

Hustler!Justin

(Whore in a Hoody)

By Vamphile



Hustler!Justin in a black Hoody and Protective!Fucked!Brian.

Justin zipped up the black hoody, crossing his arms against the cold. His ears were burning from the icy breeze but he didn't want to pull the hood up. He knew that his blond hair was a huge selling point. He stamped his feet a few times trying to regain feeling in his toes. A black jeep drove by. He took a provocative stance and smiled. Blinking from under his lashes, then raising his head to make eye contact. The jeep stopped and he approached the driver. Unzipping his sweatshirt he leaned against the window and licked his lips. "Hey."

Two

Brian watched the blond kid sidle up to his window. He couldn't be over fifteen. His nose was red, his eyes were blue and Brian leaned over to open the door. "Hey."

The kid sat down, holding his hands in front of the heater, drawing his knees up practically wrapping himself in the black hooded sweatshirt. Brian turned the heat up a little higher.

"You can park around the corner. The cops don't bother us too much there."

"How much for the night?"

"Huh?"

Brian moved his face closer to the blond's. "Is that a particularly difficult question?"

"Three Hundred."

Three

Justin couldn't believe his luck. The guy wasn't even balking. This time the smile wasn't for show. He relaxed back in the seat and almost chuckled as the man leaned over him to fasten his seatbelt. Well, apparently requiring safety wasn't gonna be an issue.

Justin watched their route, making sure he knew how to get back. The man was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and occasionally glancing in his direction. Several times he'd looked like he was about to say something. He never did.

Justin followed him up to a huge loft. He shrugged off his sweatshirt.

Four

Brian watched as the kid took off his hoody and then reached for the hem of his shirt. Brian stopped him. "What's your name?" He looked startled. Brian waited, staring.

"Justin."

Brian nodded. Not offering his name in return. He held out a tab of E but the kid shook his head. Brian shrugged and swallowed it himself and then moved closer to the boy, pulling him forward, covering his mouth, sucking his tongue, and running his fingers through that blond hair he'd been itching to touch since he'd seen it under the streetlight.

It was softer than he'd expected.

Five

Justin almost lost himself. This guy was hot, loaded, and knew how to kiss. He wondered why he needed a professional. He decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Speaking of mouths, he wasn't sure this kiss would ever end. He wasn't sure he wanted it to. The guy was backing him towards the bed. Justin stumbled when his ankles hit the first step. The man wrapped an arm around his waist.

"What's your name?" Justin asked breathlessly

"Brian." He pushed Justin onto the bed.

Justin could barely make out his hoody sprawled over the sofa back.

Six

Brian efficiently removed the kid's jeans and tossed it towards his hoody. He sat back a moment, straddling his legs and just enjoying the view. Justin looked up meeting his gaze, head on.

"So what are you into?"

Justin seemed puzzled. "Whatever you want."

"What do you want."

Justin shrugged and his body melted into the bed as Brian's warm fingers wrapped around his cock. "This is good."

Brian stroked him slowly watching as Justin's eyes darkened a little. His pink lips got redder as he bit them. "You can make noise. My neighbors are used to it."

Justin moaned.

Seven

Justin shuddered, and not from the cold. Suddenly he wanted his hoody back. He felt exposed and a little nervous. Did this guy just say, "Scream, no one will hear you?" He watched Brian's face and saw an odd expression. His hand was stroking his face. "You're scared."

"Um..."

“I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. I meant that I bring guys back here a lot. That’s all.”

Brian’s hand sped up. Justin’s body arched in response. Brian stopped. “Don’t come yet.” Justin moaned and tried to will himself not to. Brian’s hands didn’t stop. He gasped and came.

Eight

Brian laughed. He couldn’t help it. Then he felt like shit. The kid looked scared, he was twisting his body out from under Brian’s thighs, moving to make a grab for his sweatshirt. Brian followed him, wrapping his arms around him and feeling a slight flinch. “Hey. It’s okay.”

“I’m...sorry. I’ll go.”

“Hey!”

Brian was sure he didn’t imagine the flinch this time. Justin’s movements sped up. If Brian didn’t stop him quickly he’d be dressed and out the door. “It’s okay.”

Justin headed away from him. Brian grabbed his wrist gently. Justin struggled out of his grasp and left.

Nine

Justin was pulling the hoody on as he ran down the steps. He was cursing himself. He hadn’t collected the money up front. No one had seen him get in Brian’s car. He could have ended up beaten, or dead. He stormed back towards his corner, hoping to score something to kill the fear and anger. Stupid, he fucking knew better. And now he’d wasted the night. His stomach rumbled and he checked his pocket. Two dollars. He shook his head and continued walking. Trying to block out the cold. Not noticing the black jeep until it was beside him.

Ten

Brian decided to blame bad drugs for his need to track Justin down. Luckily, he wasn’t too hard to find and as he pulled up beside him he tried to get his attention. He knew he had it even though Justin had pulled up the hood on his sweatshirt and was pretending to ignore him.

“I’m sorry. It’s freezing out here. Come back. C’mon, I’ll still pay your for the night.”

He came to a complete stop and just looked at Justin. He sighed in what could NOT be relief when Justin climbed into the car and fastened his seatbelt.

Eleven

Justin stared straight ahead. He would not cry. He would be more careful. And he would get the money up front.

“You said three hundred.”

Brian dug into his jeans pocket and handed Justin the money. Justin looked down. “You’re not wearing shoes.”

The car moved again and Justin leaned forward, ready to unbutton Brian’s fly but Brian pushed his head away. “We’ve got all night.”

Justin tucked the money into the zippered pocket of his hoody and nodded. He tried to ignore the fact that again Brian tried several times to say something but always stopped. He sighed softly.

Twelve

Brian wanted to ask what had spooked the kid so badly but he had a sick feeling he already knew. By the time they got back inside the loft his feet were freezing. He should have put on shoes first. He ignored the discomfort and peeled the black hooded sweatshirt off of Justin's body. Again pushing him back towards the bed. Kissing his neck, nibbling his ear, watching as Justin's hand never let go of the black cotton. The kid wasn't losing sight of his money. Brian understood, "we're both freezing. Let's shower." Justin brought the hoody into the bathroom.

Thirteen

His shower is bigger than the apartment I looked at last month. His hot, hard cock is pressed against my ass, and speaking of huge. I feel him slide between my thighs while he massages shampoo into my hair. "We need a..." I sputter as the water gets in my mouth. He nibbles my ear and reaches out towards what I thought was a soap tray, waving a shiny square in front of me. "Smart boy."

I nod. But he doesn't put it on; he just keeps sliding his cock between my soapy thighs while his hands wash my chest.

Fourteen

I could come just like this. His strong smooth thighs tightening around my cock. His skin flushed red from the heat of the shower, and judging by his leaking erection, his desire. Eventually I do. I come hard and hold his back flush against my chest while I work my fingers slowly into his asshole. He moans and lets his head fall back on my shoulder. The hot water runs out and I turn off the shower quickly. Drying him off with a warm towel and enjoying the soft sighs he makes. Eventually we move to the bed. "Roll over."

Fifteen

He's ready to fuck me. I roll over quickly but it's not his cock I feel at my hole. It's his tongue. He drags it along my back and then spreads my cheeks. Most tricks that ask for a rim job get a flat no. I've never had anyone want to eat my ass before. Then again, most of my tricks are married closet cases. He clearly isn't. I'm embarrassed at how loud I'm being. Then I remember that he wants to hear me. I let loose and come as he fucks me with his tongue while stroking my cock.

Sixteen

I put his ankles on my shoulders, and hand him the condom. He slides it on me, and curves his body under mine. his eyes squeezed shut. He looks like he's bracing himself for something painful. I slow down, moving a lubed finger into him, stretching him, hitting his prostate. His eyes open. He stares at me. I shake my head. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

The confusion in his eyes makes me sick.

I press into him and he opens up to me as I slide home.

"Good boy." I whisper as I stroke his face. He's crying.

Hustler Justin II

Fuck, I'm crying. I turn my head away from him but he won't let me. He leans forward instead. Kissing my eyelids gently, all the while he's inside me, filling me and barely moving. My fingers dig into his biceps and I wait. He's being patient now but I know from experience that his patience will stop and then he'll take what he wants. His mouth is on mine now, he's nibbling at my lower lip and he's still barely moving inside me. I feel his weight shift and I grip his arms hard, bracing myself. He pulls out completely.

17

I pull off of him completely. I can't do this, not when every time I move he seems to be waiting for it to hurt. He's looking at me, confused and I have to admit, I'm confused too. I lie on my back, light a cigarette and offer him one. He shakes his head and then shifts his weight until his fingers are wrapped around my cock, his head lowers and I stop him. Again with the confused look, from both of us. He sighs. "What do you want?" I move to touch him and he tenses. "Ride me."

18

"Huh?"

He rolls his lip into his mouth and puts his hands behind his head. "Put me inside you."

I straddle him and his hands don't move. I don't stop watching, I can't help it. Even while I'm holding his cock upright and guiding it into me, lowering myself onto him, I can't take my eyes off of his arms. They're strong. If they wanted to, they could do some serious damage. He moves his hand and I start to move. I don't want him to get angry. He's already being more patient than I have a right to expect.

19

I want to reach out and touch him. His warm soft skin, his leaking cock, but I move my hand the slightest bit and he's suddenly working in overtime. He's afraid. I thought letting him ride me, giving him the control would help but he's right. I could hurt him. He's smart to be this careful in his line of work. I want to tell him I'm kind of proud of him, but I'm not a lesbian, and I don't even know him. I bend my knees watching as he leans back against my thighs. I don't move my hands.

20

He's watching me, he doesn't look angry. I twist my hips as I lean against his thighs and grunt a little as the head of his cock prods my prostate. I do it again and he smiles, pressing his hips up. I don't understand. Does he think he's hurting me? He seems to be enjoying watching me like this and it doesn't make any sense. I'm moving faster, hoping to finish before he figures it out. I slam down onto him. He pushes up. I grip his knees, careful not to touch my cock. I can't help it. I come.

21

He looks scared again. He's climbing off me, and as he opens his mouth I can tell he's about to apologize and bolt. I take his hand in both of mine. "C'mere."

He's as far away from me as he can be while we're still touching. His expression goes blank and he walks towards me. I drop his hand, hoping he won't bolt. He doesn't. He puts his hands behind his back and closes his eyes. His

body is tensed and that same sickening feeling overwhelms me. He's waiting for me to punish him. I sit him on the bed.

22

He's asking me questions I don't understand. He's angry. I can hear it. I can see his muscles almost vibrating with it. I don't move away, that'll probably make it worse. He's staring at me, waiting... for an answer, I think. I don't even remember the question. He sighs and sits next to me. "Do you have someone ... a pimp?"

Okay, that one I know. I shake my head. "Then what..."

I don't know what he's trying to ask. I shrug.

"Who hurt you?" he almost whispers it.

I shrug again.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. Fuck.

23

Okay, he doesn't have a pimp and he doesn't know who hurt him. All he seems to know is that his pleasure leads to punishment. The thought of handing him his clothes and sending him on his way is tempting...until I actually picture the door closing behind him, and remember how cold it is tonight.

I start slowly. "I'm not gonna hurt you. I don't want you to hurt."

His eyes are closed and one tear escapes. I swear I need to find out what kind of sadistic bastard would prefer seeing a kid in pain to giving him pleasure?

24

The weird thing is I think I believe him. He's kissing my back, slowly. He's whispering soft words, reminding me how good it felt when his tongue was in my ass, telling me how much he liked making me feel that way. I'm having a little trouble wrapping my brain around that one. I mean, I get that he'd rather concentrate on his pleasure than my pain but...

His arm is across my chest, pushing me backwards. I don't dare resist but when he kisses the side of my mouth, telling me to relax I don't know how to comply.

25

He's... compliant. That's really the only word I can think of. He's not fighting me, but he's not participating either. I run through our activities throughout the night and realize that except for requiring a condom, and setting a price, he's let me lead him everywhere. It would be great if I could break him of that habit in an evening but it seems pretty ingrained. Must serve him well in his line of work. Do what they want, put up with almost anything. Get paid. Get out.

I lick his nipple and his body responds involuntarily. It's a start.

26

His hands are strong and warm but they're not pinching or squeezing. They're not even just grasping and grabbing the way a lot of tricks do. He's whispering against my ear, telling me that he likes it when I smile. He likes how dark my eyes get before I come. He loves the sounds I make when I'm turned on. I've never met anyone like him. A lot of guys say they want to get me off, but it's like a contest, the faster the better. His words and actions match. He

seems perfectly content to just keep touching me.

27

He's relaxing into my touch. His legs are still dangling off the bed. I know he'll move if I ask, but I want him to take the initiative. His hand reaches for mine. Our fingers intertwine and I lean in to kiss him. He lifts his head to kiss me back and that shouldn't be such a major step, but I know it is. He lets his head fall back. My mouth follows his. His other hand is moving between us. I groan as he wraps his fingers around my cock. I pull his hand away. "This is for you."

28

"You paid me to make you feel good." I remind him.

"Justin." Christ, the way he says my name. "Just for tonight, let someone take care of you."

I. Will. Not. Cry. I have gotten through far worse than a guy who wants to slowly turn me on. I can do this. I think about the warmth the money will provide. I think about the fact that I can get some food and just as I do my stomach grumbles. I blush. I know I do. He laughs.

"I guess part of taking care of you includes providing food, huh?"

29

He covers his face, but he's nodding and his stomach is still growling. "Chinese, pizza... you have a preference?"

He shakes his head, of course not. I go with pizza and get myself a beer. I offer him one but he shakes his head again. "I have juice, or water."

He shrugs. I sigh. This, "anything you say, sir" thing can get tired. I hand him a bottle of water and sit next to him on the bed. "So, how old are you."

He shrugs again and I turn his head 'til our eyes meet. "How. Old. Are. You?"

"Seventeen"

30

He looks surprised. They all do. I think they think I'm lying. I'm not. He stares at me, his eyes narrowed. "What year were you born?"

I tell him and he nods. "You could have memorized that."

He's right. "I just look young. It's actually kind of good for business."

He frowns.

"Look, think of it this way, whatever they're doing to me they're not doing to some poor innocent kid."

The frown is now a scowl. I shrink away from him but he strokes my arm. "You are an innocent kid."

I can't help it. I laugh. He doesn't.

31

“Brian. I’m a hustler. It’s the definition of demeritourious.”

He lifts and eyebrow and I shrug. “I read a lot.”

The buzzer goes off and he walks away holding up a finger letting me know we’re not done with this conversation.

But I couldn’t continue if I wanted to. My stomach is growling too loudly. He puts the pizza on the kitchen counter. I shiver a little. He hands me a pair of sweat pants and one of his shirts. It’s big on me but it’s cleaner than my hoody.

I shove an entire slice of pizza in my mouth.

32

The kid has no gag reflex. I’m not surprised. The anger I felt when he said that bullshit about innocent kids, that surprised me. He’s what, hustling for the greater good. A kid who can use the word demeritourious correctly in a sentence is peddling his ass to sadistic pedophiles and he sees some sort of bright side to the whole thing.

Why the fuck didn’t I just go to Babylon and get my dick sucked?

He smiles as he starts on his third slice and I remember why I stopped when I saw him. Besides, he’ll be gone tomorrow.

33

He’s looking at me funny.

“What?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

He’s on his third beer and his eyes are kind of dark from the E he took earlier. He lights a cigarette.

“You’re not very good to your body.”

He raises an eyebrow and he’s got a point, what I do with mine doesn’t exactly classify as treating it like a temple. I push the last slice of pizza away and realize that I’ve been here for a while. I look for my hoody, glancing at the clock as I head towards it. It’s late. Time to go.

34

He’s going to lecture me on self-care? I finish my beer. He stands up and heads towards the bathroom but he’s out in a second, his hoody clutched in his hand. He’s looking for his jeans. I look at the clock. It’s almost three. Yeah, it probably is time for him to go.

He folds my clothes carefully as he changes into his own. Before he can get his shirt on I’m wrapping my arms around him, kissing his neck. I swear I can’t fucking help it. Must be the E, or whatever that shit was. He tastes really good.

35

His arms are around me and for a second, I panic, but then he's kissing my neck and I guess we're not done for the night. How many times does this guy need to get off? How many times can he? He's tossing my jeans on top of my hoody and pushing me onto the bed. Moving his mouth and hands over me. I don't think anyone's ever spent this much time just tasting me. He must like his own soap a lot.

He spreads my thighs licks my cock, sucking me slowly. He looks up and smiles. I shiver.

36

I smooth my hands over his chest. They practically span it. His body is shaking. I look up but he doesn't feel cold, and when I meet his eyes I don't see fear. I smile and go back to sucking his cock. He's moaning now and one of his hands has moved tentatively to my hair. I take him into the back of my throat and now his other hand is in my hair, not guiding me, just running his fingers through it. I suck harder and he's pulling at my hair now. I know what he's doing. He comes.

37

Oh shit, I tried to warn him. He looks up at me and shakes his head. Is he mad? His hand is holding mine now, and his lips brush against my neck before he speaks in that low even voice that's actually soothing. "I wanted you to come. I'm not angry."

I relax a little and move to reciprocate. This time he lets me. His hands are in my hair the whole time. His groans are letting me know what he likes. He lets me control how deep I take him, and when he comes, he moans my name. "Justin."

38

He lets his head just lay on my thigh for a few minutes. He looks comfortable, so I don't move him. Eventually I close my eyes but a few minutes later they're open again, and he's getting dressed. "I paid for the night."

He drops his hoody and pulls off his shirt. "Do you want to fuck me?"

I'm actually worn out, and it's four in the fucking morning but I don't tell him that. "Just c'mere."

He stands next to the bed. I sigh and sit up patting spot next to me. "Lay down."

