

## Rusty Fears 5 - Casting Line

### Content Warnings:

- Physical injury & body modification
- Manipulation
- Food & alcohol
- Implied hallucinations/distorted reality
- Panic
- Mentions of: animal death, parental death & funerals, objectification, drowning
- SFX: continuous low droning

### [Show Theme – Intro]

Casting Line by Sarina H, read by Karim Kronfli

Justin is nine when his father holds his hand as they walk down the beachfront and tells him, “You’ve got to be careful what you cast into the world, son.”

As Justin licks at his slowly melting chocolate ice cream, his father continues, “Those who cast out meanness, and selfishness, and greed, they’ll only get it back.”

They pause coming up to the pier, and his father nudges him in the side with their joined hands. He points out over the weather-scrubbed planks, to where the jutting line of wood and the figure upon it are silhouetted against the noon sky. “See, the fisherman understands. He waits with calm, and patience, and dedication, and he catches what he deserves. Now, be a good boy and don’t move while I find the toilet.”

Down toward the water, the old fisherman stands at the edge of the pier, thin black rod in hand and half-full bucket at his feet. Justin does think about his father’s words as he waits, the caws of the seagulls rising over the

gentle hustle and bustle of their town. Then, he doesn't. Because he has lots of friends, lots of things, and getting them is easy.

Justin darts forward across the planks, and kicks over the fisherman's bucket. The slippery, slimy bodies within slurp out in a wave of staring eyes and tiny open mouths. Some slide off the pier and back into the water, some flop over the old man's rubber boots. Justin giggles as the fisherman kicks off one fish, only to step back and land on another in a squelch of ruptured scales and gooey pink flesh.

He turns his back to the old fisherman's dark eyes, and runs away. Returns to his old spot, doesn't move until his dad comes back to find him. He finishes his ice cream like he'd never left.

Justin grows up. He still has lots of friends, and more who want to be his friend. He's smart, his teachers love him. As the years—and the people—roll on, he works out how to make everyone love him. Masters it like a game, what to say when he wants someone to encourage, or comfort, or reassure. What stories to spin to make them gasp or snicker or have to push down the subtle creep of yearning jealousy that they pretend not to have.

He doesn't have to do it, but it's easy. High school is easy. When his parents smile and tell them they're pleased how high his marks are, how popular he is, he smiles back just as warmly.

High school ends, and Justin leaves his cosy seaside town for university. Heads out to the big city, where roads are wide and buildings are tall, but people are all still the same. And there, between dorm corridor gossip and leverage spilled during shots of tequila and lime, there is so much more to learn. There is the world, not just the playground, to discover in these halls where clubs are founded and careers are made. Where one future can be tugged into his grasp with a smile and wink and perfectly cast quip. Another

slipped out of reach of desperate hands with a whisper in the right ear, or maybe the wrong one, when a friend gets to be more trouble than they're worth.

University is easy, when you know where all the parties are. And which corners of those parties are where the most secrets are let slip. On paper, his results are just as good as he'd like. If he outsources a few essays, sleeps with one tutor and pays another for a preview of an exam, it is how it is.

His parents die in a boating accident whilst he's away. He visits back to organise the legal affairs, and cries for longer than he'd expected at their funeral.

Justin graduates, and decides to go home for good. There are advisors who talk of big careers, friends who insist he could go far, but he knows what it is that he wants: to be the big fish in a small pond. So he packs his bags, catches the familiar train. Moves into his parents' old house, and takes a place in the well-to-do finance business they left behind.

Life is easy.

The first time it happens, it's with Kristy from the work party.

They meet over mediocre punch and cold hors d'oeuvres. She's a lifetime resident, dazzled by his liberally edited stories of his years in the city as she flutters her lashes. When he wakes up beside her, he catches it twinkling in the morning sunbeam from the gap in her curtains.

It looks like a hook. Skewered right through the flesh of her back, just below her left shoulder blade. Tip and bend sunk deep into her skin. It's large, the right size for a fishing hook though with an odd finish. Not dull metal, more silver, bright in the dimness.

