

Smoke fills the interior of the private club in Bur Dubai, the part where the brothels thrive, adding to the haze in my mind. The area is not called Sodom-sur-Mer for nothing. If everyone turns a blind eye to the sex trade, why shouldn't I? The lights are low and red, a monotone picture in which everyone and everything looks the same. Candy or Cathy or whatever she's called is draped over my lap. I push her off to cut another line. She shoots me an irritated look but doesn't complain.

"Go fetch me a vodka and get under the table when you get back." That's what I pay her for.

My request doesn't faze her. She swings her ass in her tight glitter dress as she saunters off to do as I've said. I roll a hundred and snort, waiting for the high to kick in and dull my thoughts. The whore on the other side of the table looks at the residue powder and licks her lips.

"Go on," I say.

She doesn't let me invite her twice. Licking her pinky finger, she scoops up my scraps and rubs it into her gums.

Candy-Cathy comes back with my drink. She places it in front of me with a sultry look and kneels between my legs. Her red nails walk a trail over my stomach to my belt. She undoes it, unzips my fly, and drags the tablecloth over her head with a grin. Spreading my arms out along the backrest of the bench, I lean my head against the wall. The first swipe of her fingers over my cock is always the best. As soon as her palm squeezes around my girth, my sense of touch is already desensitized. Not even the warmth or wetness of her tongue can bring me back to that first moment. The rest is just a race to shoot as fast and hard as possible. Release is always physical. The aftermath is as empty as fuck. No matter how many whores I pay or how deep I sink into any cunt, my ejaculation is always anti-climatic. I'm left wanting, and fuck if I can say what's missing.

It's not the women. They're all kinds of pretty, whatever flavor I crave for the night. It's me. I'm incapable of feeling. My life is a monotone layer of red. Whatever little there was inside me before, I snuffed out with my own two hands. I once had a shot at something, but I didn't make it. Not professionally, and as sure as hell not personally. My life is one big waste. I'm known as the man who lost Yousef-al-Yasa millions in investment, a failure that still burns bitter in my gut.

“Come, baby,” the brunette on the floor mutters.

It’s taking too long. My mind isn’t on her tongue or her fingers, it’s on the disgust in my soul. I need more than a line and a mouth tonight. Shoving her away, I zip myself up and scan the bar until I see the one with the black wig who likes it rough.

C crawls out from under the table. “What’s wrong, baby?”

I slap a bill on the table for her effort and down my drink before striding to the bar.

“Private room,” I say to the woman with the wig.

She adjusts her bra, and strides ahead of me up the stairs. We take the first room with a door that stands open.

“You want it rough?” she asks in her thick accent.

She knows I do. That’s what we always do. She lets me spank her pink and hammer her doggy style until her legs cave out.

“From where are you?”

“Told you already.” She smiles. “You don’t want to remember.”

I walk her backward to the wall until her body hits it with a thump. Adrenalin surges through my veins. My flaccid cock jumps to life. Something drifts to the surface of my feelings, something within my grasp but so damn untouchable. Every time I reach for it, it shifts a little farther into never. She’s pretty, even with her wig. I home in on her slanted eyes as I fold my fingers around her neck.

“Yes,” she gasps, lifting her chin to give me better access.

I tighten my grip marginally.

“Yes, baby,” she mewls. “Just like that. Do it harder.”

I give it to her, allowing her just enough air not to choke, but her eyes don’t dilate with anticipation or perverse excitement. Her facial expression is a practiced mask. It’s swooning and sugary and over the top. She doesn’t really want this. It’s a job. It’s just a show.

I let her go with a shove.

She takes two steps to the side. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I changed my mind.”

“That’s never happened to me before.”

“Sorry to be your first. Don’t take it personally.”

“You’ll still have to pay for the hour. What do you want me to do?”

Unfastening the top two buttons of my shirt, I sit down on the sofa, the only piece of furniture in the room. “Take a break. Hang around here. Do what the hell ever you want.”

She’s still contemplating my answer when the door opens and Ahmed enters with a box clutched under his arm. He looks from me to the wig.

“Leave us,” he says with a tilt of his head toward the door.

The wig doesn’t argue. Behind those round, nerdish glasses and slight body lies a lot of power. He’s Yousef-al-Yasa heir, one of the wealthiest men in Dubai, and fuck only knows why he still bothers with me. For all the flak I give him, he’s the only true friend I have.

He kicks the door shut. “When was the last time you’ve been home?”

“That depends on which day it is today.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Then I guess two days.”

He turns over the box and dumps a pack of mail the size of an ant heap on my lap. “Try a week.”

I stare at the paper littering my softening dick. Mostly junk mail, holiday brochures, and a few bills. It’s no secret I have a regular room at the hotel that hosts the private club. I stay here when the colorful multi-layers of my fancy apartment, the one Ahmed pays for that I don’t deserve, get too much.

I pull a packet of cigarettes from my jacket pocket. “Thanks for emptying my mailbox.”

He swats the packet away. It flies from my hand and hits the floor. He stares at me with an expression I’m well familiar with. Disappointment.

“You’re married,” he reminds me, his gaze habitually slipping to my naked ring finger.

“It’s not a real marriage.”

“It’s legal. It’s real.”

I smirk. “It’s not wrong if I’m paying for it.” I hold up my hands. “No emotions involved.”

“Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better, but you don’t fool me with your I-don’t-care charade.”

“Is there a reason you’re here, other than delivering my mail?” No one can accuse me of not being self-destructive. I’m being a bastard, biting the hand that feeds me, but I don’t know how to stop.

He takes a white envelope from his inside jacket pocket and throws it on top of the pile in my lap. My gaze shifts down. The cursive handwriting makes me pause. Something flickers in my chest. It reminds me of my grandfather fiddling with the rusted wires of one or the other machine, eliciting a spark that never quite ignited. It’s been a year since a letter has arrived. I’m amazed she kept them coming for so long, seeing I never replied to one. I’m about to say I’ll add this one to the stash when I notice the broken seal. I flip it over. The flap is torn.

Anger is not a new emotion to me, but it’s mostly self-directed. The kind flowing through my veins right now makes me want to break the glasses of the last person on earth who gives a shit.

“You opened my fucking letter?”

“You should read it.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“You should read it.”

“You obviously did. What the hell gives you the right?”

“Read the letter, Jake. Then go home and get your life in order. If you decide to come back, do it a free man you so can fuck these women without disrespecting another.”

Dropping the box on the sofa next to me, he walks from the room, gently closing the door behind him. It’s the last part that gets to me. A free man.

Alone, I don’t have a choice but to face myself. There’s no one to play the jerk for. There’s no Ahmed I can use as a punching bag by throwing his kindness back in his face. In the privacy of a fuck room smelling of sex, there’s no excuse to not admit the truth. My attempts at sabotaging Ahmed’s friendship is a way of avoiding my own disappointment, not his. One day he’ll realize like everyone else what a piece of shit I am, and that he’s wasting his time.

I flick the pristine envelope over and back, over and back. Alone in a room with

only myself and my black soul, I slide out the thin sheet of paper and unfold it. No photo drops out. There's no picture of a boy with strawberry curls and blue eyes. Not that I've ever seen a photo. I only felt the outline of the photograph through the paper, imagining what he looks like in my head. The pinch in the dead cavity of my chest is more than disappointment. It's fear. I scan over the words, each letter neatly shaped like the handwriting of a schoolmistress, but I can't make sense of the meaning. I read it again, and then all the red in my world turns black. Something I didn't know I had, the last anchor tying me to a reason to exist, drifts away.