He crawls into my bed.

39

I'm on my stomach waiting for him to fuck me but he just pulls the duvet over us both. "Go to sleep."

"What?"

"Sleep, I paid for the night. "

"It's almost morning. I should go. I have to..."

"You have an appointment?"

I think about lying and saying yes, but honesty is easier. "I don't spend the night. It's not safe."

“You’re safe with me.”

“That’s what all the axe murderers say.”

He pulls his wallet from the dresser and hands me another couple of hundred. “That’s for the morning.”

I shove it into my hoody and lie down.

40

The sun is glaring and my phone is ringing. I reach for it, noticing that it’s past noon. The previous evenings events come back to me and I look over but he’s gone. No surprise. His clothes are gone and I’m half listening to Michael while I scan the loft to see if anything’s missing.

“You’re not even listening to me!”

“Michael, just tell her you suck cock and take it up the ass, so you’re not really breeder boyfriend material.” I hang up.

There’s a note on the counter. “Thanks”, and the only thing missing right now is him.

41

Five hundred bucks! I head directly to the place from last week but the guy tells me that he’s already rented it out. Fuck. I grab a paper and sit in the corner booth of the diner. It’s still early, mostly guys like me here now. Fueling up for another day. Deb pours me a cup of coffee and smile. “Looks like you got some sleep, Sunshine.”

I eat my pancakes while I scan the ads. I can’t stay on the streets all winter. It was cold last night and it’s only November. I wish I’d had time to plan.

42

I stop at the diner for breakfast, or brunch, whatever. Debbie’s in a good mood. Michael’s sulking and I’m trying not to think about the fact that they’re predicting colder temperatures tonight, that he flinches when anyone tries to touch him, that my pillow smells like him. That he’s a fucking hustler. I pay the bill quickly and head to the gym. I need to get him out of my system.

I’m on my way in when I see him. He’s talking to a potential trick. I know that smile. He’s a hustler. He’s hustling. I shrug and go inside.

Hustler!Justin IV

I know this guy; he’s a lunchtime regular. I get into the car. He drives around the corner. We’ve done this before. He leans the seat back, unzipping his fly and I’m about to lean over when there’s a loud knock on the window. I sit up fast, banging my elbow. He zips up faster. I’m looking for what made the noise and there’s a pair of hazel eyes glaring at me. What the fuck? He paid for the morning. It’s afternoon. I tell the guy to drive off but he shakes his head. I get out of the car.

~~44~~

“You want me again? You could wait. That wasn’t gonna take long!”

He’s yelling at me? What the fuck? I step back and hold my hands up in a gesture of surrender. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “What do you want?”

I cross my arms and realize I have no idea why I followed him, except that the idea of someone hurting him bothers me. “I want you safe.”

He laughs, and he’s got a point. A safe hustler, it’s an oxymoron. “How much for the day?”

He blinks. “A thousand.”

I nod and he smiles.

~~45~~

A thousand dollars, I can get a place, be warm. I hold my hand out and he rolls his eyes. “Our first stop is the bank. You cleaned me out.”

“You hired a hustler and now you’re bitching about the cost?... Why did you hire a hustler? You can’t have a problem getting laid.”

He shrugs and looks in the other direction. I wonder what he’s hiding. I wonder why I care. After the bank we head to the loft, which makes sense. He wants his money’s worth. We’re about to get on the elevator when someone calls his name.

Lindsay needs something. Fuck. She looks at Justin, smiles and starts chatting with him. I cut her off and get to the point. I agree to watch Gus next weekend, it’s easier than arguing. I hand her a check for something, I wasn’t really listening, and usher her out the door. I turn and he’s smirking. “I had you pegged wrong.”

“Stop trying to peg me.”

“You are a married closet case.”

I’m not married, and I’m not in the closet. He nods and I end up telling him who Lindsay and Gus are. What is it about this kid?

~~46~~

So now there’s this awkward silence. He’s sort of circling me, and I’m trying to keep him in my line of sight. I really hate when people sneak up from behind. He eventually hands offers me a beer. I take it and we sit on the sofa. He does that thing again, the one you only notice if you’re really watching. He has a thought, almost speaks and then just stops. I finally lose patience. “Just say whatever you’re trying not to.”

“You’re seventeen. Why aren’t you in school?”

He’s crossed a line. I stand up. “Fuck you. I’m leaving.”

~~47~~

“You can’t leave, I paid ‘til noon tomorrow.”

He stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. “You’ve paid ‘til nine tonight. And I can leave.” He digs in that fucking hoody for the cash and I shake my head. “You don’t have to answer. You’re right. It’s none of my business.”

“It really isn’t.”

He sits down, mollified, and now I need to find a way to get answers without spooking him. “Hungry?”

He shrugs. I hand him the Chinese menu. “Pick something.”

He shrugs again. “If I promise not to beat you, will you make a fucking decision?”

~~48~~

Where does this asshole get off?

I stand up and this time I really am leaving. He thinks he can just talk to me like that? Okay, so I’ve been hurt, and made a couple of mistakes, he has no idea, he doesn’t know anything. I’m trying to leave but he’s doing that hand on my wrist thing again and god dammit, it makes no sense that I’d rather he hit me than be this careful with me.

I turn and tell him that and he just stops. Backing away. I guess it is a pretty freaky thing to hear.

~~49~~

This kid can fuck off. He’d rather get beaten than talk to me? I don’t need this. I tried to help him. I turn away but I can feel him behind me. He puts a hand on my shoulder. “I didn’t mean it.”

He did. He meant it when he said it.

“Orange chicken.”

Huh?

“I want orange chicken, and wonton soup.”

I place the order.

“You’re right. I don’t know what it’s like to be you.”

He shrugs, “And I don’t know what it’s like to be you.”

He doesn’t back away when I lean in to kiss him.

~~50~~

That accomplished nothing. His hands are in my hair. He’s moving us towards the sofa. He pushes me over the arm and falls on top of me. I don’t realize I’m bracing myself for something painful until his feather light touch is on my face. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

I don’t know why he keeps telling me that. I don’t know why he cares if I think he’s going to or not. He’s paying me for his pleasure. It doesn’t matter. I tell him that. He pulls away. I hate it when he stares like I’m an alien.

~~51~~

I sit up. When you pay a guy a thousand dollars, shouldn’t he at least be shrinking your head? I can’t just let it go though. “It matters because most people don’t want to hurt you.”

“We obviously travel in different circles.”

“Clearly. Who...” I stop. I tried this before.

“There was no one. No one specific, just... when I started, they paid more.”

“They?” I know the answer before he speaks.

“Guys who like it a little rough. Pays better.”

“And who put you in touch with these guys?”

He’s quiet for a long time. The buzzer rings. Food.

~~52~~

While he pays for the food I go and splash some water on my face. He offers me a fork but I take the chopsticks. We eat straight out of the cartons and he’s dying to continue our little chat. I’m thinking about a small apartment, a consistent phone number and a really thick blanket. It’s all obtainable thanks to him. That thought makes me feel like I owe him something more than my emotional baggage. I kneel between his knees. He moves them apart, giving me space to work. His cock is hard before I even unbutton his fly.

~~53~~

He’s good at this, but I knew that. I sink a little lower and his hands are pulling my jeans lower while his lips slide down my shaft. He takes me into the back of his throat, swallowing around me and cradling my balls while he sucks. I almost move his hands away reflexively, but a warm finger slides to the spot just behind my balls, pressing on my prostate from the inside while he tongues around the head of my cock. I don’t worry about what he will or won’t feel and I come down his throat. He swallows.

~~54~~

His eyes are half closed. He almost looks drugged, but I don’t think he is. I wonder when he had to have a testicle removed, and if it has anything to do with why a guy this handsome with this kind of money came looking for a low rent hustler. But then again, maybe he’s just the kind of guy who gets off on a cheap thrill, made all the cheaper because he can afford so much better. He’s looking at me and I smile as I pick up my chopsticks and orange chicken. I chew slowly. He says nothing.

~~55~~

That smile. I want to figure out a way to market it, or maybe I just want to find a way to keep it from disappearing. I watch him. He eats as if it might be the last time he sees food. The only other person who eats like that is Michael, but that’s a different story. I’m thinking group home, or juvie. Maybe one then the other. Would explain a lot. “Was it your foster dad?”

He looks at me like I’m not speaking English.

“The one who hooked you up with the rough guys?”

“You suck at guessing.”

~~56~~

He’s so far off it’s almost funny. He’s right. It would explain a lot. I wonder if I should pretend he’s close. Come up with something that makes more sense in his world but I’ve come too far to pretend it didn’t happen.

“Your probation officer.”

“Never been arrested.” He’s really sure I’m just some pathetic street urchin. Then again, I kind of am.

“Creepy uncle?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t meet him until after I left home. And that’s as far into the story as we’re going.”

“For now.”

“Forever.”

He shrugs, but I know he’s not done.

~~57~~

“How old were you when you left home?”

He eats another piece of chicken and shrugs. That submissive shrugging thing is an act.

“How long have you been on your own?”

“Couple of months.”

“So you left home a couple of months ago.”

“Never said that.”

“Huh, So you weren’t on your own after you left home.”

He gives me a smug tight-lipped smile.

“And the guy you were with...”

He stands up quickly. I hit a nerve. “Boyfriend?”

He shakes his head and hands me a beer while he opens his own. He downs it in two long pulls.

Hustler!Justin V

I finish my beer and light a cigarette. He stares. I shrug. We’re getting good at this communication without words thing. He doesn’t stop staring. I sigh. “He was just a guy I knew. He helped me out.”

He’s not buying this. It doesn’t make it less true.

“Helped you find clients.”

“More than that. He trained me.”

His grip on my knee tightens. He realizes what he’s doing and rubs my knee gently. I try to stop further questions with a kiss. It works. When he responds I relax. After tonight I’ll have what I need. I’ll be free.

Hustler!Justin VI

“He trained me.” What the fuck does that even mean? He’s trying to distract me. It’s working. I unzip his hoody and run my hands along the soft skin above his jeans. He moves a little hiking his shirt up. My hands slide under the thin cotton and touch the satin of skin. I move us together until I’m lying on top of him, his leg around my waist. I thrust my tongue into his mouth and press our bodies together, feeling his heat radiating through the denim. I open his fly and remove his jeans, never stopping our kiss.

~~~60~~~

He's got my jeans off, and now he's pulling at my shirt. I've used this type of distraction technique before. It doesn't usually work this well. His mouth on mine and then it's gone. I can't help making a small sound of displeasure but he pulls my t-shirt off me quickly and then he's back to covering my naked body with his clothed one. I don't know when he put a condom on. I guess the distraction thing goes both way, but a moment later, he's inside me. My mind is screaming a thousand things at once. "Stop."

He stops.

~~~61~~~

I'm holding most of my weight on my arms, pulling away from him but not out of him. His ankles are now just resting on my calves. I move to pull out but his hands on my back and press down, telling me he wants me to stay. His eyes are closed. "Open your eyes."

He does, and they're dark with desire and I see fear too. "Stop?"

He shakes his head.

"Sure?"

He nods and I move slowly inside him. My hands on either side of his head, his body arching to take me deeper. He's close. Me too.

~~~62~~~

I'm about to come. I bite my lip, and he runs his tongue along the line below my teeth. "I want to hear you come."

I can't believe I told him to stop this. I don't want it to ever stop. He seems to understand. He's no longer moving inside me. He's whispering soft meaningless syllables into my ear. He's kissing me gently, but the building pressure resides and then he starts moving again, this time with short sharp thrusts. I meet his every move with one of my own until I feel like we're one being sharing a heartbeat.

~~~63~~~

I back off, just as he's about to come. I grit my teeth against my desire to fuck him hard. When we're both sweaty and his eyes are almost black with desire I put it into overdrive. I couldn't have held out any longer. I need to come, but first I want to watch him do it. I move his hand with mine and together we stroke him to completion. I come as his body contracts around me. His fingers trying to find purchase on my skin but we're both sweaty and his hand is slick with his own come.

~~~64~~~

I don't think I've ever come so hard in my life. He tosses the condom and then rolls me onto my side. He's crushed against the back of the sofa. I'm practically falling off so I move closer. His arm is around my waist, holding me gently. His fingers push my hair off my face. I shiver as our sweat dries in the cool of the loft. Drapes my hoody over us and closes his eyes. I sigh. I should get moving but when I try to get up his arm tightens around my waist. I close my eyes too.

~~~65~~~

I don't know how long I've been staring at him. I'm stiff, and a little cold, but he's sleeping, and from the dark circles under his eyes I'm guessing he doesn't get to do that very often. I have a few more questions I'd like answered. A few more questions I know are really none of my business but I've decided to worry about what is and isn't my business later. Right now I am just going to make it my business to keep him from leaving. He can't leave while he's sleeping and so I close my eyes again.

~~~66~~~

He's faking being asleep. I've seen him when he's really out, although he had done a lot of drugs last night. Was it really only last night? If I move now he pulls me close, or his hand presses against my back. I close my eyes again

and when I peek through my lashes he's staring at me. He's a little creepy and I really want to get of here and start my new life, or at least a new chapter of it. It's only four thirty, technically he's paid for a few more hours. I go back to sleep.

### ~~~67~~~

He's asleep again. As I hold him, his face buried against my chest he starts to mumble. Mumbles become whimpers. His hands are balled into fists and punching at me. He lets out a strangled cry and when I try to hold and soothe him he kicks me, tensing his body, and twisting out of my reach. He lands on the floor. I hear the thunk as his head hits the hardwood.

I move to the floor but he's awake now and still pushing me away. "I'm fine, get off."

"Justin."

He stands up, looking around with wild scared eyes.

### ~~~68~~~

I roll my eyes and leave. He's standing too close. I push him away, getting my bearings and heading for the door. He stops me. This is getting really tired. "Brian, let me go." He's blocking the doorway and I can feel the panic rising. I scream at him. He still doesn't move. "Let me out."

"You want your clothes first?"

Shit. I take a deep breath, steadying my nerves. "Yeah."

I'm dressed in record time. Checking my hoody, cash's there.

"Justin."

"Yeah?" I stop one hand still on the open door.

"Just... let me know where you end up."

### ~~~69~~~

The door shuts. The loft seems empty and quiet compared to the previous day's drama. It's already dark out, and cold. I head towards the shower. Tonight I think it's time to revisit Woody's and Babylon.

I don't think about him at all in the shower. He doesn't cross my mind as I choose just the right jeans and the perfect black shirt. He has nothing to do with which shoes I wear, and I don't even care that the jacket I chose is warm, and that he doesn't seem to own one.

I stop at the ATM before Woody's.

### ~~~70~~~

I clutch the money in my fist as I keep my hands in my pockets to stay warm. I consider getting a hotel room but decide to pick up the kind of trick who'll pay for that sort of thing. This time tomorrow, I'll be on a whole new level.

A large sleek white sedan pulls up. The guy's fat and ugly and I've dealt with him before but not like this. He calls me over. "Hey, I've missed you."

I nod. I haven't missed him.

"I take it you've reduced your rates."

I shrug and get in the car.



## Hustler!Justin VII

Michael is looking at me oddly. “Did something happen to you?”

“Huh?” I chalk my cue and feign ignorance.

“You go away on some super secret vacation, with no notice. You come back and work so much you never have time to see anyone and now that you are out with us you’re turning down every guy who looks at you.”

“They’re all trolls.” I wait, but Michael sometimes has a way of detecting bullshit.

“You got a boyfriend!”

He also has a way of missing the mark completely. I ignore the statement completely and let Michael take his shot.

### ~~~72~~~

He springs for a Motel room. Apparently my value has gone down recently. He’s not wrong. I probably look like shit. Sleeping on the streets can destroy almost anyone. At least I got a shower at Brian’s, and I’ll get one tonight too. If I can get this guy to spring for a pizza I might actually be able to concentrate on something other than survival. I can probably get him to do it but first, business. He hands me the cash. Half of what he used to pay, but at least it all goes to me. I strip naked.

### ~~~73~~~

Michael thinks he’s on to something. “You met someone. That’s why you went away. You were on a couple’s vacation. That’s why you’ve been MIA and were never at work when I called!”

He’s almost yelling and I’m about to brain him with a pool cue but Emmett and Ted appear and I’ve never actually been happy to see them before. Michael tells them his theory and they tell him he’s crazy. Michael sees their logic and drops it. We move on to other topics and when a really hot guy cruises me, I cruise back, to shut Michael up.

### ~~~74~~~

He crooks a finger and I move forward, hands behind my back, eyes down. I know this routine. I must have performed it hundreds of times. I drop to my knees and his hand clamps down on me, forcing my jaw open. He likes to feel me resist. I close my eyes and think about a hot shower and a warm duvet and strong hands caressing me softly. I focus on that instead of the pain as he positions my body and his belt comes down against my thighs. I don’t make a sound. It’ll be worse if I do.

### ~~~75~~~

I spend enough time letting the guy blow me at Woody’s to shut Michael up for the night. We move on to Babylon and I see a short blond twink dancing. I move forward but when he turns it’s not who I thought it was, and it saves me the trouble of having to bitch at him for spending his hard earned cash here. He should be... I shake my head and order a shot. He should be wherever he wants doing whatever he wants. It’s none of my business, and I’m certainly not concerned. I down the shot quickly.

### ~~~76~~~

He tosses the condom into the trash. His hairy body dripping sweat. He runs a hand through my hair and I don’t let him feel me flinch away. His breathing is labored and I hope he doesn’t have a fucking heart attack. I feign sleep. When I hear the door close behind him I relax a little. I’ve got the room for the night. He’s got to get back to his wife. I sit up and move carefully. No real damage. Good. I shower until there’s no hot water and then wedge a chair under the doorknob before falling asleep.

