

# THE LETTER

Kathryn Hughes



# Prologue

Present day

It was the small things she took pleasure in. The faint hum of a huge furry bumble bee busily flitting from one flower to another, oblivious to the fact that it was completing a task on which the entire human race depended. The heady scent and glorious abundance of colour provided by the sweet peas that she grew in the vegetable patch, despite the fact that the space could be given over to their more edible cousins. Then there was the sight of her husband rubbing his aching back as he dug fertiliser into the rose bed without complaint when there were a thousand things he would prefer to be doing.

As she knelt down to pull up a few weeds, she felt her granddaughter's hand slip into hers, so tiny, warm and trusting. It was another small thing, the one that gave her the most pleasure of all, that always brought a smile to her face and made her heart lurch.

'What are you doing, Grandma?'

She turned and looked at her beloved granddaughter.

The little girl's cheeks were tinged pink with the afternoon sun and she had smudges of soil across her button nose. She took out her handkerchief and gently wiped them away. 'I'm just pulling up these weeds.'

'Why?'

She thought about this for a second. 'Well, they don't belong here.'

'Oh. Where do they belong, then?'

'They're just weeds, love, they don't belong anywhere.'

Her granddaughter stuck out her bottom lip and furrowed her brow. 'That doesn't seem very nice. Everything belongs somewhere.'

She smiled and planted a light kiss on the top of the child's head as she glanced across towards her husband. Although his once-dark hair was now smattered with grey and his face was more heavily lined, the years had not diminished him too much and she was thankful every day that she had found him. Against the odds their paths had crossed, and now they belonged together.

She turned back to her granddaughter. 'You're right. Let's put them back.'

As she dug a little hole, she marvelled at how much could be learnt from children, how much their wisdom was underestimated or even dismissed.

'Grandma?'

She was shaken out of her reverie. 'Yes, love.'

'How did you and Grandpa meet?'

She stood up and took hold of her granddaughter's hand. She brushed away a strand of golden hair from her little face. 'Well, let's see now. That *is* a long story . . .'



# PART ONE



March 1973

This time she was going to die, of that she was certain. She knew she must only have a few seconds left and she silently prayed for the end to come quickly. She could feel the warm, sticky blood as it ran down the back of her neck. She had heard the sickening sound of her skull cracking as her husband slammed her head into the wall. There was something in her mouth that felt like a piece of gravel; she knew it was a tooth and she desperately tried to spit it out. His hands were gripped so tightly around her throat that it was impossible for her to draw breath or make any kind of sound. Her lungs screamed out for oxygen and the pressure on the back of her eyeballs was so intense she was sure they were going to pop out. Her head began to swim, and then, mercifully, she started to black out.

She heard the long-forgotten sound of the school bell and suddenly she was five years old again. The chatter of the other children was almost drowned out by the incessant ringing. As she screamed at them to stop, she realised she had a voice after all.

She stared up at the bedroom ceiling for a second and then squinted at the alarm clock that had just roused her from her sleep. Cold sweat trickled down her spine and she tugged at the bedclothes, pulling them up to her chin in an effort to savour the warmth for a few seconds longer. Her heart was still pounding after the nightmare and she blew out gently through her mouth. Her warm breath hung in the frigid air of the bedroom. With an enormous effort she heaved herself out of bed and winced as her bare feet found the icy roughness of the wooden floor. She glanced over at Rick, who thankfully was still sound asleep, snoring off the effects of the bottle of whisky he had drunk the night before. She checked that his cigarettes were still on the bedside table where she had carefully positioned them. If there was one thing guaranteed to put Rick in a foul mood, it was not being able to find his fags in the morning.

She crept quietly into the bathroom and eased the door shut. It would probably take an explosion not seen since Hiroshima to wake him, but Tina wasn't taking any chances. She ran a basin for a wash, the water freezing as usual. Sometimes it was a choice between feeding themselves and feeding the meter. Rick had lost his job on the buses, so there was little money for heat. Enough to drink, smoke and gamble, though, she noted in the silence of her brain.

