

Jennifer Page

L O V E

L E T T E R S

on
Hazel Lane



An Aria Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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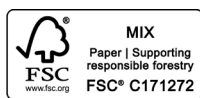
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781804548332

ISBN (E): 9781804548318

Cover design: HoZ/Jessie Price

Typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd UK



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

To my wonderful husband,
Ryszard Andrzej Hermaszewski (77 points)

Prologue

‘No-one will ever buy it,’ said Mrs Thorp, wrestling the pinafore dress over the mannequin’s bald head, ‘but it’ll look good in the window.’

‘It was there for six weeks when it first came in,’ the manager said. ‘Nobody even tried it on.’

‘We just need one customer who’s going to a fancy-dress party.’

‘Or someone who’s crazy about Scrabble and happens to be a size 12.’

The pinafore was way too large for the ludicrously thin dummy – they ought to get some more realistically sized ones but new mannequins were a luxury the charity shop couldn’t afford. Mrs Thorp pulled the waist in, securing it at the back with a pin, and fluffed out the skirt before going outside to see how it looked from the pavement.

It was certainly eye-catching, she thought. The dress was made out of fabric printed to look like a Scrabble board. It seemed fitting for the shop’s board-game-themed window; the small Pennine town of Hebbleswick had gone board games crazy since that board game café had opened in neighbouring Essendale, yet she doubted that anyone would want that dress. Well, where *would* you wear it?

She'd barely been back inside the shop for ten minutes, when she noticed a red-haired young woman do a double take as she passed by. The woman stopped and gazed at the dress, taking a step closer so that her breath steamed up a small circle on the pane. She raised her hand, touching her fingertips against the glass. This small gesture reminded Mrs Thorp of a film she'd seen once; a woman had been visiting her wrongly incarcerated husband in an American gaol and they'd both put their hands against the reinforced window between them, desperate to touch. She knew then that the dress had found its new owner.

I

Friday evening. Everyone else had somewhere to go. The younger members of the production team had spent half the afternoon in the ladies' toilets, changing their outfits and applying lip gloss, before disappearing at six on the dot for their night out. They'd stopped inviting her along since Leona joined the team.

David, executive producer of Pop! Productions, left at quarter past in a haze of overpowering aftershave.

'Hot date,' he said as he passed Jo's desk. 'You should give Tinder a try.'

Tinder! She had plucked up the courage to try one of the gentler dating apps, but she definitely wasn't ready for Tinder.

Caroline, the production manager, was the only other person left now in the open-plan office, eerily silent except for the occasional whirr of the printer.

Jo had completed all her work so reached for her phone and opened the WordPals app. She had loved Scrabble since she was a child and the app was almost identical. You could play against the app itself, against your Facebook friends – not that Jo had that many – or against random strangers. Few things in her life beat the thrill of playing on a triple

word score. Particularly if the word contained a J, X, Z or Q, the highest scoring letters in the game. She began a game against someone in Tokyo.

Caroline was usually the last to leave, but even she was rushing away now as her husband was treating her to dinner in a new restaurant in Didsbury. A first wedding anniversary celebration.

‘Paper,’ she said, pausing by Jo’s desk.

For a second, Jo thought she was referring to the state of her workspace. When she’d first arrived in this job several years ago, Caroline had wasted no time in telling her that her notebooks, printouts and Post-its would have to go. Jo saw them as essential to the way she worked, the way she kept everything organised. Caroline saw them as a fire hazard.

‘Paper?’

‘The anniversary. Like twenty-five years is silver and fifty is gold. The first is paper.’

Jo sighed. She should have known. She and her ex-husband had got as far as their third anniversary. She’d given him a pint glass, personalised with his name, but she’d never seen him use it. He’d given her a set of crystal wine glasses from John Lewis, which were too ostentatious for Jo’s tastes. A few months later, she’d broken one of them washing up – they were too delicate for the dishwasher – and Si had berated her for days afterwards, accusing her of being clumsy. Jo had ordered a small apple tree for their fourth anniversary – fruit and flowers – but they’d divorced shortly before reaching it and she’d been single ever since.

Being single was fine, of course, if you wanted to be single. But now Jo had reached her mid-thirties, she longed to have

someone to share her life with. Or at least, her evenings and weekends.

Caroline reached into her bag and pulled out a newspaper. 'My anniversary gift for Paul. What do you think?'

'A copy of *The Times*?'

'From the day we met.'

'Romantic.'

If she was ever lucky enough to get to a first anniversary with someone again, Jo thought, she'd like to be given paper too. Preferably containing a hearty portion of fish and chips, purchased from a proper chippy at the seaside.

'Have a lovely time,' she called to Caroline's disappearing back. 'Can't wait to hear all about it on Monday.'