~~~77~~~

When Michael pours me into bed he's still mumbling about something being wrong. I pick up a pillow to throw at him but it smells like Justin so I just roll over and bury my face in it instead. I mumble something to Michael about setting the alarm and the next thing I know the sun is bleeding through my eyelids and it's almost noon. It's after one by the time I feel human again. A hot shower and bad diner coffee have saved me once more. Debbie insists on feeding me. I grimace at her, but eat the eggs.

~~~78~~~

I wake up to a loud banging. I throw my clothes on quickly, grabbing my hoody, checking the pocket, and leaving before the manager charges me for another day. I must have been really tired to have missed checkout.

I head towards a building that had been advertising an apartment for rent. It's over an old comic book store. I can't find any other entrance so I go into the store and ask for the manager. I barely get the words out of my mouth when I realize Brian is standing at the counter. He pretends to ignore me completely.

~~~79~~~

I ignore him completely. So he's here and looking for an apartment, so what? Michael tells him where to find the building manager and he leaves quickly. I flip through the pages of the newest Captain Astro and eventually tell Mikey that he's pathetic and leave. If I have to walk in the same direction as Justin, that's just a coincidence. I needed to check out the stores behind here anyway. He's upset and not looking where he's going. I could move to avoid him but then he might walk into a bus. I let him walk into me instead.

~~~80~~~

Fuck. The last motherfucker I needed to run into. I wince and try to keep walking. He stops me. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head. He does that staring thing letting me know that he's not going to be satisfied with anything less than full disclosure. How does he do that with a single look? I hand him back the cash he gave me last night. "It's pointless. Without a job, or a reference, no one will even consider renting me a decent place so just keep your fucking money!" He looks as surprised by my outburst as I am.

~~~81~~~

I don't know what to say. I put the money back in his palm, curling his fingers around it. "This is not a decent place." He just bows his head and I don't know what the fuck to do. "c'mon."

"Where?"

"We'll find you someplace."

"There's no point."

"Justin. I already paid you, now let me help you use the fucking money."

"But, don't you have to be at work or something."

I shake my head. "Let me worry about my schedule"

He shrugs. I put a hand on the small of his back and lead him to the 'vette.

~~~82~~~

I move slowly, I still hurt. When we get back to the loft he points to a chair at the dining room table and sits down at the computer. I sit at the table too fucking tired and sore to care why. He looks over at me and sighs. "Bring the chair here." I blush and move it. It's heavy and I'm really not up to heavy lifting. I'm hoping he doesn't notice.

He starts asking me questions about where I want to live, and how much I can afford. I tell him and he raises an eyebrow. I shrug

~~~83~~~

Justin's budget only makes sense if he's got all night gigs five or six nights a week. He doesn't seem to think it's a problem so I factor that in. I'm asking him about how many bedrooms he needs when he shrugs off his black hoody. The graying white t-shirt underneath doesn't hide the blood the way black does. I reach a hand out, pushing him forward a little. A mark blooms larger. He's bleeding and sitting here not bothering to tell me. He pulls away a little as I push at his shirt. It's sticking to the dried blood.

~~~84~~~

Brian looks a little green. I refuse to wince but when he pulls the shirt away from my back it hurts. He stands up and so do I. I'm leaving. I won't make him ask me to. But he just commands me to stay. I try to say something but he shakes his head and cuts the shirt away from my skin. Soaking it with a warm towel before peeling it off of me. He hisses when it's gone. I shake my head. I know it looks worse than it is. He simply ignores me when I tell him that.

~~~85~~~

Not as bad as it looks? He's fucking kidding me right? His back is crisscrossed with red marks. Most of them just welts, a few still bleeding. They disappear below the waistband of his jeans. I want to ask what happened but the answer is staring me in the face. He took one of those high paying jobs, the kind that... I think I'm going to vomit. I clench my teeth against it and sit him on the kitchen stool. "Don't move." He nods. I wonder if I even have any disinfectant. I already know I have plenty of bandages.

~~~86~~~

Shit. I consider leaving but with nowhere to go there's really no point. I just fold my arms on the kitchen counter and lay my head down. I close my eyes. I should probably be more worried about what happens next but I'm just too tired. It hurts to move and by the time I think about stealing one of his shirts he's back, telling me that this might hurt. It doesn't. He dabs at my back and then tells me to stand up. I do and I think about stopping him but end up letting him remove my jeans.

~~~87~~~

I expect a fight at some point but I don't get one. He steps out of his jeans and I'm swallowing the bile that keeps rising. The marks are more pronounced on his ass and his thighs. I move to stand in front of him and don't know why I expected anything other than more of the same. He's covered from knees to neck with nasty welts. His thighs are bruised, I don't know how he was sitting or walking in the rough denim. Rough dirty denim. I give up on the antiseptic and move us both the shower.

~~~88~~~

It hurts when we walk but when the water starts it's like being beaten all over again, except this time I had no time to prepare. He stands in front of the shower spray and slowly soaps my body. I want to protest. I'm a grown man and I knew what I was getting into when I got in the car. I let it go a little further than usual, but I was so focused on getting into my own place it seemed worth it. Now hope of a place is gone, as is the ability to ignore the pain.

~~~89~~~

I stop at a particularly nasty bite mark on his torso, I'm checking for broken skin there. Christ, this is the rent boy who insisted on a condom two days ago... now he's letting someone do this. And for a moment I wonder if he did let them, or if it was something else, but his arms are smooth and unblemished. So are his legs below the knees. No one held him down and the fact that he submitted to this somehow makes it worse. I look up and expect him to be crying, he isn't. His eyes are dead.

~~~90~~~

Eventually I find that place, the one where I can't feel anything. I hide there while his hands are on me. I'm no longer completely aware of what they're doing, but I can't feel how much it hurts either. The next thing I'm really aware of is that he's standing in front of me, we're out of the shower and he's calling my name. I blink. "Hmmm?"

"What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry. Did you ask me a question?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose and leans in closely. "What happened?"

I shake my head. Can he really not know?

Hustler!Justin VIII

Well, the blank look is gone, but he's still not answering my question. He just stares. "You know what happened."

"I know what I think happened."

"Do you need me to spell it out for you in gory detail? Is that what gets you off?"

I'm far from aroused. "Why did you..."

"We've done this part. They pay better. I knew this guy, he's not that bad."

Now I'm going to scream. not that bad? I turn him around putting my hands on his shoulders. "Look at yourself in the mirror and say that."

He doesn't raise his eyes.

Hustler Justin IX

I can't look up. His fingers press into my shoulders. I wince. He softens his hold but remains behind me putting a finger under my chin. I close my eyes.

"Justin."

"I can't."

His touch is gentle, he runs a hand down my arm and then his hand is holding mine. “You have to.”

I open my eyes and have trouble recognizing myself. I look like hell. I’ve lost weight. There are dark circles under my eyes and I look pale, even for me. His hand moves slowly down my neck to my chest. My eyes follow and I gasp.

~~~93~~~

“And that’s just your torso. Your back is worse.”

He’s examining the bite mark, checking for broken skin. There isn’t any. I get the bandages and antiseptic. When I come back in he hasn’t moved.

“Still want to tell me it’s not so bad?”

“I didn’t realize... I mean... fuck.”

“So can we start again? What happened?”

I’m smoothing antibiotic ointment onto the broken skin on his back but watching his face in the mirror. I can’t read his expression but he’s hesitant. I tape a large bandage over the worst of it and he starts talking.

“I knew him.”

~~~94~~~

I close my eyes because I can’t look at myself anymore. I can’t look him in the eye, not even in the mirror, not while he seems nauseated and furious at the same time, and really, I’m just very tired.

I tell him what happened. His hands are gentle as he treats each red mark with care. He pulls back when I wince, and he doesn’t ask questions, or say a word until I stop.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, were you expecting melodrama? He picked me up. I wasn’t paying attention. I let him get too rough. I’ll be more careful.”

~~~95~~~

I don’t know what to say. He’s standing here, damaged, and his response is not, “I won’t do it again” but that he’ll be more careful. I finish applying the bandages and hand the pair of sweats and a shirt that are still sitting out where he left them.

He takes them, tying the drawstring tight at his waist and they still fall low on his hips. The legs are way too long and he’s swimming in the shirt. He moves slowly to the sofa and I rummage through the medicine cabinet for painkillers and consider what to do next.

~~~96~~~

I can’t find a comfortable position. I hurt all over. I think I was happier when I couldn’t feel it so much. He hands me two pills and I have to explain the whole allergy thing to him. He takes them back. “So what do you usually do?”

He’s not going to like the answer, so I don’t answer him.

He hands me a beer and asks me if I've eaten. I shake my head. He makes a phone call. I wonder idly why he has that expensive kitchen and no food. He sits down and then stands up, pacing.

~~~97~~~

I can't keep still. I need to do something, but there's nothing left to do. He's as comfortable as he's going to be with nothing but aspirin. He's out of commission for at least a couple of days, and however long it takes him to be ready to resume his current occupation, that's how long I've got to convince him not to. He pulls the legs of the sweatpants over his feet and I go to get him some socks. It's not much but it's something. I toss them to him and he startles and then blushes. "Sorry."

"Sorry's bullshit."

~~~98~~~

He's making me nervous pacing but when he sits down and stares at me intently, it's worse. He starts to say something but the buzzer sounds. Once he's back with pizza and a salad he seems content not to talk. I try to eat slowly but I find I'm actually pretty hungry and end up finishing most of the pizza in record time. The third beer, the extra cheese and pepperoni, combined with the stress of the day and the warmth of the loft make it impossible to keep my eyes open. I shut them, just for a few minutes.

~~~99~~~

He's asleep. I lead him to the bed and I don't think he ever fully wakes up. I just kind of watch him for a while. Lying here like this he looks like what he should be, a kid, but he's not. He's making stupid decisions but something forced him out into the world way too early and made him grow up way too fast.

It's still early, although it's already dark outside. I set the alarm and move to the computer but his bloody hood is lying on the chair and suddenly I can't seem to concentrate on work.

~~~100~~~

I wake up quickly. I can't figure out where I am and when I try to sit up it hurts. It all comes rushing back. Speaking of rushing he's at my side before I have time to stand up. He tries to help me but I shake my head. He lets me pass and when I'm done in the bathroom I stand up a little straighter and retrieve my jeans. "Thank you."

"Where are you going?"

"To work."

I actually step back from the anger in his eyes but it's gone almost as soon as it appears. "Stay here tonight."

~~~101~~~

"You can't keep paying me to stay here just because you don't like what I do. You'll go broke."

"Let me worry about my finances." He's right, but I need more time to convince him he's wrong about so many other things

"Brian, I appreciate the charity but..."

"It's not charity. You give great head."

"I know."

"So let me spend my money on what I want."

He drops to his knees.

Fuck. I can't, not like this. "Not yet, Justin, okay?"

He looks at me distrustfully. Where was that look when he went to a motel with that bastard?

### ~~~102~~~

This is when Isaac was handy. He'd book me with someone who wanted to see me like this, but tonight I realize I don't have much of a choice. I could give some guy head for fifty bucks, or I can stay here for three hundred dollars... it's an easy decision except I get this feeling that the longer I stay, the harder it's going to be to leave.

I think he's counting on that but not in the way I want. We all dream about someone keeping us, having something permanent, but I don't think that's what he wants.

### ~~~103~~~

I'm relieved when he stands up. I help him. He's still sore. I take his hoody and reach into the pocket, pulling out his money. He watches me closely. I'm cleaning out the pocket of his jeans when he snatches them from me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to throw them in the laundry... or the trash."

He walks away with them and shakes his head. "Fuck you. I'd rather just..." but he stops.

I wait. I'd actually like to know what he'd prefer over a soft bed and clean clothes.

"I thought you were paying to fuck me."

### ~~~104~~~

He looks physically ill when I mention fucking me. Am I that repulsive to him like this? He shakes his head. "I thought you were looking for an apartment."

The frustration from earlier returns. "I can't get one without a job or a reference."

"I can help with that."

"Justin works for me, he gives great head, is not going to get me approved."

He rolls his eyes and sits down in front of his computer motioning to the chair next to him. I put my money back in my hoody and fold my jeans. We're back where we started.

## Hustler Justin X

I ask him again about where he wants to live and what he can afford. He rests his head on his hand and sighs. "I told you..."

"Justin, how many bedrooms?"

"Two, three if I can afford it."

I raise an eyebrow.

“I want a room that’s all mine.”

“The whole apartment will be yours.”

“Clients will be in and out. I want a room that’s off limits, with a big comfortable chair, an easel, good light and a solid lock on the door.”

I physically jerk my hand off the mouse. He’s planning on bringing clients to his home?

### ~~~106~~~

He’s looking at me like I’m an alien again. I really hate that.

“Clients?”

I nod. “Once I get a phone number that I can keep, I can get a regular client list again. Regular appointments...” I sigh and I know I sound kind of wistful but I really do miss having the security of a regular income and a roof over my head. It was so close but without an address or a reference... it’s just not going to happen. I can feel the tears building. I turn away from him. He reaches out, touching my hand.

“Justin, No.”

### ~~~107~~~

He turns to look at me, the sadness gone. He’s angry. “No? Who the fuck are you to tell me no? You don’t know what it’s like not to know where or even if you’re going to sleep that night or wake up in the morning! Don’t tell me that my pathetic little dreams aren’t good enough for you!”

I try to explain what I meant but he’s too angry to listen. He paces a couple of times and then shakes his head. “I’m sorry you don’t like my chosen profession but I could really use your help. Brian, Please.”

### ~~~108~~~

I use the voice Isaac and I practiced. It’s smaller, submissive; it makes them think I’m twelve years old. I gamble that it’ll work on him, although not the same way. He sighs and visibly slouches in his chair. “Justin, it’s not safe.”

“It’s safer than me being on the streets. I know what I’m doing. I can be a good boy, and they can treat me well.” The voice is working. I move towards him, my head down, seeming hesitant. I’m good at playing little boy, and if this works ... I can make a decent living doing it.

### ~~~109~~~

He looks so young and scared as he moves towards me and I want to help him. As I turn back to the computer I see his eyes flash and realize I’ve just been played. I turn quickly. “That works?”

He slumps in his chair, hiding a wince. “Usually.”

“It’s sick.”

“And they pay a lot of money to be allowed their illness.”



“Justin, you can’t keep this up.”

“When I have a place it’ll be easier.”

“Why? Are you going to say no to the guys who want to beat you?”

He flinches. “That’s not what happens.”

“It’s not?”

### ~~~110~~~

Every time I think we’re getting somewhere he comes back to this. I want to yell but it’s getting us nowhere. I shake my head instead. “Last night was not how it usually goes.”

He stands up and pours himself a scotch. “Why don’t you tell me how it’s supposed to go so that you can stop saying that I don’t understand.

“Fine. Can I have one of those?”

“You’re seventeen.”

I roll my eyes. He pours me a drink. “How did it start?”

“You said you wanted to know how it goes. Not how it started.”

“I want both.”

### ~~~111~~~

He looks amused. “Everyone wants something more than they can have. It starts, usually, on the phone. He calls, answers a few questions, says what he likes, and doesn’t, what he wants and doesn’t and then gives us a contact number.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, I’ll have to just pretend to be someone else ‘til I can afford someone else. I’ve done that before, it’s easy.”

“So then the appointment’s made…”

“He shows up, pays, does no more than we’ve agreed to, and leaves… with less money than he came in with.” His smile is smug. He is actually proud of himself.

### ~~~112~~~

I give him the edited version and he just stares at me. “I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?”

“I get the BDSM thing in general but you’re not into it. Why play like this?”

“This isn’t BDSM.” He really doesn’t get it.

“They’re sadistic pederasts… what am I missing?”

I shake my head again. “They don’t want to play. I provide a very specific service. It’s what men want, even if they won’t admit it. That’s why it pays so well.”

He waits for me to continue.

I don’t. If he doesn’t get it now, he never will.

~~~113~~~

I’m still missing something. What every guy wants but is afraid to admit? Every guy wants to hurt whoever they’re fucking? I’m lost. “Huh?”

“They want to take, not only without concern for giving but without the expectation of providing anything other than pain. BDSM is play. Yes, masochists really get hurt, but they like it. What every guy really wants is for them not to like it.

“You purposely put yourself in the line of fire because you don’t like it and they’ll pay you for your pain?”

He nods and smiles.

“You are out of your fucking mind.”

Hustler Justin XI

I shrug off his anger and his dismissal of my reasoning. “It...”

“Pays better. You keep saying that.”

“It does.”

“But you get hurt.”

“It’s not usually this bad, and when it is, there are guys who prefer that.”

His eyes blaze and then there’s a mask. A blank look that I can’t read. “Prefer that they get you pre-beaten?”

“Stop saying that.”

“Why?”

“Because they don’t beat me. That’s for poor little victims of domestic violence. They cause pain, but I can take a little pain.”

“For money.”

“Yeah, I never understand why anyone would do this for fun.”

~~~115~~~

He doesn’t see himself as a victim. Getting paid for it doesn’t make it less dangerous. He’s fidgeting and waiting for me to say something and I’m not sure what to say. The fact that there are people who would get off on him looking the way he does now is possibly more upsetting than the fact that there are people who want to do this to him in the first place, but all of that is secondary to the fact that he doesn’t see any reason not to let them. I pour us each another drink. He downs his.

~~~116~~~

The aspirin is wearing off and I could use something stronger but I have a feeling asking him to go score something for me would be counterproductive. I move towards him, pushing the pain and all thoughts back. He shakes his head and moves a little further away. "I'm not letting you touch me 'til you're healed."

"By then I'll be long gone. This won't be completely healed for a couple of weeks."

He stares and I realize he's perfectly willing to keep me here for a couple of weeks. What the fuck is this guy's issue? I shake my head.