She went downstairs, filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. The paper boy had been and she absently

pulled the newspapers through the letter box: *The Sun* for her and *The Sporting Life* for Rick. The headline caught her attention. It was Grand National day. Her shoulders sagged and she shuddered at the thought of all the money Rick would squander on the race. There was little doubt he would be too drunk by lunchtime to venture out to the bookmaker's, and it would be left to Tina to put the bet on. The betting shop was next door to the charity shop where she helped out on Saturdays, and the bookie, Graham, had become a close friend over the years. Despite working all week as a shorthand typist in an insurance office, Tina looked forward to her day in the charity shop. Rick had told her it was ridiculous for her to spend the day voluntarily sorting through dead people's clothes when she could work in a proper shop and contribute even more to the family coffers. For Tina, it was an excuse to spend the day out of Rick's way, and she enjoyed chatting to the customers and having normal conversations where she didn't have to watch every word she said.

She switched on the radio and turned the volume down a touch. Tony Blackburn always managed to make her smile with his corny jokes. He was just announcing Donny Osmond's new single, 'The Twelfth of Never', when the kettle began to give its hollow whistle. She snatched it up before the noise became too shrill, and put two spoonfuls of tea leaves into the old stained pot. She sat down at the kitchen table while she waited for the tea to brew, and opened her paper. She held her breath as the

toilet flushed upstairs. She heard the floorboards creak as Rick padded back to bed, and exhaled with relief. Then she froze as he called:

‘Tina! Where are my fags?’

*Jesus. He smokes like a beagle.*

She jumped up immediately and belted up the stairs two at a time.

‘On your bedside table where I put them last night,’ she replied, arriving breathlessly at his side.

She ran her hand over the table in the gloom but could not feel them. She swallowed her rising panic.

‘I’ll have to pull the curtains a little. I can’t see.’

‘For God’s sake, woman! Is it too much to ask for a man to be able to have a fag when he wakes up? I’m gagging here.’

His sour morning breath stank of stale whisky.

She finally found the cigarettes on the floor between the bed and the table.

‘Here they are. You must have knocked them off in your sleep.’

Rick stared at her for a moment before he reached up and snatched the packet from her. She flinched and instinctively covered her face with her hands. He grabbed her wrist and their eyes met for a second before Tina closed hers and fought back the tears.

She could recall the first time Rick had hit her like it had happened only yesterday. Even the memory of it caused

her cheek to sting and burn. It wasn't just the physical pain, though, but the sudden stark reality that things were never going to be the same again. The fact that it was also their wedding night made it harder to take. Up until that moment the day had been perfect. Rick looked so handsome in his new brown suit, cream shirt and silk tie. The white carnation in his buttonhole confirmed him as the groom and Tina thought it was impossible to love anybody more than she loved him. Everyone had told her she looked stunning. Her long dark hair was swept up into a loose bun and woven through with tiny flowers. Her pale blue eyes shone out from beneath thick false eyelashes and her complexion radiated a natural beauty that needed no help from cosmetics. The party after the wedding was a lively affair at an inexpensive local hotel, and the happy couple and their guests had danced the night away.

As they were preparing for bed that night in their hotel room, Tina noticed that Rick was unusually quiet.

'Are you all right, love?' she asked. She put her arms around his neck. 'It was a wonderful day, wasn't it? I can't believe I'm Mrs Craig at last.' She pulled away from him suddenly. 'Hey, I'll have to practise my new signature.' She picked up a pen and paper from the bedside table and wrote *Mrs Tina Craig* with a flourish.

Still Rick said nothing; just stared at her. He lit a cigarette and poured himself a glass of cheap champagne. He swigged it down in one gulp and walked over to where Tina was sitting on the bed.

‘Stand up,’ he commanded.

Tina was puzzled by his tone but did as she was asked.

Rick raised his hand and whipped it sharply across her face.

‘Don’t ever make a fool of me again.’ With that he stormed out of the bedroom.

He spent the night slumped in the hotel lounge surrounded by empty glasses, and it was days before he would tell Tina exactly what her transgression had been. Apparently he hadn’t liked the way she had danced with one of his work colleagues. She had looked at him too provocatively and flirted with him in front of their guests. Tina couldn’t even remember the guy, let alone the incident, but it was the start of Rick’s paranoid fixation that she was coming on to every man she met. She often wondered if she should have left him the very next day. But she was a romantic at heart and wanted to give her fledgling marriage every chance to succeed. She was sure the incident was a one-off, and Rick allayed any niggling doubts when he presented her with a bouquet by way of an apology. Such was his remorse and contrition that Tina had no hesitation in forgiving him immediately. It was only a few days later that she noticed a card buried amongst the flowers. She smiled to herself as she pulled it out. *With fond memories of our beloved Nan*, she read. The bugger had stolen the flowers from a grave in the churchyard!