Justin wonders if this is some new kind of body art. Kristy could be the type. Still, he's fairly sure he would have noticed this.

Instinctively, he reaches out to touch it. The metal is cool when it brushes his fingers, where he'd expected it to be warm with body heat. It's wrong. The notion bubbles through him like dissolving fat, it's wrong so *wrong* and he doesn't want it there, doesn't want it in her—

He pinches, and tugs.

The hook pulls free. The barb slices almost too cleanly on the way out. There's no blood. For a moment he thinks he can see the hole left behind, ragged, torn—but then he blinks, and there's nothing. He runs a thumb down her shoulder and finds it smooth, as unblemished an expanse as he'd kissed the night before.

He's still holding the hook. Unease snaps at him, like it had been snared in his body instead of hers, probing at a rent in his being.

"Hm?" Kristy enquires sleepily, shifting under his touch.

"Nothing," he says, as his gut clenches against the emptiness of his last meal.

Going home from her place, he walks past the beach and throws the hook into the sea. Watches it sail over the waves, winking against the brightness of the sky. He lets the creeping weight of his panic ease, once it's gone, and trusts that it sinks in the water below.

It happens again.

There's Clark, ex-husband of the CEO of one of Justin's company's competitors. Justin befriends him at a local football match, cheers and laughs beside him, and gets himself an invitation to beers and chips in front of the TV. Sitting on Clark's couch, Justin holds out a hand to accept a bottle and plucks out a hook from his forearm.

There's Emilia, the PA Justin charms for a faster appointment with a potential client. It doesn't even take long. He farewells her with a hand to her shoulder, and a snatch of the thing jabbed into her neck.

Roy, at the bar. Justin offers him their most expensive drink whilst deftly talking up the heights of his success. Once they get out of there, Justin kisses him against his front door, and reaches up to slide free the long length of silver from the fold of his closed eyelid.

It happens again, and again. He looks as he drops his silvered lies, and finds them hooked into flesh and bone.

He always throws them away, down the sink or past the shore, the marks of his persuasion smithed in cold metal. He can't hold them for long, lest the truth in their form begins to creep too close. He can't leave them in where he can see.

But he learns this: they do not notice the hooks. They do not notice him rip them out. No more than they feel him guiding them where he wants them to be, than they see the waxed fissures of his life where imperfections have been filled in with a master touch.

Life goes on. Justin climbs the ladder of town business, earns his place on his company's board. He does it young, but they'll all insist he deserves it—for those who won't are long gone, and some of those who will are a comfortable amount richer for their support. He awes and delights his networks of associates, friends, lovers—sometimes friends' lovers—and accustoms himself to catching the first glint of silver out the corner of his eye.

As he approaches an age that is still young, but not so young that he cannot also be venerable, suggestions begin to hit his ears about going into local politics. He hems and haws and modestly defers, until he doesn't and begins his campaign for mayor. He has loyalty, he has attention, he has money

and favours to put in the right places. He has become most efficient at tearing free the signs of his influence as he passes by, from scars that will be hidden away again in a blink.

He meets Mariette in the early days of his campaign. She's new in town, introduced to him through mutual friends. She works in PR, wants to hear more, and offers to help. They talk through the evening almost without him trying.

She's beautiful. Not just in the way he likes, but in the way everyone likes. She's perfect. For more than a liaison, for a life.

If Justin ever wondered if he knew what love was, he might wonder if it were this.

And if he'd ever dreamt of a partner, a home free of the barbed teardrops that follow where he leads, that ends the first time he embraces her to glimpse a hook above her spine. She loves him, she knows him, but still she turns within the circles he has crafted. She's pleased to congratulate his ambition, and his success.

Now, he dreams of a long career in the enduring limelight, a place in the minds and conversations of every family in town, and a spouse with a flawless smile and a back lacerated with silver. Everything he ever wanted, and everything he's ever deserved.