~~~117~~~

A couple of weeks sounds like it might be long enough to figure out how his head got so fucked up in the first place. He shakes his head and I realize that I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing, or why I'm doing it but Jesus, this kid cannot just set up shop with no one to make sure he doesn't end up bleeding to death on the floor.

"Who took care of you before?"

"My parents."

"No, twat. Who got you the clients, made the appointments and ensured you weren't bleeding internally?"

"Nice try. No."

~~~118~~~

He wants to know about Isaac. Not gonna happen. I cross my arms and put my feet up on the coffee table. He shakes his head. "You play the little boy role well, but you're really pretty fucking stubborn."

"When I'm not getting paid not to be. It is my life. When I'm not on the clock, it's my decisions."

He smiles. "You are on the clock."

"I'll tell you whatever you want to hear. But you have to tell me what that is, daddy." I smirk as he flinches. Using my best little boy persona I giggle and pout.

~~~119~~~

That's just sick. "Cut it out."

"Cut what out?" He's actually twirling a piece of his hair and his eyes are suddenly wider. His entire expression and demeanor is different.

"Justin."

He stops. "See, I'm good at it."

"Congratulations. Go be an actor, wait 'til you're 21 and star in porn but..."

He cuts me off with a harsh laugh. "Brian, I can't plan for something that might not happen."

I look up at him. "Might not happen?"

“What are the odds I’m going to make it to twenty-one?”

He’s right. The more I know, the less likely it seems.

## **Hustler Justin XII**

I guess it’s called normal for a reason, it’s what most people have. I don’t have a normal life, and I haven’t in a while. I’d bet there are people who assume that I’m already dead, if they think about me at all. So it guess it makes sense that his thought pattern is long term. Mine never has been. If I make it to twenty-one, well... I didn’t think I was going to make it to 18 and who knows, I still may not. I can remember when that seemed a long time away. I wish he’d stop scowling.

### **~~~121~~~**

And that’s his reality. He won’t be alive to see twenty-one, so why bother with anything other than instant gratification? I would actually admire that except for the fact that he has no interest in his own safety or comfort. I don’t understand. I hate not understanding. This is one that I really can’t wrap my head around. If he’s not planning for a future, then why not enjoy the present? Why punish yourself for the time you’ve got left? I look over and the reality of his statement hits hard. I wish I could hold him without hurting him.

### **~~~122~~~**

He’s staring at me contemplatively. “C’mere.”

I narrow my eyes. The little boy thing doesn’t work on him. “Why?”

“Just c’mere.”

Technically it’s his dime so I do. He shifts so that I can sit next to him and then pulls me back until I’m leaning against his chest. His arm is wrapped lightly around my waist; one of his legs is straight against the back of the sofa. “Comfortable?”

I actually am. I nod.

He sighs and we just stay like that. He runs a hand through my hair and over my arms. I don’t know what he’s doing.

### **~~~123~~~**

He actually asks me what I’m doing. I want to make him stop talking so he can stop breaking my heart. “It’s called affection.”

He tries to pull away but my grip around his waist tightens. He winces and stops. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Sit here and be comfortable.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I know.”

He really doesn't. He had parents. Hell, even my parents showed affection occasionally.

“What do I do?”

“Nothing.”

he's still for a minute and then wriggles his ass against my groin. “You can fuck me.”

I don't respond.

### ~~~124~~~

His fingers in my hair feel good. The warmth of his chest against my back feels nice too. His hand never moves to my waistband or under my shirt. I think he's trying to comfort me. My mother used to do this when I was little. I haven't needed it in a while. I don't need it now. This isn't why he's paying me. He said he didn't want to touch me 'til I was healed but now he's kissing the top of my head. I offer sex. All movements stop. I miss them more than I thought I would.

### ~~~125~~~

“I'm not going to fuck you and you're not going to blow me. Tonight you're safe, and warm, and you're going to sit here and remember what it's like to part of the human race.”

He starts to say something but then just sighs as I run my fingers lightly along the side of his face. He's crying. “hey.”

He shakes his head and tries to pull away from me. I don't let him. “hey.”

“Brian... I can't.”

“Why not?” I hold my breath, wondering if he even knows

“It hurts.”

I kiss the top of his head. “I know.”

### ~~~126~~~

I try. I sit there and let him touch me and all I can think is, “Please stop. Please don't make me do this.” Here's the irony, those are the phrases Isaac taught me. The ones they love, they ones we laughed about... until the first time I used them. I was a wreck when I got back. They knew they didn't have to stop. They didn't stop. And I'm thinking about that, and relaxing against him. I try to shut myself down. I should be able to ward off affection. I can feel the tears behind my eyes. “Brian.”

### ~~~127~~~

“Brian.” It's plaintive and I can't tell if he's putting on his little boy act or genuinely upset. I let him go and he moves quickly to the other side of the sofa. He turns so I can't see him wiping his eyes. “What the fuck was that about?”

I'm out of ideas. “Nothing. Thought maybe someone touching you without hurting you would be a nice change of pace.”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

I shrug. I’m done. I like the kid, he’s smart, he’s pretty fucking strong considering what he’s been through but I think it’s time to cut my losses.

### ~~~128~~~

He shuts down. I recognize it. I’ve perfected it. I tell myself I’m relieved. I am actually. If I’m too far gone for anyone to help, then there’s nothing I can do, right? he hands me the remote and moves to the computer. “watch whatever you want. I’ve paid for the night. don’t leave before eight.”

I flip through the channels and bite my thumbnail. Isaac could touch me. I never really minded that, but then that was practice. I wonder why he never had me practice anything softer. Maybe most people don’t need to practice that. I am broken.

### ~~~129~~~

I shoot off a couple of emails to people I know who own investment property. One of them must have an apartment for him. He’s biting his nail and shaking. I stand up and pretend I don’t notice his gaze following me. I get a blanket out of the closet and hand it to him. He looks at me questioningly.

“You’re shivering?”

“I am?”

His teeth are chattering. I nod. He’s blushing but ten minutes later he’s still blushing. I walk over and put a hand on his forehead. He tries to swat it away. He has a fucking fever.

### ~~~130~~~

He asks me if this is a drug thing. When I don’t understand the question he rolls his eyes. “Are. You. A. Junkie?”

“No.”

He puts a cool cloth on my face and I pull away. “Stop that.”

“You have a fever.”

I shrug. “It’ll go away.”

He looks at me oddly. “You really don’t care.”

“That I have a fever? Not really.”

“If you live or die.”

“It’s not really up to me.”

He grabs my shoulders. I think he’s going to shake me but he just stares, holding my gaze. “You’re the only one it is up to.”

## Hustler Justin XIII

I shake my head, drop his shoulders and walk away. With all his street smarts he hasn’t figured out that the only one who controls his future is himself? I’m halfway across the loft when I feel his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

He bites his lip. He doesn't fucking know. He knows I'm mad, and he doesn't want me to be and that's as far as he got. I hand him a bottle of water. “Drink this before you get dehydrated.”

He finishes it quickly. He's trying to appease me by following directions.

### ~~~132~~~

When I hand the bottle back to him he nods but doesn't look at me. I wonder why he's suddenly so angry, probably because he thinks I'm too sick to even blow him... but then he said that's not what he wanted. He tells me to go to bed. It's only eight but I am kind of tired and again it is his dime. As I'm walking up the steps and peeling off my clothes I realize why he's so upset. I relax. He'll be here soon and then he can work out his frustrations. That's what I'm here for.

### ~~~133~~~

Great, he's back to being a fucking doormat. I could have handed him battery acid, I think he would have swallowed it.

He takes off his clothes. I see the bandages contrast against his skin under the blue lights. I want to go over there and check them, make sure they're not infected... make sure his fever is going down. I don't do any of those things. I let him sleep. He needs it and I need to clear my head of this fucking hustler. I don't know why I let him get under my skin in the first place.

### ~~~134~~~

I wait for a while but he doesn't come to bed. I guess I fall asleep eventually. When I wake up it's almost eleven and he's sitting on the sofa drinking. I wrap myself in a sheet and move towards him.

“Go back to bed.”

“You're upset.”

“I'm fine. Go back to bed.”

“You know, it's okay.”

“No Justin, It isn't okay.”

“Brian, I'm not surprised and I won't mind.”

He turns to look at me. He seems confused. “Won't mind what?”

I drop the sheet and kneel in front of him, eyes down, hands behind my back. I wait.

### ~~~135~~~

When I see what he's doing, what he's offering, I stand up. He doesn't move. After about ten minutes he raises his head and sees me sitting at the table, as far away from him as I can get. He looks confused. “You don't want...”

“To hurt you? No. How many times do I have say it?”

“It's okay if you do. Everyone does.”

I stand up and decide I need to try once more. “Get up.”

He stands, his hands still behind his back. He's naked and the red marks are barely faded. "Listen to me, are you listening?"

### ~~~136~~~

He's not yelling, but his voice is forceful. He asks me if I'm listening and I nod.

"Not everyone wants to hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. Most people don't want to hurt you."

I want to interrupt him but I know better.

"Jesus." He moves my arms so they're hanging at my side. I keep my head down but he lifts my chin with his finger. "You can be safe but you have to understand that whoever told you that this was what men wanted was lying. You're worth more than this."

I wish I believed him.

### ~~~137~~~

He doesn't believe me. He nods, because he's being compliant. I think I like him better when he's not listening to me, at least then there's some spark, some hope. The red marks on his body seem to be accusing me of something, which isn't even fair. I didn't do this. I touch his face. The aspirin seems to have worked. His fever is down. He's waiting; I'm not sure for what. Then his stomach rumbles and I want to laugh, and scream. "Justin."

"Yes?"

"Can you just tell me when you're hungry?"

"I'm hungry."

I hand him the menus.

### ~~~138~~~

This whole decision making thing is a big deal to him. I don't care what he orders. I can actually deal with the hunger but he's watching me so I sit down at the table and peruse a vast array of takeout menus. He sits next to me. "It's after eleven, most of these places don't deliver this late."

I push them away. "Okay."

He seems upset. I wish I could figure out how to stop pissing him off.

"You feel up to going out?"

I look up, surprised. "A party?"

"What? No. Food. There's a diner down the street."

### ~~~139~~~

He gets dressed slowly. His own jeans, which I really will wash when we get back with my shirt. I promise him the hoody will be safe.

By the time we get there it's almost midnight and Deb is still working. "Hey Brian. Sunshine, you're here early."

I look over at him. Sunshine? he nods to her and we take the back booth. "Order whatever you want."



He doesn't look at the menu and Debbie hands him a cup of coffee before she even asks me if I want any. Surprisingly she doesn't say anything about us being here together.

## Hustler Justin XIV

"You come here often?"

I can't help it, I laugh. "Isn't it a little late to be using a pick-up line?"

He chuckles. It's a nice sound. "Sunshine?"

I shrug. "She's like that."

Brian nods. "She always has been." He tells me how he knows her. I can't help wondering what would have happened if I'd met Michael and Debbie when I was fourteen instead of Isaac.

He touches my hand. I flinch. I don't mean to. I guess I was lost in thought. He gets that blank look. I start to say something but Debbie interrupts, taking our orders.

### ~~~141~~~

He never looks at the menu, but seems to know what he wants. I order and Deb stares at us. She looks thoughtful and then walks away. We're left with an awkward silence as he shifts in his booth. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Aspirin's wearing off I guess."

"Fever back?"

He shrugs. Of course he doesn't know. I reach over to touch his forehead. I can feel Debbie watching us. He's not burning up anymore though.

She refills Justin's coffee. I want to say something about coffee this late at night but really, it's the most innocuous bad habit he has.

### ~~~142~~~

I eat quickly. When I finish he pushes his plate in front of me. I eat his sandwich too. Debbie gives us two checks. I have a feeling she's watching to see what Brian does. Brian doesn't even blink. He picks them both up and drops the money on the table as we leave. Debbie grabs his arm. I move away but he holds on to my wrist. She says something about not needing to prove anything and being too old for stupid bullshit. He shrugs kissing my temple. "I'm just recapturing my lost youth."

She snorts and we leave.

### ~~~143~~~

When I get a chance, I may have to ask Debbie what she knows about her little "Sunshine." It's not that I don't believe what he's telling me, it's that I don't know how honest he is with himself. He can't even fucking tell when he has a fever. My fingers have moved off of his wrist and as we walk back towards the loft I hold his hand. I do it primarily to keep him from taking off... although I've got his money... he won't leave without that. He seems content to walk beside me. It's kind of nice.

### ~~~144~~~

I'm starting to feel really sore. It's always worse the next day. I try to keep up with his long strides. He's holding my hand. I guess he's afraid I'll take off. I won't. He's paid 'til morning. I made a commitment; I plan to stand by it. I just push past the sore muscles and dull ache of my jeans abrading my already sore skin and match my pace to his. We stop. He's holding my head staring into my eyes. I try to turn my head but with a hand on either side of my face, I can't.

### ~~~145~~~

He's in pain. Why am I not surprised he didn't bother to tell me. He's doing that thing, where he's barely here. We're two blocks from the loft. "Can you make it?"

He looks confused. "To the loft. Can you make it?"

He nods and I move closer, letting him lean on me. Upstairs I hand him two aspirin and a beer. He drains the beer and pulls off his jeans. His legs are red and one of the cuts is open again. "Empty your pockets."

"Fuck off"

"Justin, I don't care what's in them. They're filthy, so are you."

### ~~~146~~~

I move the contents of my pockets... pretty much everything I own, to my hoody but he hands me some kind of leather makeup case. We're washing the hoody too. I look at him and smirk and he shakes his head. "The stupid thing came free with my anti-aging cream. Just put your shit in it. He hands me clean sweatpants and another shirt. The material is soft. He takes my sneakers and socks and throws them all in the washer. It's after midnight. I'm glad I'm not standing out there tonight. It was cold enough just walking back here.

### ~~~147~~~

He's wearing sweatpants, wool socks, a t-shirt and a sweater and he's still shivering. I have a million questions I want to ask him and it's after midnight. He'll try to leave in the morning. My computer notifies me of an email. It's from a guy on the west coast who owns three buildings in the city. He says he's got a couple of available units. If I tell him, he'll set up shop. If I don't... he'll set up shop and I won't know where... or he'll just disappear, like so many rent boys. I print out the lease.

### ~~~148~~~

This man is fucking amazing. He's handing me a lease, and a floor plan. The building is nice. I had a client there once, before Isaac got the two bedroom, then they mostly came to me. The layout will work. The bedrooms are separated. Clients won't have to come near my room. The rent isn't bad. I'll only need to have three nights a week booked, maybe four to cover my expenses. I sign the lease. "The doorman will have keys for us tomorrow." I smile and lean my head against the side of the sofa. Everything will be okay.

## Hustler Justin XV

He looks almost happy. I fax the lease off and sit down on the other side of the sofa.

"When can I move in?"

I think about lying. For the cost of two new suits and a pair of shoes, I can keep him off the street and in the loft for a week, but that's a temporary fix. "Day after tomorrow."

He nods. "You're staying here 'til then."

"I am?"

I nod. "Don't worry, I'll pay you."

"But...you don't want me."

"I think I proved last night that I do."

"But ..."

"You're taking the night off. To heal."

### ~~~150~~~

I want to tell him that he doesn't have to pay me for tonight, or tomorrow, but Isaac's voice is reminding me that you don't turn down a soft heart with a big wallet. I nod. "Okay, but..."

He shakes his head and pushes at my foot with his own. "No buts." What he's asking of me should be easier than what other clients ask. It isn't though. With them it's all farce and pain, so I turn myself off. I check out. He's asking me to be present. I try to think of a way to get through this.

### ~~~151~~~

He's silent and I want to know what he's thinking. I don't ask. I tell myself it's because I hate when people ask me. The truth is, I'm afraid he'll say something that seems completely innocuous to once again remind me how fucked up he is. In the end I turn on the TV and take a small comfort in the fact that he isn't flinching away from my foot which is touching his calf and he isn't trying to buy his place in the loft, or in my bed with his body. It's a small victory. I'll take it.

### ~~~152~~~

It's almost four and I'm starting to get really tired again. I guess I close my eyes. When I open them he's holding a hand out to me. "Huh?"

"Bed, c'mon."

I assumed I'd be sleeping on the sofa... he already said he's not going to fuck me. I think about saying something but he'll just look at me like I'm an alien. He always does when I misunderstand him. Anything I say at this point will upset him. I take his hand. I'm not sure what he's doing, when I was little my mom called it "tucking me in."

### ~~~153~~~

I'm fucking exhausted. This is not how I planned to spend my last week of sick leave, but I guess it's better than what I've been doing. I pull the sheet and duvet over us and he turns to face me. I can see him bite back a wince and I make a mental note to check those injuries again tomorrow. He's staring at me but he doesn't say anything, then he closes his eyes and I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. His breathing is soft and even. He's asleep. I close my eyes too.

### ~~~154~~~

Isaac's back, and I am safe. He smiles like he used to, before he disappeared. He's running his fingers through my hair, talking about cutting it to make me look younger. Tracing a couple of marks on my torso and then pulling me back to the practice room. I don't want to go. I'm sore and it's too hot in here. I try to tell him, but when he turns to

look at me it's not him. The fat sweaty guy pushes me into the practice room. I land on all fours. I look up and Brian's staring at me.

### ~~~155~~~

His head is buried in my shoulder and I hear a strangled sound. He's asleep. "Justin, Justin... wake up." I shake his shoulder and he winces and opens his eyes. "Ouch. Sorry." He moves to the other side of the bed.

"You okay?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm just not used to sleeping next to someone I guess"

I'm not buying it. "Who's Isaac?"

He freezes.

"Justin."

"He's just an old trick"

"One who hurt you?"

"Isaac would never hurt me."

"I thought all men wanted to hurt you."

"Isaac didn't. Doesn't matter. He's gone." He pretends to go back to sleep.