Jo was lying. She didn't want to hear about her colleague's romantic dinner – it would only remind her that she had no-one – but it was true that she couldn't wait till Monday. At least in the office there were people around.

She wouldn't feel so bad if: a) she still shared a flat with Gemma in the city centre, but Gemma had moved to Watford two months ago with her partner's job; and b) the man she'd recently started referring to as her boyfriend – albeit only in her head – hadn't texted, cancelling their date that evening with only a couple of hours' notice; and c) – yes there was a c) now she came to think of it – if she hadn't overheard Leona bitching about her earlier in the small office kitchen.

She picked up her phone and looked at Dan's message again.

Sorry. Can't make tonight after all.

It was over two weeks since she'd seen him.

He'd been perfect too. Attractive. Confident. (Jo felt she needed someone confident to make up for her own shortfall in that area.) Outgoing. (Ditto.) And quirky too with his spiky hair and flamboyant shirts.

Quirky. Now there was a good word – 22 points even before you counted any bonuses like triple letter or double word scores.

Meeting Dan had been a bit of a result. She'd been anxious about dating again, after all she'd been through – deep down, she didn't believe she was worthy of finding love – and even more anxious about joining a dating app. She found it so hard to trust anyone. No, more than that; she found it hard to trust her own judgement. But nor did she want to be alone for her entire life and how else were you meant to meet anyone these days? Especially if you weren't particularly extroverted. She wasn't the sort of woman who'd initiate a conversation with a man in the chiller aisle at Tesco, and as for chatting up someone in a bar... well, that was never going to happen.

So Jo had joined the dating app, and, anxious often to the point of nausea, had gone on a series of first dates, mostly terrible, wondering how on earth you were meant to be able to tell what someone was really like underneath the façade. She didn't want to end up with another Si.

But then she'd met Dan and he'd been confident and kind, and had quickly asked her for a second date and Jo had thought her luck was in.

She sighed.

Three dates and she'd started thinking of him as her boyfriend. Was she mad?

‘Should I call him?’ she said to Mona.

The *Mona Lisa* was one of three enormous canvases, grand masters butchered to reflect modern times, that dominated the office walls. Mona was depicted staring at an iPhone, whilst the figure from Munch’s *The Scream* was watching a thriller on an enormous wide-screen TV and the hand of God from Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* stretched out to touch not Adam but an iPad. According to David, the paintings reflected the fact that Pop! Productions made content that could be watched anywhere at any time by anyone on any device. Not strictly true, Jo always thought. Their programmes were probably banned in North Korea and places like that, and her mum’s old Nokia could only make phone calls and send texts. But she didn’t point this out. Nobody liked a... what was the word? Pedant.

Pedant. A paltry 9 points.

‘What do you reckon? Call him again? Or leave it?’

Mona stared at her phone.

‘Okay, I’ll take that as a no,’ Jo said.

She’d already left one rambling monologue on Dan’s answerphone asking when she could see him and yes, she knew she shouldn’t have, and no, he hadn’t rung back.

The thing was, Dan wasn’t just the man she was dating; he was her entire social life. Now Gemma had moved away and her colleagues had stopped inviting her out – thanks to Leona, Jo suspected – her social calendar was decidedly empty. There was no-one she could call for a drink and she’d no plans for Saturday or Sunday either.

‘You’ll soon make new friends,’ Gemma had said when she’d told Jo about her imminent move. ‘You need to find your tribe.’

But making friends seemed to get harder the older Jo got, and let's face it, she'd never found it easy. At school, she'd been one of those children who preferred lessons to playtime. Socially awkward, one teacher had called it. Another had repeatedly asked her if she was being bullied.

Was it bullying? No-one was beating her up or stealing her lunch money. It was just a bit of name-calling. 'Sticks and stones,' her granny used to say. 'Sticks and stones.'

Words will never hurt me.

Although that just wasn't true. Not in Jo's experience. Words did hurt. Jo felt that hurt deep in every cell of her body, just as much, she thought, as if she *had* been beaten up. Wounds from a physical beating healed over time, but emotional scars didn't. They accumulated, one on top of another. The words her classmates had used echoed around her mind for years to come, taunting her throughout her teenage years, shaping her beliefs about herself, destroying what little self-confidence she had.

Ugly.

Fat.

Pathetic.

'You're such a swot,' said freckle-faced Sally Grainger at playtime one day after Jo had come top in the spelling test yet again.

'Your face is scabby,' said Stuart Bell, frowning at a nasty patch of childhood eczema on Jo's face.

'You're not invited,' said Melissa Dean, pointedly handing out birthday party invitations to every other girl in the class.

It was ironic really that words were the weapon the bullies used to make Jo's life a misery, yet at the same time, words

were her consolation, her solace. As soon as she began to learn to read, Jo had been fascinated by how letters could be put together to form words, and how in turn, those words could be assembled into sentences, and those sentences into stories. Jo quickly learned she could escape from her misery into the pages of a book.

