

## The Lilac Envelope

### *The night before*

As he did often, over the past three years, Mitchell Fisher wrote a letter he would never send.

He sat up in bed at midnight and kicked off his sheets. Even though all the internal doors in his apartment were open, the sticky July heat still felt like a shroud clinging to his body. His nine-year-old daughter Poppy thrashed restlessly in her sleep, in the bedroom opposite.

Mitchell turned on his bedside lamp, squinting against the yellow light, and took out a pad of Basildon Bond notepaper from underneath his bed. He always used a fountain pen to write—old-fashioned he supposed, but he was a man who valued things that were well-constructed and long-lasting.

Mitchell tapped the pen against his bottom lip. He knew what he wanted to say, but by the time his words of sorrow and regret travelled from his brain to his fingertips, they were only fragments of what he longed to express.

As he started to write, the sound of the metal nib scratching against paper helped him block out the city street noise that hummed below his apartment.

*Dearest Anita*

*Another letter from me. Everything here is fine, ticking along. Poppy is doing well. The school holidays start soon and I thought she'd be more excited. It's probably because you're not here to enjoy them with us.*

*I've taken two weeks off work to spend with her, and have a full itinerary planned for us—badminton, tennis, library visits, cooking, walking, the park, swimming, museums, cooking, a tour of the city bridges, and more. It will keep us busy. Keep our minds off you.*

*You'll be amazed how much she's grown, must be almost your height by now. I tell her how proud I am of her, but it always means more coming from you.*

Mitchell paused, resting his hand against the pad of paper. He *had* to tell her how he felt.

*Every time I look at our daughter, I think of you. I wish I could hold you again, and tell you I'm truly sorry.*

*Yours, always*

*Mitchell x*

He read his words, always dissatisfied with them, never able to convey the magnitude of grief and guilt he felt. After folding the piece of paper once, he sealed it into a crisp, cream envelope, then squeezed it into the almost-full drawer of his nightstand, amongst all the other letters he'd written. His eyes fell upon the slim lilac envelope he kept on top, the one addressed to him from Anita, that he'd not yet been able to bring himself to open.

Taking that envelope out, he held it under his nose and inhaled. There was still a slight scent of her on the paper, he thought, of violet soap. His finger followed the angle of the gummed flap and then stopped. He closed his eyes and willed himself to open the letter, but his fingernails dented crescents into the paper.

Once more, he placed it back into his drawer.

Mitchell lay down and hugged himself, imagining Anita's arms were wrapped around him. But, when he closed his eyes, the words from all the letters weighed down upon him like a bulldozer. As he turned and tried to sleep, he pulled the pillow over his head to force them away.

## 1. A Locked Heart

The lovers who attached their padlocks to the bridges of Upchester might see it as a fun or romantic gesture but, to Mitchell, it was an act of vandalism.

It was the hottest year on record in the city and the morning sun was already beating down on the back of his neck. His biceps flexed as he methodically opened and squeezed his bolt cutters shut, cutting the padlocks off the cast-iron filigree panels of the old Victorian bridge, one by one.

Since local boyband Word Up filmed the video for their international smash hit “Lock Me Up with Your Love” on this bridge, thousands of people were flocking to the small city in the North West of England. They brought and attached locks marked with initials, names, messages, to demonstrate their love for the band and each other, on the city’s five bridges.

Large red and white signs that read NO PADLOCKS studded the pavement. But as far as Mitchell could see, the locks still hung on the railings like bees swarming across frames of honeycomb. The constant reminder of love surrounding him, other people’s, made him feel like he was fighting for breath.

As he cut off the locks, he wanted to yell, ‘Why can’t you just keep your feelings to yourselves?’

After several hours of hard work, Mitchell’s trail of broken locks glinted on the pavement like a metal snake. He stopped for a moment and narrowed his eyes as a young couple strolled toward him. The woman glided in a white floaty dress and tan cowboy boots. The man wore shorts and had the physique of an American football player. With his experience of carrying out maintenance across the city’s public areas, Mitchell instinctively knew they were up to something.

After breaking away from his girlfriend, the man walked to the side of the bridge while nonchalantly pulling out a large silver padlock from his pocket.

Mitchell tightened his grip on his cutters. He was once so easy and in love with Anita, but rules were rules. ‘Excuse me,’ he called out. ‘You can’t hang that lock.’

The man frowned and crossed his bulging arms. ‘Oh yeah? And who’s going to stop me?’

Mitchell had the sinewy physique of a sprinter. He was angular all over with dark hair and eyes, and a handsome dorsal hump on his nose. ‘I am,’ he said and put his cutters down on the pavement. He held out his hand for the lock. ‘It’s my job to clear the bridges. You could get a fine.’

Anger flashed across the blond man’s face and he batted Mitchell’s hand away, swiping off his work glove. Mitchell watched as it tumbled down into the river below.

Sometimes the water flowed prettily, but today it gushed and gurgled, a bruise-grey hue. A young man had drowned here in a strong current last summer.

The man's girlfriend wrapped her arms around her boyfriend's waist and tugged him away. 'Come on. Leave him alone.' She cast Mitchell an apologetic smile. 'Sorry, but we're *so* in love. It took us two hours and three buses to get here. We'll be working miles away from each other soon. *Please* let us do this.'

The man looked into her eyes and softened. 'Yeah, um, sorry, mate,' he said sheepishly. 'The heat got the better of me. All we want to do is fasten our lock.'

Mitchell gestured at the sign again. 'Just think about what you're doing, guys,' he said with a weary sigh. 'Padlocks are just cheap chunks of metal and they're weighing down the bridges. Can't you get a nice ring or tattoo instead? Or write letters to each other? There are better ways to say I lov– Well, you know. . .'

The man and the woman shared an incredulous look.

'Whatever,' the man glowered, and he shoved his padlock back into the pocket of his shorts. 'We'll go to another bridge instead.'

'I work on those too . . .'

The couple laughed at him and sauntered away.

Mitchell rubbed his nose. He knew his job wasn't a glamorous one. It wasn't the one in architecture he'd studied hard and trained for. However, it meant he could pay the rent on his apartment and buy Poppy hot lunch at school each day. Whatever daily hassle he put up with, he needed the work.

His workmate Barry had watched the incident from the other side of the road. Sweat circled under his arms and his forehead shone like a mirror as he crossed over. 'The padlocks keep multiplying,' he groaned.

'We need to keep on going.'

'But it's too damn hot.' Barry undid a button on his polo shirt, showing off unruly chest curls that matched the ones on his head. 'It's a violation of our human rights, and no one can tell if we cut off twenty or two hundred.'

Mitchell held his hand up against the glare of the sun. 'We can tell, and Russ wants the bridges cleared in time for the city centenary celebrations.'

Barry rolled his eyes. 'There's only three weeks to go until then. Our boss should come down here and get his hands dirty, too. At least join me for a pint after work.'

Mitchell's mouth felt parched, and he suddenly longed for an ice-cold beer. A vision of peeling off his polo-shirt and socks and relaxing in a beer garden appeared like a dreamy mirage in his head.

However, he had to pick Poppy up from the after-school club to take her for a guitar lesson, an additional one to her music class in school. Her headteacher, Miss

Heathcliff, was a stickler for the school closing promptly at 5.30pm, and it was a rush to get there on time. He lowered his eyes and said, 'I'd love to, but I have to dash.'

Then he selected his next padlock to attack.

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