### ~~~156~~~

I miss Isaac. I lie there, my eyes wide but I'm not really seeing. I wish I knew where he was and why he left. Brian's arm reaches out, his fingers caress my forearm, one of the only spots left that isn't sore. He's the specific kind of guy that Isaac always warned me about. They mean well, they seem nice and in the end, they'll annihilate you. At least the ones I deal with are up front about it. Their goal is to hurt, and when they're done they leave. Brian's the type to leave scars that won't heal.

### ~~~157~~~

He finally falls back asleep, but it takes him almost an hour. I know I'm done sleeping for the night but that's okay, I've done enough sleeping in the past six months for a lifetime. And I've got nightmares of my own. I sit up and smoke, watching him sleep. He looks really fucking young when he's like that. His voice telling me how far that gets him, how well he's paid to look like this rings in my ears and I want to lock the door, keep the world out. I wonder if Lindsay would consider home schooling Gus.

### ~~~158~~~

By the time I wake up he's drinking coffee and smoking while reading the paper. He motions to the row of mugs. I pour myself a cup. "So, I guess you have to go to work today."

He shakes his head. "We both have the day off."

"I'm not..."

"I'm giving you a day off, with pay. We'll go see your new place, drop off the lease, get the keys."

I smile. I can't help it.

When I finish my coffee he hands me a bagel. It's stale so I put it in the toaster but it's not plugged in.

### ~~~159~~~

It takes me a little while to remove the bandages. We shower together and he tries to "repay my kindness." I turn him down. He pouts in what I'm sure is a practiced maneuver. I wash his back, being careful not to hurt the healing red lines that stripe his thighs and ass as well. After I put fresh bandages on he swears he feels fine but I see him wince. I lend him a shirt. He puts on his hoody and I hand him one of my jackets. I don't care if it's too big. It's fucking cold out.

### ~~~160~~~

He watches every move I make. He washed my sneakers. He's almost as much of a control freak as Isaac was. I need to stop thinking about Isaac. I need to figure out why this guy won't even let me blow him in the shower. Then I remember that after tomorrow, I don't have to think about it again. The building is as nice as I remember. The guy at the front desk hands him the keys and we take the elevator to the ninth floor.

He hands me the keys and lets me open the door. I almost cry.

### ~~~161~~~

He's happy. It's the first time I've really seen that. The apartment isn't large, but it's got a comfortable set up, a living room and kitchen between two bedrooms each with their own full bath. He starts talking about the light and how he's going to set up the room with the southern exposure to be his haven. He's essentially renting a room in his own place. His excitement dims as we cross the living area and he pushes open the door to the second bedroom. He's all business as he talks about sturdy bed-frames and an armoire for toys.

### ~~~162~~~

I turn to get Brian's thoughts on where I can find the stuff I need but he's not here. I find him in the living room watching the painters tape off a window. "We can go. I've got the measurements."

He nods silently. He doesn't say anything in the elevator or the lobby. When we're in the jeep he turns to me. "Can't you do something else?"

"Why?"

"Because maybe then you'll live past nineteen."

"Brian, give me one financial option at 17 with no high school diploma that'll pay that rent, or any rent."

He grinds his teeth loudly.

### ~~~163~~~

He's got a point, but that's not the point... I want to shake him but that's not even a new feeling.

"Couldn't you just take safe clients? Ones who won't hurt you?"

"They all hurt you. Mine just admit it."

"That's not true."

"And you know this how?"

"I didn't want to hurt you."

He's silent but I have a feeling that he's holding back, not out of responses. "So tell me about Isaac. He's the one who trained you?"

"Yeah."

"The one who'd find clients who wanted you pre-beaten."

He tries to open the door. I'm going forty-five. WTF?

~~~164~~~

He stops the car. I try to jump out but he's leaning over me and holding the door shut.

"Brian..."

"You're insane."

"It got you to stop the car, didn't it?"

He stares at me. "Why does talking about him make you want to run?"

"Because it's none of your business."

He leans back and waits. I don't open the door.

"I'm sorry. You're right. It's none of my business."

"Thank you. None of this is really any of your concern."

"No, it probably shouldn't be."

"But it is."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

He shrugs and I believe he really doesn't know.

Hustler Justin XVI

I glance over at him every few seconds while I'm driving. What is it about him? Maybe they fried more than my balls with that radiation. I wonder if I've lost my mind. We're almost back at the loft when I realize that he never did eat breakfast. I consider the diner but showing up with him two days in a row might require more explanation than I'm ready for. I make a sharp left and head away from Liberty Avenue. The only indication that he's noticed the change in our route is his white-knuckled hold on the door handle.

~~~166~~~

I don't know where he's taking me. He's angry, and we're not heading back towards the loft. I want to ask him but that'll probably make him angrier. I wonder if he's just going to kick me out of the car. He parks and I almost laugh at myself. He's taking me to lunch. Once we're seated he buries himself in the menu. I don't blame him. I'd be tired

of dealing with me too. We order and he leans back, lighting a cigarette and offering me one. I take it and we smoke in companionable silence, but something's coming.

### ~~~167~~~

"If I found you a job, one that pays okay, then would you consider...?"

He shakes his head. "Brian, this is what I do. I'm actually well trained and good at it."

"You train dogs, not people."

"I'll be fine."

"Like you are now?"

"Fuck you. I am fine."

I stare at him. He doesn't turn away. He doesn't blush. He doesn't think he's lying.

"Justin..."

"Don't start, Brian, please. I'm okay. I know what I'm doing. And things will be rough the first couple of months but then I'll get some regulars..."

Our food comes. I table the discussion.

### ~~~168~~~

I can tell we're not done, but the pasta smells good and I'm hungry. He barely touches his and I wonder again about his eating habits. Unlike him I know what is and isn't my business so I don't say anything.

"Can you help me run an errand?"

"Depends."

"I need a few things and I don't have a car yet. I guess tomorrow I could spend the day on the bus going back and forth but..."

He nods. "We'll get you some groceries and stuff tomorrow before you move in."

I smile. He really can be kind of sweet.

### ~~~169~~~

He's wandering around the furniture warehouse and I try not to think about what his criteria are but his climbing under the bed and then pulling on the headboard to check its strength are too much. I walk away. What's left to say?

He pulls me aside. "I know you probably want to pay me in cash but is there any way...?"

I nod I know what he's asking. The money I promised him, is going to finance his continued career. He kisses me on the cheek and I pull him forward, kissing him more deeply. He walks away smiling.

### ~~~170~~~

He stands behind me while the salesman writes the order. "What about that big comfortable chair, and an easel?"

"I'll get the stuff for my own room at the Goodwill or something. This room and the living room have to be perfect."

He pulls me away from the desk. "Brian."

"We're picking out a chair, and a bed, for you. Just for you."

"I can't afford that."

"Call it a bonus."

"But..."

He turns me around. "You need to pick this yourself. Find something you like."

I shake my head.

"Treat yourself as well as you treat your clients."

### ~~~171~~~

What I really want is for him to treat himself well and tell the clients to fuck off. He knows that but I'll settle for him having a safe place inside his own home. The sofa he chose is elegant but not meant for relaxing. The bed is massive and solid, but there's nothing soft or comfortable about any of it. He sits in a small chair and I shake my head, pointing to a monster of an overstuffed thing. He smiles when he sits down. That's the one.

A full sized pillowtop mattress and a dresser complete his room.

### ~~~172~~~

I'm actually starting to get excited about this. I consider painting the walls to my room. I'll never get the security deposit back anyway, not with the hooks I have to have installed in the walls and ceilings. He looks at me when I say that. It's that alien thing again.

I lean against him. "Brian, just don't think about it. It bothers you every time you do."

He nods but I doubt that's going to work. It's okay. After tomorrow, we're done and I can call a few of the clients I have left, start getting the word out.

### ~~~173~~~

I hate what he's going to do. His nonchalance about it is worse. As if being tied up and mistreated is just part of his to do list. Do laundry, get beaten, buy milk. I'd really like to know more about Isaac. He seems happy and mentioning Isaac's name always makes Justin's smile disappear. By the time we're back at the loft he's as wired and excited as a kid his age should be. He flops down on the sofa and smiles. "Thank you, Brian"

I flinch. I don't want to be considered an integral part of his career resurgence.

### ~~~174~~~

I see his frown and I stand up. I don't want him to feel ripped off. I have to stand on my toes to kiss him, but I do, pulling his head down. It's not something I'm used to doing but he doesn't seem to mind. His hands are in my hair, and his mouth is covering mine. Isaac was good at kissing. He's better. I miss it. Tricks don't care about kissing. I move my hand to his waistband, unbuttoning it with ease. He's hard and when I wrap my fingers around his cock he moans into my mouth.



~~~175~~~

I work the hem of his shirt, tugging at it. His hands leave my cock just long enough for me to pull it over his head. Fuck. I forgot. He sees my expression and shrugs. "They're mostly gone." He reaches for my cock again. I step away. He moves forward. "Brian, please. I want you. Don't you want me?"

I do. I shouldn't. I push him back towards the bedroom, taking his clothes off slowly. Kissing every red spot I can find. Soothing my fingers over the pale skin, much of it showing almost no sign of the previous damage.

~~~176~~~

He's so careful with me. I want to tell him there's no need to be, but he'll just back away completely. He's kissing my body, spreading my thighs and ghosting his fingers over what I know must be a red line that hasn't faded completely. His lips are on me next. Sucking my balls. He presses on my hip a little and I roll over. He spreads me apart and his tongue is probing and wet. I bite the pillow but he pulls back. "I want to hear you."

I don't have to fake it for him. I moan loudly.

~~~177~~~

I don't think he's faking it. I taste him and let his own pre-come work as lube while I jerk him off. He's not moving at all. His body is trembling. "Justin."

His head is pressed into the pillow. He moves it a little so he can see me. "You can move."

He blushes. I don't think he knows he was trying to stay still. When I go back to rimming him he presses his ass into my face. I wonder if he can feel me smile while my tongue is inside him. He's about to come. I can tell.

~~~178~~~

It's a good thing tonight's our last night. All the habits Isaac and I worked so hard for me to break, and he wants them. He wants me to moan, and squirm and he doesn't want to control it. It feels so good, and almost unnatural to be this free. To focus on my own orgasm instead of what he wants. Not to have to feign pleasure or pain. I come and he flips me over, kissing me. He wipes his hand off on the sheet. I blush and he nibbles my lip, his fingers in my hair. "You're beautiful."

~~~179~~~

I pull back, because he's crying. "Hey."

He shakes his head. Looking away. Silently asking me to ignore it. The fuck I will. "Justin."

He sits up and slides his body down mine until he's sucking on the head of my cock. Trying to distract me. I fucking hate that. I pull away. "Justin."

He's on his back running a hand through his hair. "Sorry."

"Stop apologizing."

"But..."

"I know... it's hard to hear anything nice. I'm sorry it made you cry."

"I'm okay now."

He seems to be better. "Then ride me again. I love watching you like that."

~~~180~~~

I wonder if it's about my control or his stamina. I don't think his surgery was that long ago... not based on the number of bandages in the bathroom. It doesn't matter. I love riding him. He hands me the condom. I'm about to press him into me when he stops me. "Lube." He looks at me and the question in his eyes is clear. I shake my head. He really doesn't want the answer. I guess he understands because he coats his own fingers, carefully stretching me until I'm so ready I'll beg, without him even telling me to.

~~~181~~~

He's so ready to let himself be hurt, even when it's clear he doesn't need to. I press my finger against his prostate, watching him gasp, feeling him open to me. When he's more than ready I lean back and he guides me inside him. He presses down, taking all of me into him in one quick move. I reach for his hand and he takes mine. We stay like that while he rides me. He's so fucking beautiful. How the hell can anyone prefer hurting him to seeing him like this? He throws his head back gasps, and comes.

~~~182~~~

I come before he does. He sees the fear I guess because he strokes my thigh and arches into me a little. My body shudders from the over stimulation. I clench my ass around the base of his cock and he makes a face that almost looks like pain but spreads his hands over my thighs, wordlessly telling me to stay like that. I do and watch as his body reacts to his orgasm. His nipples getting even harder, his stomach muscles tensing. His legs, bent behind me for support straighten. His grip on my thighs is tight and reassuring.

~~~183~~~

I pull him against my chest. Wrapping my arms carefully around him. He tucks his head in the crook of my neck. As I soften and fall out of him he sighs. "That was really great." I smile. "Coming from a professional, that means a lot." He swats at my chest lightly and closes his eyes. "I wish guys like you paid better."

I want to argue that I'm paying him pretty well but I know what he means. "Have you considered taking on more clients, safe one?" Did I just say that?

He shakes his head against my shoulder.

~~~184~~~

He's never going to understand what I do. He strokes the hair on the back of my neck. "Why not?" I take a deep breath and try again. "None of them are safe. Like this, I'll get hurt, emotionally, and that's harder to heal. I have a high tolerance for pain, and I've spent years being trained. I'm not giving that up to be a run of the mill escort. And this way, I have two or three days a week that are all mine."

"Which you need so you can heal."

"Everyone needs a couple days off a week."

~~~185~~~

I have so many things I want to say but I start with the one sort of flashing in neon. “Years?”

“What?”

“You’ve spent years training. You’re only seventeen.”

“I’d be over the hill as an Olympic gymnast by now.”

“And as a pedophile’s wet dream?”

“Stop it.”

“How old were you when you met Isaac?”

“I lived with him for two and a half years.”

I officially hate Isaac. “You were fourteen?”

“Something like that.” He stands up. “I’m showering now.”

“We’re not done.”

“Brian, this is none of your business.”

He’s right, but I still want to know.

~~~184~~~

He comes in and helps me take the bandages off my back. “You could do so much better.”

“Than what?”

“Than this.” He runs his fingers over the exposed lines that are dotted with scabs. For the most part I’m healed.

“Better? By letting any asshole with a hundred bucks come down my throat? Or should I just bend over and let them plow my tight little ass? Is that somehow less offensive to your delicate sensibilities?”

He looks a little green. “I just meant that...”

“I know what you meant Brian, but I’m not you.”

He smirks. “Few are.”

~~~185~~~

“Very few. Most people don’t have the luxury of getting sick and taking six months off of work to deal with it, and not bothering to fucking tell anyone!”

What the fuck? I take a step back... “You don’t...”

“I’m not blind, Brian. I know why you picked me up. To make sure you were back in working order. I heard the message on your machine. Cynthia? She’s excited that you’re coming back. It’s been sooo long. Oh, and she hopes you got a good start on the book you’re writing.”

I'm going to be sick. "Get the fuck out."

~~~186~~~

He really does look sick. I don't care. "Truth hurts, huh, Brian."

Well, here's the truth. I do what I do and I have my reasons. You have people who care about you. Debbie, Michael, Cynthia, but you did what you did, and I guess you had your reasons. So if you could just respect my decision then we'll be just fine."

He's really pale. He staggers backwards 'til he's sitting on the bed, his head in his hands. "No one was supposed to know."

Fuck. I went too far. "Brian."

He tries to stand but crumples to the floor.

~~~187~~~

His voice sounds far away. I try to stand up but my knees don't seem able to support me. When I open my eyes he's leaning over me. He looks scared. I try to sit up. He tries to help but I push him away. "Justin, leave."

"Brian, are you okay?"

"Get out of here."

He ignores me and once I'm standing pulls me back onto the bed. "You're still sick."

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, people pass out like that all the time."

"How did you..."

"Relax. I'm sure no one else does. I'm a professional, remember?"

~~~188~~~

"A professional snoop?"

I laugh and nod, lying next to him, mostly so he doesn't try to get up. "It's my job to figure out what they want, stuff they won't even tell me, or Isaac over the phone."

"I'm okay now."

I rest my head on his chest. "Clearly. You know, you yell at me for not taking care of myself and I have yet to see you really eat."

"Food is not my friend."

"Did you have chemo, or just radiation?"

"No chemo."

"You're lucky."

He wants to ask more. I can tell. "My mom died of cancer."

~~~189~~~

Mommy issues. That explains a lot. “How old were you?”

“Around ten. But she’d been sick since I was young, like seven.”

“Ten is pretty young.”

“Yeah, I guess, but old enough to remember. I doubt my sister remembers anything. She was only three.”

“So...”

“Yeah, she couldn’t get the cancer treated right away, because she was pregnant. By the time they got to it... well, it was a long fight and she lost.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. We got through it.”

He didn’t. What he’s doing now clearly shows that he’s not even close to over it. I don’t argue.

~~~190~~~

We just lie her quietly for a while. Both lost in thought. My head resting on his chest. His heart beating in my ear. It’s nice. It’s one of the things I miss about my early days with Isaac; back before he was hyper vigilant about training... when I was still allowed some affection. By the time I was sixteen he told me I was too old to need shit like that. He was right. I still wanted it, but I didn’t need it. His hand is cupping the back of my head, just sort of petting me. It’s weird.

~~~191~~~

I missed fucking. But I think I missed this too. Not from tricks... but touching people, in general. I was so afraid that they’d figure it out I cut myself off from everyone. I didn’t want to get near Michael, Debbie, Lindsay or Gus. I spent a lot of time alone. His being here is nice. I wonder if his mother was afraid of letting him get too close. Is that why he was susceptible to someone like Isaac? Is that why he doesn’t know how to accept affection?

But he’s accepting it now. Maybe he’s not a lost cause.

## Hustler Justin XVII

I feel my eyes closing in spite of myself. I don’t know why I end up sleeping so much around him. His hand stops moving and just stays there warm and solid against the back of my head. I think he’s asleep.

When I open my eyes again he’s still asleep and it’s after five. My stomach growls but I ignore it. I move slowly, partly because I don’t want to wake him and partly out of necessity. I’m still sore and it’s been a while since I took anything. I don’t think he’ll mind if I use the shower.

