

Her Last Promise

Kathryn Hughes is the internationally bestselling author of *The Letter*, *The Secret*, *The Key* and *Her Last Promise*.

Her novels have been translated into 28 languages.

Kathryn lives with her husband near Manchester and has a son and a daughter.

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By Kathryn Hughes

The Letter

The Secret

The Key

Her Last Promise

Praise for
THE KEY

‘A wonderful, enthralling story; one that I didn’t want
to end’ *Lesley Pearse*

‘A heartbreakingly powerful read’ *Sun*

‘Un-put-downable with a twisting plot’ *My Weekly*

‘A fabulous read’ *Woman’s Weekly*

‘A must-have’ *Sunday Express*

‘Impeccably researched’ *Daily Mail*

‘An intriguing and emotional tale with some surprising
twists that will keep the reader absorbed throughout.
Another winner’ *People’s Friend*

‘Shocking, stirring’ *Woman*

‘A very atmospheric, heartbreaking and intriguing read
that will shock and surprise you’ *Alba in Bookland*

Praise for
THE SECRET

‘An emotional and intriguing read . . . Keeps you guessing right to the end’ *People’s Friend*

‘Gripping’ *Good Housekeeping*

‘Heart-warming and optimistic’ *Jen Med’s Book Reviews*

‘A gripping and moving family drama that will tug at the reader’s heart’ *Writing magazine*

‘A moving, emotional tale which will bring tears to your eyes and also a smile, this is a perfect Sunday afternoon read. Loved every bit of it!’

Peterborough Telegraph

‘Pulled me in right from the first page . . . I really enjoyed this book’ *Rea’s Book Reviews*

‘I so thoroughly enjoyed this book, it was filled with all kinds of mystery, family secrets, [and] characters that really stood out’ *Read Along With Sue*

‘One that you just HAVE to finish’ *Hollie in Wanderlust*

Praise for

THE LETTER

‘A wonderful, uplifting story’ Lesley Pearse

‘Autumnal Sunday afternoons were invented to read
heart-tugging novels like this’ *Red*

‘This moving love story had everyone talking . . .
Get set to be hooked’ *Look*

‘A beautiful story . . . I didn’t want to put it down’
Reviewed by Fran

‘A moving story of love, loss and hope’ *Bella*

‘You will find it hard to put down. I cried buckets of
tears reading it’ *Books With Wine And Chocolate*

‘Beautifully written and incredibly poignant. You
cannot fail to fall for this story’
The Last Word Book Reviews

‘The story kept me gripped . . . A breath of fresh air,
and just what I needed after a long day in the office’
Here.You.Me

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Kathryn Hughes



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First published in 2019
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 6593 7

Typeset in Garamond MT by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other controlled sources. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

For Rob

*For everything you've done for me and for everything
you're going to do.*

I've watched you now a full half-hour;
Self-poised upon that yellow flower
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep or feed
How motionless! – not frozen seas
More motionless! and then
What joy awaits you, when the breeze
Hath found you out among the trees,
And calls you forth again!

From 'To a Butterfly' by William Wordsworth

Donde una puerta se cierra, otra se abre.

'Where a door is closed, another is opened.'

From *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes



1

2018

It all began in the November. I can clearly recall the heavy charcoal skies and the mist which hovered two feet above the lawn. The damp smell of rotting leaves mixed with old bonfire smoke. The whole garden seemed to carry the weight of a burden. I'm not even sure why the weather's relevant but lots of stories seem to begin with it. Perhaps I'm trying too hard. Perhaps I should have started with the letter instead. After all, it's where the story really begins. It was the catalyst for everything that came after.

I dropped the letter onto the kitchen table and flicked on the kettle. I knew I needed the fortification of caffeine before I would have the strength to open it. My appetite had vanished but in another attempt at procrastination, I pushed some bread into the toaster and stared at the letter again. My name and address were type-written and the envelope was a rich cream colour and luxuriously thick. I might have known. The sender had deemed the contents so important that I'd had to sign for it. I propped

it up against the bread bin and pulled down my ‘World’s Best Mum’ mug. I popped a tea bag into the mug and picked up the letter again, fanning myself with it. I was deliberately putting off opening it because I knew that when I did, my life would never be the same again.