One Christmas, she'd ripped open shiny wrapping paper to reveal a Junior Scrabble set and her love of words for their own sake began. Jo loved Scrabble from the very first moment. Before long, her parents bought their serious little daughter the adult game too, and Jo began to collect words in her mind. Words that needed Qs and Zs and Xs and Js, so would gain her the most points. Those high-scoring words jostled for space in her brain alongside the negative ones: ugly, fat, pathetic, scabby, horrible.

Another good thing happened that same year; Gemma joined their class. It was midway through Year 3 and Jo finally had her first proper friend. Life became easier then. The taunts of 'Nobody likes you' subsided a little. The two girls were inseparable for the rest of their school days and into adulthood. Well, apart from when Jo was married; Si hadn't liked Gemma much. Jo never understood why. In fact, he had pretty much banned Jo from seeing her. After the divorce, the friendship had resumed – thankfully, Gemma had been understanding – and the two of them had shared a flat in Manchester. But then Gemma had left for Watford. Bloody miles away. Jo wondered if she'd ever stop missing her.

She tapped out a text to Gemma now.

He's cancelled on me.

The reply came back quickly.

Not again? What was his excuse this time?

No reason given. Vague as usual.

Think you should face it – he’s not that interested. Get back on the app. Find someone new! There are loads of single men out there.

It was all very well for Gemma to say, ‘Get back on the app’. She’d never tried it. She’d met Jack in their first year at secondary school and they’d been together since they’d snogged at the school disco aged thirteen. Gemma had never even been on a date, let alone a dating app.

She tapped out a reply.

Loads of single men but I always choose the wrong ones.

A minute later, her phone pinged again.

Saw an article online the other day that might help. I’ll send you the link.

Jo sighed. Not another article! She put her phone down and opened the spreadsheet showing the programme budget for Pop! Productions’ latest offering to Channel Five: a show that combined dating and cookery. She double-checked but everything was accounted for, from the crews’ overnights in hotels near the location to the cost of the presenter’s fake eyelashes.

Her phone pinged again and she saved the spreadsheet and shut down her computer.

She clicked on the link that Gemma had sent:

Could Numerology Help You Find The One?

The article suggested applying the ancient art of numerology to the more modern world of internet dating, working out your compatibility with someone using numbers derived from the letters of both your names. It sounded like a load of hocus-pocus, but apparently Pythagoras himself had believed in this stuff. And if Pythagoras thought there was something in it, who was Jo to argue? After all, the man had a theorem and how many people could claim that?

You had to use the name you went by rather than your full name, and according to the chart, Jo's relationship number was seven. Lucky seven? Well, she hadn't been so far.

Jo scrolled down. Her ideal man would, she read, have a relationship number of three, five, seven or nine. She looked at the chart again and calculated that Dan's number was one. Maybe there was something in this.

She logged onto Buzzz, the dating app onto which she'd pinned her hopes. She'd left her profile up there, intending to remove it once Dan said the magic word: relationship. Or asked her to be exclusive. Only he was never going to say it, was he?

No new messages.

Still loath to make the forty-minute train ride back to her empty house, she decided to rearrange the contents of the stationery cupboard. What a lovely surprise that'd be for

her colleagues on Monday morning; they'd actually be able to find an envelope, paper clip or drawing pin should they ever need one.

Monday morning: sixty-three hours and nine minutes to go.

The cleaner arrived.

'Hi, how are you?' Jo said, hopeful of a conversation, but he didn't hear her through his headphones. He hovered under the desks, strutting to an inaudible beat.

Twenty-five to eight. She couldn't put it off any longer. Time to go home.

Her phone pinged as she pulled on her coat. Gemma again probably, thought Jo pulling it from her bag. But it wasn't Gemma; it was a new message on Buzzz.

You look lovely. Fancy meeting for a drink tonight?

The sender's main photo showed a dark-haired man. Serious-looking but attractive nonetheless. Jo skimmed his profile: six-foot, graduate, wants children. And based here in Manchester.

She hesitated. What about Dan?

She clicked on Dan's photo. Stared into his brown eyes. Then she noticed the little green dot in the corner. He was online.

Too busy to meet her tonight, yet here he was. Online. Right now. Using the app.

We aren't exclusive yet, she reminded herself. But perhaps Gemma was right. Perhaps it was time to face the fact that Dan wasn't that interested and date someone new.

She could get the train home and curl up with a favourite

episode of *ER* – she was particularly partial to season five of the popular medical drama when George Clooney aka Dr Ross was starting to get a little hint of silver in his beautiful dark hair – or she could join the ranks of People Who Had Somewhere To Go and meet an actual human being for a face-to-face conversation.

She would go on the date, she decided.