~~~193~~~

I wake up in an empty bed and it takes me a second to remember why that bothers me. I pull on a pair of jeans and find him sitting on the sofa, resting one of my coffee table books against his knees and concentrating on something he’s writing. “Hey.”

He looks up and smiles. “Hey.” His hair’s wet. I move behind him, and pull his shirt away from his back. I should dress those.”

He shrugs away. "They're fine."

I see what he's drawing. He's really good; the images are disturbing but then so is everything in his head.

~~~194~~~

It's been a while since I've had the time and place to just focus on a sketch. I can feel him staring at it. I tilt my head back. He kisses my forehead. He's weird. "You hungry?"

I'm about to tell him I'm not when my stomach rumbles. "I'm just going to pretend you were about to say yes."

I nod and we go through the whole menu thing again. I make a choice because it bothers him more if I don't.

Once we've settled down to eat he starts again. I do my best not to roll my eyes.

~~~195~~~

I feel like Debbie. I just can't let the subject go. "If I found you somewhere cheaper to live..."

"Then my clientele would have to be lower rent as well."

"You could enter the system."

"I'll be getting upwards of five hundred bucks a night. You want me to give it away for free?"

He's right but there has to be someplace... "Stay here."

He just stares at me and I really don't blame him. It's the worst idea I've had yet. Which doesn't explain why I continue. "Live here. It's safe and free."

He laughs. It's not that funny.

~~~196~~~

I hear my laughter verge on hysteria. I remember Isaac warning me... it's like he knew Brian personally. "They'll want to take you home and keep you. You're like a kitten, but when they're tired of you, or you scratch up the furniture, they'll leave you out on the street. Watch these guys. They seem harmless. They're the most dangerous animal you'll meet."

I didn't believe him 'til the first guy offered to "save me." Isaac and I laughed about it and I never saw him again. There were others. Didn't matter. Now there's Brian. He thinks he means it.

~~~197~~~

I usually like to see him laugh, but this is unnatural. Tears are streaming and he's doubled over. When he finally pulls it together I go back to my sesame noodles. He sighs and drains his beer. "You don't want me here. You'd kill me in a week. I'd kill you in two."

"You don't know that."

"I really do. You helped me get my own place. It's the smartest thing for both of us. Tomorrow I'll be out of your hair for good. You can have your life back." It makes sense, so why does it feel so wrong?

~~~198~~~

He's gotten attached. Dammit. Isaac taught me never to spend more than 48 hours with one trick. Of course I had to try it, once. He warned me, and he was right. Just like he was right about the kitten thing. Now he's upset that we won't see each other again. In a week he won't remember my name. In the meantime, he has helped me. I do kind of

owe him. I wish I knew what he really wanted. He's always so worried about making sure I get off. I consider it while I go back to my drawing.

~~~199~~~

I head to the shower and try to stop thinking about him. I can't. Images flash of what he must have looked like at fourteen when Isaac first recruited him. Fourteen, Christ, he's just a kid now. By the time I'm dressed and back in the living room he's finished his sketch and moved on to a new subject. "Is that Isaac?"

I startle him. He tries to hide it but I move my head and he relents. "No." He's lying. "Lean forward." I hold out the bandages. It's the only time I don't mind how fucking compliant he is.

~~~200~~~

He pushes my shirt up and insists on covering the one remaining mark. The rest are pretty much faded. This one, I don't remember it but the strap must have sliced my skin. I'll be back in business tomorrow, which is good because while I have an apartment. I don't have anything else. I wince at the thought and he thinks I'm in pain. I let him think that. When he's done I pull my shirt off and press my body against his. I owe him more than this but letting him fuck me is the least I can do.

Hustler Justin XVIII

He presses his body against mine, kissing me. I hope that my touching the cut on his back has nothing to do with his sudden amorous mood. Then most thoughts skitter out of my head as his hands unbutton my jeans. I tug at his sweatpants, which are actually my sweatpants and wonder if he owns any clothes other than his jeans. But that's actual thinking, so I save it for later and just revel in the feel of his warm body pressed against mine.

I was worried that it would never be this easy again. With him, it is.

~~~202~~~

He's taller than I am, (most men are), but the way he touches me, the way he bends his knees so our bodies are even. The way he kisses me... it makes me feel safe. His hands practically span my back when they're pulling me to him. I should be worried. I know how much damage hands that big can do, but I'm not. I melt against his body and as he wraps an arm around the small of my back and lifts me, practically carrying me to bed, I don't feel small or overpowered. How does he do that?

~~~203~~~

He looks up at me while his eyes are dark with desire and he's smiling. I'm not sure I've ever actually seen him smile in bed before. I want to fuck him, but I need him to feel safe. He opens his arms, beckoning me. I fall on top of him. Holding my weight off of him with my arms, kissing his face, his neck, his jaw. He wraps his legs around my waist. "Fuck me." I pull back. I need to see his expression. He's determined, and desperate. I reach for the condoms and lube. He shakes his head.

~~~204~~~

I owe him a lot. I want to give him something that he can't get on the street, at least not safely. He reaches for the condom and I reach for his hand. Shaking my head. "You don't have to."

His body was hot against my skin. Now it's gone. He's standing up, his erection fading. "What the fuck?"

He's angry. What the fuck indeed.

"It's okay. You can ride me bareback."

That alien thing again. I really hate that. He's shaking his head. "I thought you understood this."

“I do. I never let anyone... but... don’t you want to?”

~~~205~~~

Want to? Yes. Will I? Never. He owes me a lot? For some furniture and a couple of orders of takeout? That’s what his life is worth? I stare at him and wonder how he survived this long.

“What would Isaac say?”

He turns away from me and I barely hear him mumble. “Isaac’s gone.”

I figured that much myself. “Where is he?”

He shrugs and we’re back to him refusing to make eye contact. “He’s just gone.”

“You lived with him.” I lay next to him so we’re face to face. “Justin. Tell me, what really happened?” He’s crying.

~~~206~~~

“I had an overnight client. When I came home the locks were changed and the landlord said he took off.”

I close my eyes. I can’t look at him. I try to turn away but his hand on my shoulder stops me. “When?”

“Around August.”

“And you’ve been on the streets since then?”

“Yeah. The landlord let me in. I had a duffle bag full of stuff but only a couple hundred dollars and no phone numbers.”

“Why didn’t you go to a shelter or...”

I roll my eyes at him and he rolls his bottom lip into his mouth.

~~~207~~~

I have those same million questions, and he’s answering them and every answer makes me want to kill someone.

“The landlord offered to rent me a one bedroom but I didn’t have the rent. I figured I’d get it in a couple of days and come back. I never quite got the money together.”

“But you have it now.”

“Yeah but he doesn’t have anything available anymore... plus I don’t have my client’s numbers. Isaac took them. He took everything. The movers came as soon as I left. That’s what the landlord told me.”

“Where is your father?” He flinches.

~~~208~~~

“He’s dead.”

“Family?”

“They’re All dead.” It’s a lie but he doesn’t know that. I hated my father at fourteen. I loved Isaac. I ran away... I never really thought it would stick but he never came looking. He didn’t want me back. And life with Isaac was good. Isaac loved me. He wanted me. He had time for me.

Part of me knows that Isaac didn’t mean to leave me like this. But there’s a growing part that thinks maybe he was one of those guys who thought I was cute as a kitten...but didn’t want a full-grown cat.

Hustler Justin XIX

He turns away from me and I let him. What’s left to say? He’s alone. I want to tell him he has me, but he doesn’t, not really. I’m back at Ryder on Monday, and somewhere in between catching up on my work and dazzling new clients, I need to write a book. I glance over at him, curled up and shaking. I cover him with the duvet.

“We can still fuck.”

I don’t know what to say to that so run my fingers through his hair and go back to the sofa with scotch and a pack of cigarettes.

~~~210~~~

I pull myself together. He doesn’t need this shit. I don’t have time for this shit. I join him on the sofa and take a cigarette out of the pack. He hands me a glass of scotch and I have to admit that sometimes, it’s nice to be treated like an adult instead of a child, or a pet. “I’ll be okay.”

He nods. I don’t think he believes me.

“I’ve managed so far.”

He doesn’t nod at that. I don’t think he agrees. I lean my head on his shoulder. “You can come visit me.”

His body gets tense.

~~~211~~~

Visit him? Make an appointment? Pay him? I don’t know how to respond so I don’t.

“You helped me out, and you don’t want anything difficult. I’d give you a discount.”

I’m going to strangle the twat in about twenty seconds but I find myself nodding. Tossing him a couple hundred dollars and making sure he’s safe both seem like good ideas.

“Just call first, okay? I’ll make sure you have the number.”

I picture walking into a scene like the one that left him marked and flinch. He feels it.

“I just mean that... clients hate to be interrupted.”

~~~212~~~

“Justin...”

I know what he’s about to say. “Don’t, Brian. We keep going in circles.”

He nods and we spend the rest of the night staring at the television, or watching the smoke swirl from a cigarette. When I can’t keep my eyes open anymore he helps me to bed and sometime in the middle of the night he curls up

behind me and fucks me gently. Kissing my ear. Whispering things I think he's hoping I won't remember. I come before he does but only by moments. When we fully wake up, hours later, he's grumpy and I'm excited.

~~~213~~~

The furniture is being delivered between noon and four. We start with the grocery store. It's ten thousand tiny decisions. I wonder if he even knows what he likes to eat, or how to cook.

We finally make it out of the store with the essentials. Peanut butter, bread, milk and a couple of other things I insisted on. He's putting it all away and waiting for the delivery guy when I realize he doesn't have dishes, or... anything. He says he doesn't care. "Justin, I'll be back." He nods seriously. I wonder if he believes me. Why would he?

~~~214~~~

He's not coming back. That's okay. I didn't expect him to. It's almost five when the furniture guys arrive. They assemble everything and it's starting to look like someplace that's worth the money. The reception area is formal but it's supposed to be. I'm startled when Brian walks in.

"The door's not locked."

I shrug.

The doorman is behind him with a big cart full of stuff.

"For me?"

He nods, and starts opening boxes.

"You know, I can't really cook here. The place can't smell like..."

"Plates, microwave, coffee pot. I'm not anticipating you becoming the next Martha Stewart."

~~~215~~~

I'm ready to go home but the thought of leaving makes my stomach churn. "You have an appointment book yet?"

He nods.

What's Tuesday look like?

He rolls his eyes. "It's wide open."

"I'd like to see you."

"Morning or evening?"

"After work, say eight?"

"You work late."

"I have a lot of catching up to do."

He nods and I can tell he's really looking forward to some time alone. Surprisingly, I'm not. He settles into his room, and I hear him lock the door as I pull his door shut. Making sure it's locked before I walk away.

~~~216~~~

This is what I dreamed about all those months on the streets, I reach for the sketchbook he insisted on buying, and a set of charcoals. I pull my knees up in the ridiculously large chair and just draw. Isaac always said it was a waste of time, we could be practicing, or networking but sometimes I just ignored him. Practice was always longer and harder later, but it was worth it. I wish he hadn't taken my sketchbooks with him. When I can't keep my eyes open I crawl into bed pulling the thick duvet up to my chin.

Hustler Justin XX

I spend the rest of the evening sleeping fitfully. I'm not sure how I'm going to manage to keep up with my old pace. I try not to think too much about the book I'm supposed to be writing. I'll have to hire someone to ghost write it for me. I'm trying to keep my mind on the book, because it does worry me, but not as much as Justin does. It's no use. Every time I fall asleep I dream about him getting hurt. I don't believe in prophetic dreams. I do believe he's going to get hurt again.

~~~218~~~

I wake up to the doorbell. It's the locksmith. He eyes me oddly when I tell him what I want but he does it and leaves. I shower, shave and get dressed. I have some errands to run that I just didn't want to do with Brian. I need to get a couple of client's booked soon. The money I have is dwindling fast. I make appointments with workmen for Monday and then buy a few items of clothing. I walk out of the store in them. I don't even want to look at those jeans or that hoody again.

~~~219~~~

I go to the diner for lunch and Debbie take her break across from me. "You seen Sunshine?"

"Do I look that pale, Deb?"

She snaps her gum. "The kid. You seen him? He hasn't been in. I'm getting worried."

"He's fine. He found a sugar daddy to stake him. I don't think he's working the streets."

She smiles and pats the side of my face. "You're a good man."

"What makes you think it was me?"

She gets up to deliver a customer's order and hands me an extra plate of fries. "Eat it. You've lost too much weight."

~~~220~~~

The salesman greets me coolly but when I tell him what I need he smiles and takes me to the back room.

"You've been here before."

I nod. "With Isaac."

Something flashes. "Yes, I remember. Are you two still...?"

I shake my head. "He's gone. I'm setting up shop, so I need a few things, and you know, if you wanted to let your clients know..."

He nods and I give him my new phone number. "You were quite popular."

I smile. "I hope to be again."

He helps me choose the type of hooks and suspension equipment I'll need.

~~~221~~~

I almost don't recognize him. He's dressed differently, and smiling broadly. "Taking a trip?"

He looks confused and then laughs when he realizes I was referring to the store he'd just exited. "They sell other leather goods in the back."

I always wondered how a luggage and travel shop stayed in business on this street. Learn something every day. "Get what you need?"

"Yep, instillation's tomorrow."

I pretend that doesn't bother me. "Well, see ya."

He waves and walks off in the other direction. I watch, but say nothing. He'll be fine; he's managed this far without me. I walk away.

~~~222~~~

Back at my own place, My own place! I curl up in the chair with a book. I can hear Isaac's voice in my head telling me what a slob I am for leaving my own shopping bags around the chair but I work on ignoring it and make myself some tea. When I look up from my book it's dark out. I go into the other room to start setting up. I try not to think about what each item does as I put it away. When I'm done I leave the room as quickly as I can.

~~~223~~~

The salesman was all too happy to show me the backroom and give me Justin's information. I already have his number but watching this man write it on the back of his card makes me angry. There's no reason for it. It just does. I look at his vast array of finely crafted leather and blanché. I turn and leave as quickly as I can. On the way home I stop by a bookstore. Brainwashing and childhood trauma is fascinating. It occurs to me that although he mentioned a duffle bag, I'd never seen it. Does he own any clothes?

~~~224~~~

Installers and contractors are here most of the day, but by four they're all gone and I have everything I need. I heat up some ramen noodles and clean the kitchen again. I almost spill them when the phone rings. I pull out my appointment book and pretend I'm considering the offer. I'm down to my last ten dollars so there really isn't a question. He wants to come at six. I get his particulars and confirm the appointment. I spend the time making sure everything's perfect. At a quarter 'til, I remember the mug of noodles and dump them.

~~~225~~~

Everyone's so happy about my triumphant return. I smile and nod and even Marty seems happy to see me. Cynthia's thrilled but mostly because she was dealing with some low level idiot while I was gone. I forgot how draining and long a day could be. By seven I'm wondering how I did this six days a week but I push through, drinking another cup of bad coffee and staring at the mess made in my absence. I've barely thought about Justin in the last ten minutes. I think that's a record since I met him. At eight I call.

~~~226~~~

He left about twenty minutes ago. There's five hundred dollars on the nightstand and I'm taking a few more moments to recover before I shower and strip the bed. The phone rings. I consider not answering it. I don't know if

I'm up for another client tonight. I can't turn down a gig right now so I put on the fake voice and act as my own handler. I sigh when I realize it's Brian. "How was work?"

"I'm still there."

"So you need to cancel for tomorrow?" I'm a little relieved. I'm not sure where we stand. It's confusing.

~~~227~~~

He sounds weird. Not just the fake voice. "I don't need to cancel."

"Why'd you call?"

"To say hello, see how you're doing."

"I'm fine."

That's my first hint that he's not. "I can stop by with dinner."

"I made ramen noodles."

"Nutritious."

"I was busy."

"You should go to the diner. Debbie's worried about you."

"Can't you just tell her I'm fine?"

"She needs to see it for herself."

"I'll make it this week sometime."

"You sure you don't need anything?"

"I'm going to take a shower and do some sketching before bed."

"You need a TV."

"Goodnight, Brian."

~~~228~~~

Christ, Isaac was never this protective and he had money on the line. I shake my head and decide that I'd rather take a bath. The warm water is soothing. I drain it when it turns pink and refill the tub. When I get out I check to make sure the bleeding's stopped. It has. I take some aspirin and pull on Brian's sweatpants and shirt. They're really comfortable for sleeping but when I lay down I can't seem to fall asleep. I get up and check all the locks again. Maybe I do need a TV. I read instead.

Hustler Justin XXI

I consider stopping by to see him but he sounded tired and it's almost ten by the time I leave the office. I'm drained. Michael calls my cell and invites me to Woody's. I make an excuse and go home. The loft is back to normal. The cleaning service was in and everything's where it belongs. That should be comforting but it isn't. In the end I

shower and crawl into bed. I wonder if this kind of exhaustion is normal. It's been two months since I've had any treatments. I'll ask the doctor. I'm asleep before I know it.

~~~230~~~

I slept like a rock. Warm blankets and a big soft bed help but I think the deadbolt and two additional locks on my bedroom door help. When I stretch I wince. I reach for something stronger than aspirin but I don't have anything. I swallow four aspirin and try to remember the name of the doctor that Isaac took me to on the few occasions when he really thought the damage required some professional care. A half hour later I realize that it's just the standard post gig ache. I guess I'll have to get used to it again.