I left the unopened letter on the table and took my mug of tea over to the window, prolonging the state of blissful ignorance for as long as possible. I stared out over the garden to the shade of the horse chestnut tree where Dylan’s red and yellow toy car was still parked. A layer of green algae covered the roof, which was no surprise as he hasn’t driven it for years. His turtle-shaped sandpit was still embedded in the lawn, the grass underneath long dead. His whole childhood stretched out before me and I remembered fondly the little tea parties he used to hold for his teddy bears in the Wendy house when he thought I wasn’t looking. He calls it the shed now and denies ever having owned a tea set but it’s safely wrapped in tissue paper and stored in the attic ready for my grandchildren. I thought of him all alone in his room at university, poring over his books, rubbing his eyes with tiredness, his stomach rumbling with hunger as he wondered where his next meal was coming from. On the day Ralph and I dropped him off, I’d carried a box full of pans and cooking implements into the kitchen he was to share with his fellow students. There was no room in the fridge for the fruit and vegetables I had brought as it was already full of the essentials – lager, vodka and a

token bag of lettuce. I'd had a feeling all the years of nurturing were going to be undone in one term. There would be nobody who cared if he got his five-a-day, ensured he drank enough water or rationed his Percy Pig habit. And I was right, for in reality he lives on a steady stream of Domino's, Dairylea Dunkers and whichever lager is on offer in Tesco. He assures me that during the first term 'nobody' does any work. No wonder the NHS is in such a state.

I swilled my cup under the tap and wandered upstairs to Dylan's bedroom. The walls were bare, peppered only with the greasy stains from the BluTack he used on his posters. I slumped down on his bed and smoothed out his Manchester City duvet cover. His life can be measured in duvet covers. His first one was pale blue with little rabbits and ducks on. Then we had Teletubbies, Bob the Builder, a slightly worrying Barbie phase, Thunderbirds and then finally this one. He didn't take it to university though. He had insisted on a plain 'grown-up' one and I'd realised then that his childhood was well and truly over.

He's studying medicine at Newcastle and I could not be more proud of him. He's worked so hard for it and considering his father left us when Dylan went into Lower Sixth, it's nothing short of a miracle. It's one of the many things I cannot forgive Ralph for, but when your secretary is seven months pregnant with your twins what can you do? I felt the familiar bitterness begin to creep in. Ralph

and I tried for years to have another baby but it just wasn't to be. I think I coped with the disappointment quite well. I threw all my energies into bringing up Dylan and Ralph threw all his into shagging his secretary. There has been a long line of secretaries over the years, culminating in Susie, the mother of his twin girls. I'm sure he loves them but it amuses me no end to see him struggling to cope with the demands of two toddlers and a young wife whose IQ is not much higher than theirs. Naturally, Susie has had to give up work and his current secretary sports a blue rinse and wears tweed skirts. I can't help thinking Susie must have had a hand in her successor's selection process. Ralph is fifty-five now, the same age as me. He should be enjoying a more leisurely pace. A couple of golf trips a year with the boys, a nice flash sports car, time to relax in the evenings with a good wine and a box-set. Instead of which, he has to go on holidays dictated by the availability of a kids' club and drives a huge family bus, the only vehicle capable of transporting all the paraphernalia that accompanies his new family wherever they go. As for relaxing evenings, they are consigned to distant memory. The twins are particularly demanding at bedtime, I believe. He spends the entire evening carting one or both of them up and down the stairs, offering more and more extravagant bribes as the evening wears on. Still, you reap what you sow, I suppose.

I'd known the letter was coming since the day Ralph walked out but I just couldn't bring myself to open it. It

sounds pathetic now but I knew I wouldn't be able to read the words which would officially herald the end of my marriage. I closed the door on Dylan's room and headed downstairs, suddenly eager to get it over with. I picked up the letter and ran my finger under the flap. The paper inside was the same rich cream colour as the envelope. I pulled my glasses down from the top of my head and began to read. 'Dear Mrs Richards . . .' By the time I'd finished, my legs would hardly hold me up. The letter wasn't from Ralph's solicitors at all.



2

1978

Violet Dobbs studied her reflection in the cracked mirror over the kitchen sink. The scraps of their evening meal were still evident in the bowl full of cold water; swollen crusts of bread, floating peas, a slick of margarine on the surface. She upended the bowl, poured the greasy water away then scooped the resulting mulch out of the plughole. Drying her hands on the tea towel, she returned to the mirror. Using both middle fingers she smoothed out the skin between her eyebrows, erasing the two vertical lines that seemed to have appeared overnight. She really must stop frowning so much. She glanced over her shoulder to where Tara lay huddled under the heavy bedclothes, her teeth chattering dramatically. Lacy patterns of ice had already begun to form on the inside of the window pane.

Violet instinctively frowned, then reminded herself of the promise she'd made only a few seconds ago. 'You alright there, Baby Girl?'

'No, I'm not. Do we have to go tonight, Mum? It's bloody freezing.'

‘Language, Tara.’ She applied a dash of red lipstick and pressed her lips together. ‘Yes, *I* do have to go tonight because we need the money.’ Turning towards her daughter, she softened her tone. ‘Look, I know you don’t like coming with me but I don’t know what else to do. Unless you’d rather stay here?’

Tara hugged the hot-water bottle to her chest. ‘No! I can’t stay here on my own, not with *him* downstairs.’ She pulled the rough grey army blanket up to her chin as though this would afford her some protection.

‘Tara, love, even if he does come knocking, you don’t have to let him in.’