He proposes the day before the election. It will be perfect, to announce his engagement with his victory. When Mariette cries and says yes yes yes and kisses him, he extricates the cold metal from her lip with his teeth. Licks the wound closed. He wins the election.

He wears a new suit for his inauguration, top of the line and perfectly tailored. He waxes his hair, polishes his shoes, and finds Mariette checking her

makeup in the bathroom. She's gorgeous, even under the stark ceiling light, two silver hooks through both her ears.

"How do I look?" she asks him.

"Amazing," he replies, and bends to kiss the side of her neck, as he reaches up for the first hook.

"Oh," Mariette says as his fingers tap her earlobe, twisting her head. "Do you like them?"

The world stills.

They do not notice the hooks. They do not notice him—

"I got them custom made!" Mariette is beaming. "I thought, in honour of our town's fishing history."

They're his hooks, *his* hooks. The right size, the right bright gleam, pierced through his fiancée's lobes where earrings would go.

"Come on, can't be late."

She sweeps out of the room.

They arrive at the ceremony. Justin can see the shine of silver beside him in the darkness of the car, catches the sway and twinkle as Mariette cranes her neck to examine herself in the flip-down mirror. He drives because he's memorised the route, he's memorised every central road in his town, but all the while he sees the silver beside him.

*They do not notice the hooks.*

"Ready, darling?"

Justin parks. From the spot he can see the lights of the town hall, the figures milling at the entrance waiting, waiting for *him* because this night is about him and what he deserves and they're all going to see.

*They do not notice the hooks.*

He opens the door. People have already turned towards them, a handful making their way down the steps. Someone walks up from the other side, he isn't sure who, he always remembers everyone's names but now he can't remember—

“Mariette, aren't you lovely. And your *earrings!*”

Something, somewhere, shifts. A single grain, within a life built on sand and smiles. It shatters.

Before the seats and the banners and the congratulating faces, before the celebration of him and *what he has done*—

Justin flees.

He doesn't know if people murmur, or shout. He doesn't hear the slam of his soles against the pavement as he runs, away, from the hall and the ceremony where he cannot stay so he runs.

No one follows. Or, he outpaces them. He doesn't know how long, how far, which way he's fled.

Until he finds himself at the pier.

Justin halts. Along the shore he'd strolled as a boy, he looks over at the moon that hangs over the horizon. The air is damp this clear evening, the water smooth. At the edge of the pier, a figure is silhouetted against the sky.

Rod in hand, bucket at his feet.

The familiar form doesn't move as Justin walks forward, steady across the worn faded planks. His bucket is empty, tonight. No catch, not yet.

Justin stops beside him. He says, to that very same old man, the ocean as his witness, “I'm sorry.”

The voice that answers is low, grating, drifting on the still air.

“Sorry ain't it.”

“I know,” Justin says. His eyes burn in the salt, in the afterimage of light from a glorious life that he cannot claim. “I know.”

The fisherman turns. His gaze is dark.

“Do you?”

At the end of his rod, his line is reeled in.

Justin takes a last breath, and opens his mouth.

In the weeks that follow, the news of the new mayor’s disappearance at his own inauguration spreads like a tumbling stone. It is a shock, a sensation. They will tell the story for years, even decades, but they will move on. The town will continue, and it will not miss him.

Back inside an empty house, Mariette sobs her bewilderment into her cold sheets. She will rage, she will cry, but then she will stop. One day, she will meet someone else.

And somewhere that is below the sea or above it or within it, the Old Fisherman walks into his hut and past his catch that dangles beside his door. Through eyes dark with the very depths of the ocean, he surveys the bloated body that hangs in the remnants of an expensive suit, once-polished shoes brushing the floor, swaying where it suspends by its bottom lip. And he says, in a voice that roils with the gales of the air and the currents of the endless water, “Careful what you cast, son, for we catch what we deserve.”

### **[Show Theme – Outro]**

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