~~~231~~~

Today's a little easier. Although I think I've had three gallons of coffee. I've told Cynthia to tell everyone that I'm not talking about the book until it's published. I made up some bullshit about it fucking with my process but who cares? The important thing is no one's mentioning it. I fix three ideas that were good but not great and start another campaign with a blank slate throwing out every crappy concept they handed me. When I finally look at the clock it's after six. I pack up to leave. I have errands before my appointment with Justin.

~~~232~~~

I get several calls today. Two are from clients I recognize from before. One is from someone new. I schedule them for tomorrow and the new guy for Thursday. He wants a long session but I don't think he knows what kind of energy that entails. I'm not going to complain if I get paid for four hours and he leaves after two. I take a couple more aspirin and clean myself up. Brian's coming soon and I want to be ready. He's never seen me at my best. He deserves that. I can't believe I'm excited about his appointment.

~~~233~~~

I glare at the salesman 'til he leaves me alone. I hate when they fawn... well, if I'm not planning on fucking them, and I'm not. Eventually I hand them my credit card and they wrap everything up. I'm running late, and I'm still tired but it's only five after eight when I get to Justin's door. I ring the bell and he pulls it open. "You didn't check to see who it was?"

He shrugs.

"You should leave the chain on."

"Kinky."

"On the door."

He moves aside to let me in and locks the door. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic."

~~~234~~~

He has two shopping bags with him. I wonder if he's finally decided he'd like to see what he's missing. He didn't have to buy his own toys though. He puts the bags on the sofa and turns to face me. He just stares. I lower my eyes. He moves closer, raising my chin with his finger. "You okay?"

I nod. He doesn't let me drop my gaze. He gestures to the bags. "I bought you some stuff."

I wonder if that is in lieu of paying me. He shakes his head. "Don't worry, I'll still pay for our appointment."

~~~235~~~

I sit on the uncomfortable, formal sofa. I gesture to the bags and he looks through them. "Thank you."

I nod and he drops to his knees. I close my eyes and bite back a scream. I'd like him once to thank me verbally without trying to do it orally. I push at his shoulder and he looks up at me. "You don't want...?"

I shake my head and pat sofa next to me. He sits down carefully. "I'm glad you're here."

I want to believe him, but I can't help wondering how often he says that without meaning it.

~~~236~~~

I don't think I'll ever understand this man. He buys me presents. He doesn't want a thank you, even though I know he likes the way I say it. I fidget and he looks over at me. "Why don't you get dressed? I'll take you out to dinner."

"We could just stay in..."

He stares at me and it is his dime. I take the shirt and pants he hands me from the bag and drop my robe. He touches my arm and I turn to face him. I can't read the look on his face but he's not happy.

~~~237~~~

He's shaved. Completely. He looks younger and... I bite back the bile. I tried to put it out of my head, to convince myself that he was exaggerating but he wasn't. They want him to look prepubescent. He almost does. He raises his arms to put the shirt on. There's not a hair left on his body. It's... I shake my head. I think I'm going to cry. I have to talk to the doctor. Why am I so fucking emotional? I wasn't before the radiation. He looks closer to age appropriate in the clothes I bought him. "Let's go."

~~~238~~~

He's pissed off. What did I do? He leads me out of the apartment. I lock the door and follow him to the jeep. He says nothing. I fold my hands. He lights a cigarette and offers me one. I don't take it. He shakes the pack in front of me, knowing I want one. He lights it for me and I roll down my window a little. He still hasn't said a word. We drive for almost twenty minutes and when we park I'm surprised. This place looks fancy. I guess that's why he bought me such nice clothes.

~~~239~~~

He tries to hide it but he's hurting. I help him out of the jeep and he follows me. I hate when he acts like a puppy that just got smacked with a newspaper. The hostess seats us but he doesn't open his menu.

"Do you want a drink?"

He shrugs. Great we're back to this. "Justin."

"I'm too young to get served."

I don't know what to say. It's the truth, but it's also what most of his clients want to hear. "Do you want a drink?"

He nods. I order scotch for us and hand him his menu.

## ~~~240~~~

I've done this before but it's been a long time. Isaac hated these kinds of gigs so he didn't book them often. I glance at the menu and smile, handing it back to him. "Just order for me, please, Brian." Fuck. I got it wrong again.

"Justin." he leans forward, moving the centerpiece out of the way. "This isn't a game. I brought you here because I'm hungry, and you're hungry, and don't tell me you're not. So, order whatever you want and please cut out the little boy bullshit. I know it's an act, and I fucking hate it."

## ~~~241~~~

I just wanted to eat something that wasn't fried in diner oil. Now we're back to playing games. He realizes I'm serious. He studies the menu and then tells the waiter what he wants. I fight closing my eyes in gratitude. I order and get us a bottle of wine. We both need to relax and he needs to tell me why he's in more pain today. He looks worried about something and I raise an eyebrow. He asks to go to the men's room. I nod. He doesn't fucking need my permission. He's moving slowly as he walks away.

## ~~~242~~~

I splash a little cold water on my face and take a deep breath. I can do this. I can pretend to be his friend, or nephew, or whatever. I remember the last one of these I went on, and the fight Isaac and I had afterwards. I was so full of myself. This guy liked my company. He talked my being an escort. It made Isaac irate. He ranted about tuxedos and functions and "dates", and how all it did was make the whore think he was something else. He was right and this is nothing more than foreplay.

## ~~~243~~~

He's smiling when he comes out, but as he gets closer I see that it's fake. I sigh. This kid is fucking killing me. "Justin, what's wrong?"

He puts his hand over mine on the table. "What could be wrong when I'm here with you?"

I want to storm out but I lean back and smirk. "You can't come up with something less cheesy?"

His smile falters. Good. "Justin, I'm not asking you to be my escort. I just figured we could eat. That's all."

His smile is completely gone. "I know." he slumps his shoulders. "I'm not escort material."

## ~~~244~~~

A part of me hoped that Brian did like my company enough to consider me escort material. I had some momentary hope that I could market myself to a different clientele. I shake my head at my ego. Brian's right. Isaac was right. I've found my niche and my rapidly filling appointment book proves it. When I can't pull off the little boy angle anymore, well, that's probably not a bridge I'll have to cross.

The wine is served. I drain my glass.

"Justin."

I look up but he just rolls his lip into his mouth. I smile and shrug.

## Hustler Justin XXII

What the fuck am I supposed to say? Do I boost his ego by telling him that he is "escort material"? I wave for another bottle of wine. "Justin."

He doesn't even look at me. "Justin. I wasn't... I didn't mean... I am paying for your company aren't I?"



He looks up and gives a half smile. "I guess."

"So just assume that other's would."

"You really think so?"

Great, why doesn't he just ask me to introduce him to a few. Then I can change my name to Isaac. At least he's happy for the rest of the meal.

### ~~~246~~~

I'm drunk and full by the time we're done. He laughs when I try to get him to taste the chocolate cake, but he eventually sucks it off my finger. I think he must be drunk too. He stops to kiss me before we get in the car, swearing he's just getting the last of the chocolate off of my lips. We're both smiling as we're driving back to my place. When we're on the elevator he nuzzles my neck. His hands are running up my torso and then trying to slide under my waistband as I unlock the door.

### ~~~247~~~

He tastes like chocolate and red wine. He's laughing freely and is captivatingly beautiful like this. I think I'm drunk. I move towards the sofa but he shakes his head. "We'll mess it up." He pushes me towards his bedroom, which is really his office. I want to say something but I won't ask him to give up his sanctuary, besides, the bed is soft. He's kissing my skin as he unbuttons my shirt. I groan. His hands are strong, efficient and nimble. My pants are gone in seconds. He takes me to the back of his throat and hums.

### ~~~248~~~

His eyes are half lidded. He spreads his legs as I deep throat him. I stroke his thighs, cradle his balls, and suck hard. I slide my lips up the shaft and move my hand to the base of his cock. He doesn't complain. He never starts to thrust into my mouth but simply lies back, running his hands through my hair, not directing my head. I press my tongue into his slit and he lets out a deep grunt. He comes and I pull back, letting it splatter across my face and chest. I look at him and smile.

### ~~~249~~~

I pull at his arm. He crawls up my body. He's still dressed. Well, he's gonna have to clean that shirt now. I wonder why he didn't just swallow but I pull him forward and kiss him instead of asking. Now we're both covered with my come. He sighs as I wrap an arm around him, pulling him closer to me. I use my other hand to work the fly of his pants. He shakes his head against my chest. "You don't have to." I'm too drunk to have this argument. I growl instead. He shuts up and helps me.

### ~~~250~~~

We're both naked. He's rolling me onto my back, moving his mouth down my chest. I sigh, closing my eyes. For the first time in years it's not because I don't want to see what's coming next. I lose myself to the feel of his lips on my skin, him pushing my thighs apart, his tongue licking around the head of my cock. His lips slide down my shaft. He takes me to the back of his throat and now I need to open my eyes. His are closed and he seems to want nothing more than to taste me.

### ~~~251~~~

He comes and I'm hard again. I kiss him and he pulls my head forward, his tongue sliding over mine. I reach for a condom. I cover two fingers with lube and press one inside him. He bites his lip and I move back and forth inside him slowly. He squeezes his eyes closed and I stop. "Justin." He turns his head. I take my hand away from his ass and something cold and acidic roils in my stomach. There's blood. "Justin!" He won't look at me. I wash my hands, and come back with a wet cloth. "What happened?"

~~~252~~~

“Brian move, I need to put the sheets in the wash.”

“Go clean up. I’ll take care of the sheets.”

I want to argue with him but his expression makes it seem pointless. I go into the bathroom and close the door. Fuck. I got drunk and forgot, besides, once most guys come, they’re not ready to fuck again so quickly. Christ. What’s wrong with this guy? He has cancer and radiation and still can’t get enough.

I know it’s wrong to blame him. It just feels easier. When I come out the bed is in pristine condition. He glowers.

~~~253~~~

He’s wearing a robe when he comes out. He hands me one. “Convenient.” He doesn’t say anything.

I toss the robe on the bed and move closer to him. “Justin.” He closes his eyes and I wrap my arms around him. His head rests against my chest. I kiss the top of it because it keeps me from throttling him or tracking down whatever sick fuck hurt him. “Did things get out of hand?”

He shakes his head and I want to scream. “So you knew he wanted this?”

I feel him nod against my chest. “Next time, say no.”

~~~254~~~

I push away from him. “You think it’s that easy?”

He nods.

“I asked what he wanted, I knew what I was getting into, and I made five hundred dollars.”

“To let a man rape you.”

“That’s not what happened!”

“Really?” His eyebrow arches.

“It’s not! We’ve been through this. I’m tired of justifying my life to you!”

“Then justify it to yourself. Tell me how you convince yourself that it’s okay to let anyone treat you like that.”

“This is what I do! It’s who I am! And I won’t be able to cash in on this much longer.

~~~255~~~

He’s crying and yelling at the same time. “Why not?”

“Because eventually I’ll start to look my age.”

Someday, he’ll say something about this that doesn’t make me feel like killing someone. “Then what?”

“I don’t know. Probably nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Someday the clients will dry up, and then I’ll end up homeless...” he shrugs.

“So your plan is to live like this 'til you die of hypothermia on the street?”

“It wasn’t my plan. Plans change.”

“Isaac was supposed to take care of you.”

“Yeah, but he’s gone, and I won’t recruit some other kid to do this for me.”

## ~~~256~~~

As I say it out loud it seems even more hopeless. I just live like this, in pain, and fear, until I can’t anymore. He takes my hand and sits me on the bed. “Justin, you have other options.”

“Really, like what?”

“Well, let’s say you had a crap job, that you hated. How different would that be from today?”

I sniffle and he hands me a tissue. “Not much.”

“Right, so all you can afford is a tiny one room apartment, with a chair, a bed and a microwave...”

I see his point. It’s all I have now. “But...”

## ~~~257~~~

I think I may have finally gotten through that unfathomably thick skull of his. “No buts. You can’t do that, you can’t survive if you don’t live through this and Justin, if you keep this up, you won’t. You’ll get sick, or you’ll bleed out, or someone will go too far. And even if it didn’t risk your life... no one is supposed to live in this kind of pain and fear.”

“Well, what kind of pain and fear am I supposed to live in?”

I kiss the top of his head. “The kind we all do. It’s called life.”

## Hustler Justin XXIII

His arms around me feel good. He may be right but then again, I have no skills, and I dropped out of school at fourteen. I’ve read a lot but... he makes it seem so easy. It isn’t. “Brian, I don’t know if I can. I mean...”

“You can. It’ll take a little doing. Sublet this place, rent something smaller, find a job, one that sucks, but doesn’t risk your life.”

“I guess next month I can...”

He pulls away. “Not next month, Justin. Now.”

“Now? I have clients booked for tomorrow.”

“Cancel.”

Isaac's voice screams NO! I shake my head.

### ~~~259~~~

"Justin. Where's your appointment book?"

He hands it to me. He's booked, this week and next. I'm penciled in for Tuesday. "We'll keep this one."

He smiles.

We're sitting on the floor, leaning against the bed. There are letters and codes next to each name. "What does that one mean?"

"You don't want to know."

I point to it again and he looks away.

"Justin." I understand some of them, and I'm not sure I want to understand the others, but I push on.

He deciphers his code for me and I'm more convinced. They all have to be cancelled.

### ~~~260~~~

His expression is grim as I explain. Some I assume he can figure out for himself. Others are less common. A tie means they have a school uniform kink. A dogs means they want a silent pet. It's all simple, but was complicated to learn at first. Not the code but what they actually wanted. As we're going through their requests I wonder who they'll find to do this for them when I'm not around. I feel bad. "I can't abandon them."

Great, that alien look again.

"Abandon who?"

"My clients. They need something that they can't get just anywhere."

### ~~~261~~~

I almost laugh. I sell products to housewives with the same line of bullshit. Only they can provide for their family but let our frozen dinners help. I shake my head and run a hand through his hair. Forcing him to look me in the eye. "Justin. They'll find someone else. They always do. You can't kill yourself for these bastards."

"They're not bad guys Brian. Not all of them."

"What about the one last night. The one who wanted to..."

He turns away. "He didn't want anything out of the ordinary."

That bothers me more. "Justin, it's not okay."

### ~~~262~~~

Great, I'm crying. I usually save the tears for the guys who want them. I have a code for that too. He doesn't stop.

"It's not supposed to be ordinary to need days to recover."

"Yeah, well, you don't even need an hour."

He smirks. "I'm like that. But we're not talking about refraction time. Most of these guys don't care if you get off."

He's wrong. "Yes they do."

"Right, they don't want you to."

"Which is better, since I don't get off on what they do."

"Justin. Someone will provide for their needs. Get your own needs met."

### ~~~263~~~

I wonder if I'm pushing too hard. I consider backing off but he seems to be listening. He slams his appointment book shut. "I am meeting my needs. I have a room all to myself and enough money to make sure I'm not homeless for a while. I'm not giving up my clients."

"What if you just ditched the ones who draw blood?" did I just say that? What the fuck is wrong with me?

He's silent. I stare at him. I can barely hear him when he talks. It's almost a whisper. "That would be almost all of them."

### ~~~264~~~

He holds me while I cry. I feel like such a useless faggot, and it's all his fault. I was fine last night. I was fine this morning. Now I'm crying? About what? My life isn't so bad. Lots of people have it worse.

"Brian. It's time for you to go."

He pulls away and looks at me. Lifting my chin and kissing my eyelids. "Please cancel tomorrow's appointments."

I shake my head. He stands up. "Think about it?"

I shrug and he leaves. "Lock the door."

I lock it behind him and then lean against it for a moment.

## Hustler Justin XXIV

I consider calling him once I'm home but I don't think there's anything left to say. I end up working on some one of the campaigns that got fucked up in my absence and not getting to sleep until after two. The alarm goes off way too early but I've got a long day ahead of me. I fight off images of him sharing the shower with me. I consider stopping at the diner for breakfast but Deb will ask me about him. She thinks I'm taking care of him. If she only knew. I get a latte at Starbuck's.

### ~~~266~~~

It takes me forever to fall asleep. I finish my book and realize I won't have time to get another tomorrow, not with two clients. When I finally fall asleep it's not that same safe sleep. I curse Brian's name. I was happy here, and now he's made me question everything. He acts like it would be so easy to just cancel my clients and pretend to be something I'm not. I wish I knew where Isaac was. He always made things make sense. Come morning I shower and prepare myself for my first client. I shouldn't be so nervous.

### ~~~267~~~

Eventually I close my office door. As the clock pushes past nine and closer to ten I can't help thinking about Justin's first appointment today. It's worse knowing what all the little drawings mean. It's worse knowing Justin won't stop. I'm bellowing to Cynthia for more coffee when my cell phone rings. "Justin."

“Brian... I...I canceled.”

“You did the right thing.”

“I don’t think so...he was mad.”

“He was there?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?” why did I ask? He won’t tell me.

“I think so.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Brian...” but I’ve hung up.

## ~~~268~~~

I check to make sure it’s him before unlocking the door. He takes one step inside and pulls me close. I lean my head against his chest for a second. “You didn’t have to come over. He didn’t hurt me.

Brian pushes my robe off and shakes his head. His finger traces a bite mark on my shoulder. "That’s new."

"That was before..."

He leads me to the sofa. “What happened?”

"He... when he realized Isaac wasn’t around to answer to he..."

“Wanted more.”

I nod. Brian’s eyes are dark.

“So I said no.”

He smiles.

I tell him the rest.

## ~~~269~~~

I’m angry but also proud and relieved. He said no. I didn’t think he used the word with anyone but me. The asshole wanted something he didn’t want and he said no. He decided that his comfort, or safety was worth more than this bastard’s desires. I kiss his forehead. “Brian, you have to go.”

Okay, I clearly missed something.

“I have a client coming in like, two hours, and...

“What? I thought..."

"If I had done what he wanted, I never would have been up for another client today."

My heart sinks.

"Cancel him too."

He laughs. "I can't."