‘But he’s the landlord, Mum, he has a key. I can’t stop him.’

Violet shook her head. ‘It’s not right, I’m sure there must be laws against that sort of thing. He may own the place, but it’s our home. We pay the rent.’ Violet noticed her daughter’s raised eyebrows. ‘Don’t look at me like that, Tara. We pay the rent when we can afford to.’ She peered into the mirror again, rubbing the red lipstick off her teeth with her finger. ‘Anyway, that’s why I’m doing it tonight.’ She pirouetted on the spot. ‘How do I look?’

‘Beautiful, as I’m sure you’re well aware.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that. Look at these lines on me forehead.’

‘Oh, yeah right. I wish I looked as hideous as you.’

Violet plonked herself down on the bed and touched her daughter’s freezing cheek. ‘You’ve no idea, have you,

love?’ She pointed to her own face. ‘Look at the amount of slap I have to put on. But you, you’re gorgeous from the minute you wake you up until the minute your head hits the pillow again. You don’t need anything to enhance your youthful beauty.’

Tara folded her arms and frowned. ‘You’re just saying that. I’m nowhere near as pretty as you.’

‘You’ll grow to love yourself in time, Tara. Don’t be so quick to grow up. All that’s ahead of you.’ Violet sucked her cheeks in. ‘Do you think I had these cheekbones when I was fourteen? You think I had this hourglass figure when I was still at school?’ She shook her head. ‘No, straight up and down I was, boys never looked once, let alone twice at me.’

‘Come off it, Mum! You were pregnant with me at fourteen!’

Violet averted her gaze and looked down at the bed. ‘Ah . . . yes . . . well, that was . . . different.’

Tara picked at the candlewick bedspread, pulling out a tuft of thread. ‘Where is he now?’

‘I haven’t a clue where your dad is, Tara, love. You know this already. His parents moved to Mongolia and he had no choice but to go with them.’ Violet clapped her hands, then rubbed them together, indicating the conversation was over.

Tara did not pick up on the body language. ‘Do you think he would’ve stayed if he’d known about me though?’

‘I’m sure he would. Young as we were, we were still

very much in love.’ She tucked a stray strand of hair round her daughter’s ear and smiled. ‘We’re alright though, aren’t we, Tara? I do me best. You’re everything to me, love, don’t you forget it.’

The banging on the door startled them both. ‘Open up, it’s Colin.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ Violet whispered under her breath. She winked at Tara. ‘Erm . . . Colin who?’

‘Don’t play games, Violet. Your rent’s due.’

‘I know it is and you’ll get it next week.’

‘Next week’s too late. I’ve warned you about this before, now you’ve left me no choice.’ The bunch of keys rattled in his fist.

‘He’s coming in, Mum,’ Tara whispered, clinging to her mother’s arm.

Violet rose from the bed and planted her hands on her hips. ‘Well he doesn’t scare me.’

Colin flung the door open and barged into the room, his hairy stomach bulging through his string vest. ‘You’re four weeks in arrears, Violet. Time’s up.’

Violet spoke in a soft voice, one that was better suited to trying to calm a fractious toddler. ‘Come on now, Colin, can’t we come to some arrangement?’ She gestured to the threadbare armchair, the fabric stained with the grease of a previous tenant’s Brylcreem. ‘Sit down, let’s talk about this.’ She nodded towards Tara. ‘Fetch Mr Simpson a glass of whisky, will you?’

He lowered himself into the chair and accepted the

drink. 'I've got bills to pay too, you know. This isn't a hostel for the homeless.'

'I know, I know,' placated Violet. 'And I can see you're a reasonable man.' She pulled up a chair next to him and ran a finger along his forearm, tracing the outline of his faded tattoo. 'Me and Tara though, we're good tenants, aren't we? Or would you prefer someone who had all-night parties? Imagine all that punk rock booming through the rafters, you tossing and turning, trying to get to sleep. Or what if you had tenants who turned this place into a drugs den? What then, eh? Place stinking of weed. Drug dealers banging on the door at all hours. Is that really what you want?' She squeezed his bicep and smiled. 'My word, Colin, have you been at those weights again?'

He downed his whisky and stood up. 'Nice try, Violet.' He slammed the glass down on the draining board. 'Payment in full by eight o'clock or else you're out on your ear.'

Violet glanced at the clock on the wall. 'But it's half seven now.'

He shrugged his hairy shoulders. 'Not my problem.'

Violet closed the door behind him. 'Bloody great ape.' She shuddered. 'Ugh, poor Mrs Simpson having to share a bed with that Neanderthal.'

'What will we do, Mum?' asked Tara. 'He said eight o'clock.'

Violet reached for her Afghan coat. 'Oh, it's all hot air,

Tara. Take no notice, he just likes to throw his considerable weight about.'

She wrapped a feather boa round her neck and picked up her handbag. 'Come on, Baby Girl. It's you and me against the world. We'll show 'em.'