\* \* \*

Now, four years later, they stared at each other for a second longer before Rick released his grip.

‘Thanks, love.’ He smiled. ‘Now be a good girl and fetch me a brew.’

Tina exhaled with relief and rubbed her crimson wrist. Ever since that wedding night incident, she had vowed she was not going to be a victim. No way was she going to be one of those battered wives who made excuses for their husbands’ vile behaviour. There had been many times when she had threatened to leave, but she always backed out at the last minute. Rick was so repentant and humble and, of course, promised never to raise his hand to her again. These days, though, he was drinking a lot more heavily and his outbursts were more frequent. The time had finally come when she could stand it no longer.

The problem was, she had nowhere to go. She had no family, and although she did have a couple of close friends, she could never impose on them to the extent of asking them to take her in. It was her wages that paid the rent, but there was no way Rick would leave voluntarily. So she had started an escape fund. She needed enough money for a deposit and a month’s rent on a new place, and then she would be free. That was a lot more difficult than it sounded. She rarely had any spare money left to save, but no matter how long it took, she was determined to leave. The old coffee jar she kept hidden at the back of the kitchen cupboard was filling up nicely, and she now had just over fifty pounds. But with rent on even the most

basic bedsit commanding eight pounds per week, plus a deposit of at least thirty, she would need to save a lot more before she could make the break. For the time being she would make the best of it, staying out of Rick's way as much as possible and trying not to get him riled.

She carried Rick's tea upstairs, together with *The Sporting Life* tucked under her arm.

'Here you are,' she said, trying to sound breezy.

There was no reply. He was fast asleep again, propped up on the pillow, mouth open, a cigarette balanced precariously on his dry, cracked bottom lip. Tina picked it off and stubbed it out.

'For Christ's sake! You'll kill us both,' she muttered.

She set the mug down and pondered what to do. Should she wake him and incur his wrath? Or should she just leave the tea on the bedside table? When he woke up it would no doubt be stone cold, which would be sure to send him into a rage, but by then she would hopefully be at the shop and out of harm's way. The decision was taken out of her hands as he stirred and forced his eyes open.

'Your tea's there,' she said. 'I'm going to the shop now. Will you be OK?'

Rick pushed himself up on to his elbows.

'My mouth's as dry as a camel's,' he sniffed. 'Thanks for the tea, love.'

He patted the quilt, indicating for her to sit down.

‘Come here.’

That was what life was like with Rick. He was an evil, spiteful bully one minute and an angelic choirboy the next.

‘Sorry about before. You know, about the ciggies? I wouldn’t hurt you, Tina, you know that.’

Tina could scarcely believe her ears, but it was never a good idea to contradict Rick so she merely nodded.

‘Look,’ he continued. ‘Could you do me a favour?’

She let out a small, inaudible sigh and raised her eyes to the ceiling. *Here we go.*

‘Could you put a bet on for me?’

She could bite her tongue no longer.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea, Rick? You know how tight things are. With only me earning, there’s not much spare cash for things like gambling.’

‘*With only me earning,*’ Rick mimicked. ‘You never miss a chance to get that in, do you, you sanctimonious cow?’ Tina was momentarily startled by his vicious reaction, but he was not finished. ‘It’s the Grand National, for Christ’s sake! Everybody has a bet today.’

He reached down to the floor, picked up his trousers from where he had discarded them the night before and pulled out a roll of banknotes.

‘There’s fifty quid here.’ He tore off the lid of his cigarette packet and wrote the name of a horse on the back. ‘Fifty pounds to win.’

He handed her the money and the scrap of cardboard. Tina was stunned.

‘Where did you get this?’ She held up the roll of notes.

‘Well it’s not really any of your business, but since you ask, I won it on the horses. There, you see, who says it’s a mug’s game?’

*Liar.*

Her head was swirling and she felt her neck begin to flush.

‘This is more than a week’s wages for me, Rick.’

