be hereabouts.'

He ushered her along the passageway and into a large, square room. Sconces lit the panelled walls and her boots sank into the thick carpets laid upon the floor. At the far end was a grand stone fireplace the colour of honey, where a fire burned smokily, the green wood spitting and hissing. She knew that there was a better kind to use.

Beside the fire, a young woman sat reading in a chair. Her hair, dressed in loops and curls, shone fair, and her skin glowed, struck with firelight. Her gown was the colour of autumn cider and lace frothed at her slim wrists like a syllabub. She had a smallish, pink mouth, and a pointed chin that sharpened her otherwise serene features. A mole at the high point of her cheek, which might have been mistaken for a courtier's beauty patch, drew attention to her round, china-blue eyes. Rowan had never encountered anyone quite like her before: she was so clean and dainty; she looked as though she might snap at the slightest pressure.

'Ah, my dear Caroline,' the man said, rubbing his palms together as if he were unsure of himself. 'What do you think to our new maid?'

'Rowan Caswell, ma'am.' Rowan spoke up, for Mr Hollander – she presumed that was he – had not bothered to ask her name. She remembered that a curtsey might be in order and bobbed self-consciously.

His wife turned and put down the book she had been reading, now studying Rowan with a languid curiosity. Rowan was grateful

that her face was in shadow, that her scar might not be seen so clearly.

'This will not do. It will not do at all.'

Rowan's spirits sank to the thin soles of her boots.

'Were we not after a boy, someone we could train to be your valet?' She shook her head, as if the fact of her husband returning with something other than he intended was not an unusual occurrence.

'There was no one suitable.'

'What? Not even early this morning?'

'No, I am afraid not.'

But there had been; Rowan remembered several boys of about her age, as well as older men, waiting to be hired.

Caroline Hollander sighed, and inspected Rowan more closely. Her eyes narrowed, and Rowan knew that she had seen her scar. 'She is no painting, but that is perhaps a good thing,' she said. 'All right, if there really was no one else, she will have to do, for now anyway. We shall have to get her clean, for I doubt the girl's seen a bath for a good while. Probably lousy and with goodness knows any manner of other infestations.'

The unkindness of her words was tempered by a sweet smile, but Rowan was affronted, though she knew better than to show it. She might be the worse from her long journey, but she used a tincture of rosemary, peppermint, clove and geranium that kept the lice at bay and her hair shiny. When necessary, she also rubbed a paste of fenugreek seeds and mustard oil on her body, which wasn't as sweet-smelling, but was certainly efficacious. She might be a simple girl from a poor village, but she was no peasant.

'Have Prudence arrange it tonight. But for heaven's sake, Patrick, make sure she is fed first; the scrawny baggage looks like she hasn't seen a meal for months.'

Rowan allowed herself to breathe out. It seemed that she met with Mistress Hollander's approval, enough to be employed on a trial at least.

'And she will need new dresses. I'll not have my servants clothed in rags. She can have an old one of Alice's for the time being.' Caroline Hollander picked up her book again, as if they had already taken their leave.

'Of course, dearest,' he replied. Then, to Rowan, 'Come along, then, I'll show you upstairs.' He took a glass lamp from a sideboard and led them back along the hallway. Rowan glanced behind her as she left the room, seeing shadows gathered around her new mistress. She blinked and they disappeared; she told herself it was simply the effect of her unfamiliar surroundings.

Kayte Nunn is a former book and magazine editor, and the author of four previous novels, including the international bestselling *The Botanist's Daughter* and *The Forgotten Letters of Esther Durrant*. *The Silk House* is loosely based on a house that still stands, in the town in England where she grew up. Kayte now lives in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales.

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