‘I know. Aren’t I clever?’ he replied smugly.

She clasped her hands together as though in prayer and brought them up to her lips. She tried to remain calm as she blew gently through her fingers. ‘But this money could pay our electricity bill or our food bill for a whole month.’

‘Christ, Tina! You’re so boring.’

She fanned out the notes in her trembling hands. She knew then that she was not physically capable of handing over such a large amount to a bookie.

‘Can’t you put it on?’ she begged.

‘You work next door to the bloody betting shop, I’m hardly putting you out.’

Tina could feel the tears starting to sting but she had made up her mind. She would take the money and discuss with Graham what to do. She had taken money from Rick before for a bet and not put it on. The horse had inevitably lost and he had been none the wiser. However, Tina felt she had aged about ten years during the course of that race, and this time it was different. The stakes were so much higher. *Fifty pounds, for heaven’s sake.*

Suddenly and inexplicably she found herself in the grip of panic. She felt the heat rise from her toes to the back of her neck and she found it difficult to breathe. She backed out of the bedroom, muttering excuses about having left the toast under the grill, and ran downstairs to the kitchen. She climbed up on to a stool and reached into the back of the cupboard, feeling around for the coffee jar containing her escape fund. Her fingers found the familiar shape and she pulled the jar out and clutched it to her chest. Her hands shook as she tried to unscrew the lid. Her sweaty palms could not get the grip she needed and she groped around for the tea towel. Finally the lid yielded and she peered inside. There was nothing but a few coppers left. She shook the jar and looked again, as though her eyes had deceived her the first time.

‘Bastard!’ she cried out. ‘Bastard, bastard, bastard!’

She started to weep, the huge sobs making her shoulders heave.

‘Thought you could pull the wool over my eyes, did you?’

She jumped and spun round to see Rick leaning in the doorway, another cigarette hanging from his lips and wearing only his greying tea-stained vest and grubby underpants.

‘You took it! How could you? I’ve worked all hours to save that money. It’s taken me months.’

She slumped down on to the floor and rocked back and forth, still clutching the almost-empty jar. Rick strode over and dragged her roughly to her feet.

‘Pull yourself together. What do you expect when you hide money from your own husband? What are you saving for anyway?’

*To get away from you, you drunken, manipulative waste of space.*

‘It was supposed to be a . . . surprise, you know, a little holiday for us. I thought a break would do us both good.’

Rick pondered this for a second and then relaxed his grip on Tina’s arm. He frowned doubtfully.

‘A nice idea. Tell you what, when that horse romps home, we’ll have a belting holiday, maybe even go abroad.’

Tina nodded miserably and wiped her eyes.

‘Go and get yourself cleaned up. You’re going to be late for work. I’m off back to bed. I’m knackered.’

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and headed back upstairs.

Tina stood alone in the middle of the kitchen. She had never felt so wretched or desperate in her life, but she was determined she was not going to put that bet on. That fifty pounds was hers, and no way was it going to be wasted on a horse race, Grand National or not. She took the money and stuffed it into her purse, then took a cursory look at the name Rick had written on the cigarette packet.

*Red Rum.*

*You’d better not win, you bugger.*

Tina arrived at the shop and fished in her handbag for the keys. In spite of the notice on the shop door asking

people not to, someone had left a sack of old clothes on the doorstep. It was inconceivable to Tina that anyone would actually steal clothes that had been donated to charity, but it had happened on several occasions. Even in these gloomy economic times of strikes and power cuts, it was still surprising how low some people would stoop. She hoisted the bag over her shoulder, unlocked the door and went inside. After two years of working here, the smell of the place still caused her to wrinkle her nose. Second-hand clothing had an odour all of its own and was the same in every charity shop or jumble sale you went to. Mothballs mixed with stale sweat and biscuits.

Tina put the kettle on for the second time that morning and opened the sack. She pulled out an old suit and held it up to give it the once-over. It was very old but incredibly well made and of a quality the likes of which she had not encountered before. It was an unusual greenish colour, with a very faint gold stripe, and made entirely of wool.

The bell rang on the shop door, causing her to halt her examination.

‘Nice suit, er . . . lovely colour. No wonder they wanted rid of it!’

It was Graham from the bookmaker’s next door.

‘Morning. I’m surprised you’ve got time for idle chit-chat today,’ Tina teased.

‘Yeah, busiest day of the year for me, but I’m not

complaining,' he replied, rubbing his hands together. 'Nigel's opening up so I've got a couple of minutes.'

Tina gave him a warm hug.

'Well it's nice to see you.'

'How are you today, then?'

It was a loaded question. Graham knew full well the circumstances of her domestic situation. He had commented on her bruises or split lip on more than one occasion. He was always so kind and Tina could feel herself beginning to wobble. Graham took her elbow and guided her to a chair.

'What's he done this time?' he asked, tilting her chin and scrutinising her face.

'I hate him sometimes, Graham, I really do.'

He pulled her into his arms and smoothed her hair. 'You deserve so much more, Tina. You're twenty-eight years old. You should be settled in a loving marriage by now, perhaps a couple of kids . . .'

She pulled away, her mascara-smudged eyes searching his. 'You didn't come to help, then.'

'I'm sorry.' Graham cradled her head again. 'Tell me what's happened.'

'You haven't got time for this, today of all days.'

But Tina knew Graham would always have time for her. He had been hopelessly in love with her since the day they met. Tina loved him too, but only as a dear friend and father figure. He was twenty years her senior, and besides, he already had a wife, and it just wasn't in her nature to steal another woman's husband.

‘He wants me to put a bet on.’ She sniffed, and Graham pulled out a crisp starched handkerchief and handed it to her.

‘Nothing new there,’ he said. ‘He’s one of my best customers. And it is Grand National day.’

‘That’s what he said. But this is different, Graham. He’s talking about fifty pounds!’

Even Graham balked at the amount.

‘Where on earth did he get that kind of money?’

‘He stole it from me,’ Tina sobbed.

Graham looked confused, as well he might. ‘From you?’ he asked. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’ve been saving up, Graham. Saving for my esc—’ She stopped abruptly. She didn’t want to go down that road with Graham right now. He had offered her money in the past, but she had refused. She still had some pride and self-esteem left. ‘It doesn’t matter what I’ve been saving for; the fact is it’s my money and he wants me to put it on a horse in the Grand National.’ Her voice rose with incredulity at it all.

Graham wasn’t sure how to respond, but it was the bookie in him that spoke first.

‘Which horse?’

Tina glared at him in disbelief.

‘Does it matter? I’m not doing it.’

‘Sorry, Tina. I was just curious, that’s all.’ He hesitated. ‘What if it wins?’

‘It won’t.’

‘What’s its name?’ Graham insisted.

Tina sighed and rooted in her handbag for the cigarette packet, which she handed to Graham. He read the name and exhaled gently.

‘Red Rum!’ He nodded his head slowly. ‘He’s got a chance, Tina, I have to be honest. It is his first National, but he may yet start as favourite. There’s a big Australian horse though, Crisp. I think he’s likely to be up there too.’ He put his arm around Tina’s shoulders. ‘He’s got a chance, Tina, but there are no guarantees in the National.’

She leant against him, welcoming the comfort of his arms.

‘I’m not doing it, Graham,’ she said quietly.

There was a steeliness in her voice that told Graham arguing would be futile.

‘It’s your choice, Tina. I’ll be here for you whatever happens.’

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

‘You’re a good mate, Graham. Thanks.’

Graham looked away, slightly embarrassed.

‘Anyway,’ he said brightly, ‘you never know, you might find a fifty-pound note in the pocket of that old suit.’

Tina scoffed. ‘Do fifty-pound notes actually exist? I’ve never seen one.’

Graham managed a laugh. ‘I’d better get back,’ he said. ‘Nigel will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

‘Of course. I won’t keep you any longer. What time’s the race?’

‘Three fifteen.’

Tina glanced at her watch. Only six hours to go.

‘Let me know if you change your mind about the bet.’

‘I won’t, but thanks.’

When Graham had gone, Tina turned her attention back to the bag of clothes that had been left outside the shop. She held up the jacket of the suit once again, and remembering Graham’s words, she slipped her hand into the inside pocket. She suddenly felt a bit foolish, but then her hand touched what appeared to be paper and her heart skipped a beat. She pulled it out and turned it over. It wasn’t a fifty-pound note, but an old, yellowing envelope.