### ~~~270~~~

I was shaken. It wasn't just what he wanted, it's that he kept talking about Isaac, and how surprised he was that we'd agreed to his requests. I told him I wasn't working with Isaac anymore, his eyes lit up. I guess having Isaac to answer to kept them from going too far. He bit my shoulder and I pushed him off me. No biting was always a rule. It's not safe, and it leaves marks for days. He didn't listen. I kned him in the balls. Brian seems surprised I'm not canceling both clients. Does he want me to starve?

### ~~~271~~~

He wants me to leave and just...? I pull the robe back over his shoulder. "Did you clean that?"

He nods. I go to his bathroom and get the supplies. "I'm doing it again." He sighs and sits still. I just need something to do with my hands other than pick him up and carry him out of here. At two thirty he's got another appointment. "Justin."

"Mmm?" He winces as I touch the cotton ball to the quickly bruising teeth marks. "Don't tell them Isaac's gone."

He nods. "I figured that much out for myself."

"I'm coming by tonight."

### ~~~272~~~

I don't argue with him. If I tell him not to, he won't leave at all. I try to ease his mind, and mine. "I've worked for this one before."

"You said that about the asshole who just left."

"Yeah, but Mister Kechmyer's easier."

"You know his name?"

"No, but that's what he likes to be called. It was his gym teacher's name..."

"Sick fucks."

"They're working out their issues."

"They're hurting you."

"All he wants is some simple age play, reverse the roles. He's the one using, not being used." I don't think it's unhealthy.

"Maybe not for him."

~~~273~~~

I put the band-aid on the worst of it. It's decorated with some cartoon. He shrugs. "Helps them see me as young."

I look at him. He really doesn't look old, except maybe around the eyes, but I'd guess he had that by fifteen. "We're going to get you out of this."

He shakes his head. "Not today. Now go. I've got things to do."

"To please the client?"

"It's my job." He shrugs, smiles, and pushes me out the door.

I make a phone call on the way back to the office. I may be in over my head.

Hustler Justin XXV

I felt okay when he was here. Once he leaves I'm nervous again. It's stupid I know. I clean up and get ready for my 2:30 when there's a knock at the door. I don't recognize the guy. My phone rings. It's Brian. "I'm fine."

"I know. There's someone there to see you. Let him in"

He sent me a client? Weird. I open the door and the he introduces himself, then he walks around the apartment, nods and leaves. "I'll be right outside."

I call Brian back. "Who the hell is that?"

"Charlie. He's there if you need him."

~~~275~~~

I feel better knowing Charlie's there. He owes me one and until I can get him to stop this I'd prefer to have them think Isaac beefed up security. I still feel antsy, as two thirty rolls around but Charlie's good at what he does. He's actually good at a lot of things. The other appointments I made will make him even less happy but I'll deal with that when I see him tonight. Charlie calls at four to tell me that the client left.

"How was Justin?"

"I didn't get a good look."

I didn't expect him to. "Thanks."

~~~276~~~

I hear Charlie leave a little after the client does. I shower and pull on comfortable clothes. The phone rings. It's not Brian. I take all the information and then wait an hour to call him back. I keep telling myself that I don't have to do this. Isaac's voice is reminding me that I do. Next month's rent is looming. The cost of some of the things I still need factor in and I make the appointment. I hide my appointment book. I never should have let Brian know what my code means. I'm surprised he hasn't called again.


~~~277~~~

When Charlie reports back I thank him again and stare unseeingly at the wall. He took the appointment. I fucking hate playing games like this but I don't trust him to be honest about this and doing a full body check every night is... well, tempting but still not enough. Not if he's going to actually take appointments with clients like the one Charlie pretended to be. I try to focus on the campaign in front of me and eventually I'm able to get some work done. I leave early; it's only eight thirty. I drive straight to Justin's apartment.

~~~278~~~

"You have your own place. I've seen it."

He doesn't say anything he just pushes past me. "I brought orange chicken."

I sigh and we sit at the kitchen counter, drinking beer he also brought. He's waiting for something, I'm not sure what.

He tells me about the idiots who fucked up his campaign and how his clients have no idea that they're asking for the impossible and all the while he studiously avoids looking at me.

"What?"

"What, what?"

"You're up to something."

He tries to cover quickly, but he's a lousy liar. "You get any new clients today?"

~~~279~~~

"No."

He's a lousy liar. He's tearing his fortune in half before he's even read it. The cookie is now crumbs on the counter.

"Where's your appointment book."

"Hidden."

"So there's something in there you don't want me to see."

"No one's supposed to see it."

"I made you an appointment."

He looks confused.

"Not that kind of appointment. I want you to talk to someone."

"A shrink?" He's right to look doubtful. A shrink is next, but that'll be years. Besides, he'd have to be open to it. We're not there yet.

"No. A professional."

"Professional what?"

“Dungeon master.”

~~~280~~~

He’s lost his fucking mind. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“I just want you to talk to him.”

“He hurts people for money.”

“And what you do makes so much more sense.”

“Brian...”

“Justin, do this for me.”

“If I do, you drop the whole thing afterwards.”

“For a week.”

“Forever.”

“Ten days.”

“Two weeks.”

“Two weeks but Charlie stays.”

“He’s creepy.”

“Not as creepy as your clients.”

“He can’t do anything. He’s outside the apartment.”

“From now on he’ll be inside.”

“That won’t work.”

“Make it work.”

“If I can’t?”

“I’ll make it work. You won’t like it.”

~~~281~~~

He’s right. Charlie needs to be inside the apartment. He still doesn’t know the appointment he made today is bogus. I pick up the food containers and move them to the trash. His head is resting on his hand. His eyes are closed. He looks so young. A loud buzzer startles him. He smiles embarrassedly. “Laundry’s done.”

He takes a pile of sheets from the dryer and I follow him into his office, trying not to think about what happens here while I help him fold them.

~~~282~~~

I want to ask him a bunch of questions. Why he thinks my talking to a dungeon master is a good idea. Does he think I should work for him? How he knows Charlie. How much Charlie knows. He looks tired though and his eyes have this kind of hurt look. At least he ate tonight. When the sheets are folded I lay back on the bed and risk asking him to join me. He does, fully clothed. He wraps his arms around me and it feels nice. Isaac only did this after a really hard practice. It was different.

~~~283~~~

When he first invites me to lie down I'm not sure. If he thinks he needs to pay for Charlie, or dinner with sex... but we both stay fully clothed. He kisses my cheek and buries his head in my chest. He falls asleep and I wonder how he can sleep in this room but with his head tucked under my chin and his even breathing matching mine, I guess I fall asleep too. When I wake up it's after three. I'm on my back and he's curled around me. I close my eyes. He really does need to sleep.

~~~284~~~

When I wake up I smile. I knew he'd come back. But then I realize it's not Isaac. It doesn't smell like him and Isaac was always gone before I woke up. Brian's eyes are open but he's not moving. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"I..."

"Fell asleep. It's okay. 'C'mon. Why don't we go to the diner for breakfast, show Deb you're alive."

I nod. I actually am kind of hungry and I don't have an appointment 'til noon."

"Brian..."

"Yes?"

"I got a new client yesterday."

He nods. I'm glad, and slightly disappointed. He's getting used to what I do.

~~~285~~~

On the way to the diner I explain about the new client. He's angry. "You tricked me?"

"You weren't being honest with me."

"I was too."

"No, you weren't and Justin, what you agreed to... what the fuck were you thinking?"

"That he probably didn't know what was involved and wouldn't actually go through with it."

"And if he had? What if he really had wanted to brand you, what then?"

He shrugs. "I'd have Charlie."

"You didn't know that."

"Brian, I can take care of myself!"

He storms out of the jeep and slides into a booth. Deep Breath.

~~~286~~~

He's angry... you know what? So am I. Fuck him! Fuck all of this. He wants me to talk to someone who hurts people for a living... why? He wants to put a bodyguard at my front door? That defeats the whole purpose of what I do. He's fucking with my life, with my livelihood and I'm about to tell him so when Debbie pours me a cup of coffee and does everything but pinch my cheek like a doting grandmother. I glower at him over my coffee and he glowers back. Deb catches on and brings us our usuals.

Hustler Justin XXVI

He eats while he glares. Debbie brings him orange juice pours us some more coffee and looks like she's about to say something. She catches my look, shrugs and walks away. "So when am I supposed to meet the guy who tortures people for a living?"

"Three hours before you're supposed to go get tortured for a living."

He slumps and I shake my head. "Justin, I'm just asking you to talk to him."

"And then you'll shut up for two weeks."

Why the fuck did I agree to that? I nod, pay the bill and drive us to Don's.

~~~288~~~

The place gives me the chills. Brian's hand is on the small of my back. I think if he could stand behind me and steer me he would. We wind our way through the actual dungeon part and upstairs. We're greeted and offered drinks and ten minutes later an average looking guy with dark hair and very intense brown eyes sits across from us. He's wearing jeans and an oatmeal colored thermal shirt. I wonder why he's here with us. I guess my eyes show my surprise when Brian makes the introductions. Don laughs, "not what you were expecting, huh?"

~~~289~~~

I'm silent at first. I didn't give Don the full story; I wanted Justin to see his honest reaction. I usually come in through the front door too, but again, I wanted Justin to see the dungeons before his imagination turned them into something else. I sit back. "Justin, why don't you tell Don what you do for a living?"

He blushes and Don shakes his head laughing. "I think you'll find it's really hard to shock me."

So Justin gives him a slightly edited version of what he does and it seems Don's not as unflappable as he thought.

~~~290~~~

He looks surprised, which seems a little weird. I mean, I know what I do isn't mainstream BDSM but surely he knows there's a market for it.

"So Isaac was your boyfriend?"

I shake my head. No one understands what Isaac was. We used to joke about trying to define it but Don doesn't seem angry, he just seems interested. "He was, kinda, but he was also my trainer, and my handler."

"Was he your master?"

“No. We didn’t do stuff like that. I wasn’t his slave. It wasn’t about me getting off on pain, or him on hurting me.”

## ~~~291~~~

Don raises an eyebrow at me. I shrug and let Justin continue. “All Isaac did was to help me practice.”

“Practice?”

“Yeah, you know, get better at staying quiet or saying the right things even when I was hurting. Being what the client wanted.”

“And they wanted to hurt you.”

“I’ve explained this to Brian over and over. Those are the guys who pay better.” Isaac wasn’t a bad guy, he was looking out for our future.”

“Where is he now?”

I can hear the restrained anger in Don’s voice. I merely shake my head as Justin recounts Isaac’s disappearance.

## ~~~292~~~

Don leans forward in his chair, putting a hand over mine. “Justin. Did you see what goes on downstairs?”

I nod.

“Do you think anyone is doing anything against their will?”

“But that’s the point... they’re playing. What I do isn’t play.”

I see Brian open his mouth but Don holds up a hand and Brian doesn’t say anything. “It’s not play, you’re right. It’s deadly serious, and dangerous, and sick. Justin, in this world, in any world, it’s rape.”

“That’s bullshit! You’re just saying that because you’d go out of business if more people could do what I do!”

## ~~~293~~~

“Justin, sit down.”

He turns to face me. “Fuck you, Brian. Fuck the both of you. Why does everyone keep insisting that Isaac was trying to hurt me? Why do you insist on making me hate the one person who loved me?”

As he says it I stand up. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. He didn’t love you.”

“He did. Brian, he did, he had to.”

Don looks at me and I’m holding Justin’s shaking form against me. Don stands behind him. His hand on his shoulder.

“Justin, I love my slave. I would never do anything he didn’t want.”

## ~~~294~~~

I hear myself hiccough and pull away from Brian. “That’s you. Not everyone.”

"It's everyone sane. Safe. Sane. Consensual, those are the code words. What he did was none of those. He hurt you and you don't deserve that. You shouldn't be hurt at all if you don't find some pleasure in it."

"No one really finds pleasure in it."

I hear Don sigh and I lean against Brian's chest, avoiding eye contact. "Yes, lots of people do, just like lots of people enjoy inflicting the pain, but only to those willing to accept it."

"But I am willing to."

### ~~~295~~~

I just keep my arms around him and let him talk into my chest. Don just shakes his head. Well, at least Justin heard from a professional how fucked up what he's doing is.

"Do you want to go?" I whisper it into the top of his head and he nods. We leave through the front and Justin is silent. We get back to his apartment and he still hasn't said a word.

He eventually sits down on the bed. He's twisting his fingers around each other. I almost don't hear him when he finally speaks. "Isaac didn't rape me."

### ~~~296~~~

He's kneeling in front of me, holding my face in his hands. "Yes he did. And not just physically. He fucked with you in ways that no one should ever fuck with someone else. He took advantage of the fact that you were a kid, and alone and scared and he used you."

I feel the tears streaming. There's a hole in the middle of my chest. I swear the wind could blow through it. Nothing will ever fill it. I pull away from him and curl up in a ball. He's holding me, wrapped around me. Letting me cry.

### ~~~297~~~

The only words I can make out are "it's not true." And I don't contradict him because I'm not even sure he knows he's saying it. He doesn't move except for the body wracking sobs. I don't have a fucking clue what to do. I didn't mean to break him... but he was already broken. I didn't mean to hurt him... but in the long run, this is less painful, right? No apologies, no regrets... wasn't that my motto? So why do I want to beg his forgiveness? Why do I want to give him some lie to cling to?

### ~~~298~~~

Everything hurts. I pull out of his grasp and move to the bathroom. I find a bottle of pills and sort through them. He's standing behind me watching. I pull out two Valium and swallow them, putting the multicolored mix back in the bottle. He pulls me back on the bed and holds me close while he makes a phone call. I hear him tell Charlie to tell my 1:00 that I'm not available. I push away from him. "It's only noon. I'll be fine." He ignores me while he finishes with Charlie and hangs up the phone. "Not fair."

### ~~~299~~~

He looks about twelve when he pouts. His eyes are red, he's screaming that it's not fair. Well, I think he's proof that life isn't fair, and I no longer care what he thinks is and isn't okay. His ability to keep himself safe is no longer. It has been deemed missing, presumed dead. I'm not letting him deal with a client when he's like this. What would he let him do, just to prove he can take it? Just to prove it's not so bad? I shudder. "All that Valium is about to put you down for the count."

### ~~~300~~~

He is right about the Valium. I don't think he's right about Isaac. Even if Isaac got it wrong about some stuff, he did take care of me. He loved me when no one else did. I feel my head get a little fuzzy from the pills and lay down. Brian is holding me again. I close my eyes and pretend that it's Isaac, and he's proud of me after a rough practice session. He's rubbing my back and my ass and telling me what a good boy I am. I smile and whisper his name before I fall asleep.

## Hustler Justin XXVII

I hear him whisper Isaac's name as he closes his eyes. I can't close mine. Images of what he told Don, details that I never pushed for about "practice sessions" are burned there. He was fourteen! He's still only seventeen. The way he says Isaac's name, the wistful dreamy tone sickens me as much as what's been done to him. I stroke his back and then slide away from him. He's too drugged to notice I'm gone. I don't want to be an Isaac substitute. Charlie's already at the door. "Don't let him try to repay your kindness." He nods.

### ~~~302~~~

I wake up alone. I'm groggy but not so doped I don't feel the sinking sense of loss. I move to my own room. I don't like sleeping in the other one. I pull the covers over my head completely and keep my eyes open in the warm dark space. I have everything I ever wanted. Clients who pay well, a safe place to escape, a big chair and time to sketch and write. Why did Brian fuck with that? I want to cry but I'm out of tears. I let myself sleep again. Thinking doesn't hurt when you sleep.

### ~~~303~~~

I'm distracted the rest of the day. I call Charlie and make sure he's not going anywhere and then try to focus on work. Luckily I can do a lot of this shit without having to concentrate, because I can't get my mind of a 17 year old twink who's hurting because of me. And then I get angry again. It's not because of me. It's because of Isaac. I call him but there's no answer. Charlie swears that Justin hasn't left. I leave at eight and meet peter at his office. I don't want to do this in public.

### ~~~304~~~

When I wake up again the Valium has worn off. I wonder if something stronger would make this better. I know it will momentarily but in the long run, there's only one thing that will make it better. I get dressed and open the door. Charlie's standing there, blocking my exit. "Move."

He shakes his head.

I try to squeeze by but he's determined.

"Charlie. You're supposed to keep me safe, not prisoner."

He shakes his head. "Boss says to stay 'til he gets here."

I seethe. "I'm the boss. Let me out!"

He doesn't move. "He'll be here soon."

### ~~~305~~~

Peter doesn't tell me much that I didn't know. "He's transferring his dependence from Isaac to you. He may not even be aware he's doing it."

"How dangerous is that? I mean, I'm not going to hurt him."

“It’s a stopgap measure, but it can’t be more than that or he’ll never be anything other than an abused kid. He’ll never mature or get past this. Love and dependence are linked in his mind.”

“He’s in love with me?”

“You’re not stupid Brian. Just because you don’t want to be in love with him doesn’t mean you’re not.” I sigh.

### ~~~306~~~

Brian shows up ten minutes later, with takeout. “Charlie won’t let me leave.”

“Where were you going?”

“What’s for dinner?”

He lets me change the subject and I’m halfway through my chicken Parmesan when he pours more wine and asks again.

“I need to find someone.”

“Isaac?”

I nod. He doesn’t react. I’m surprised. “You aren’t going to yell?”

“No.”

“So I can go?”

“No.”

“But...”

“No.”

“Brian...”

He sighs. “Justin. He hurt you, and I don’t think he wants you to find him. It’s classic pedophile behavior. Once you started to look like a man, his interest was gone.”

### ~~~307~~~

He pulls his hand from mine and drains his glass. I refill it. He gives me all the standard protests but some of his passion is gone from them. He’s starting to see that it’s true. It’s textbook. The fact that Isaac’s probably seducing some 12 year old right now bothers me but not as much as all the things Peter said about me, and Justin and what we might be in for, emotionally. He gives up trying to convince me. “I can’t live locked in this apartment.

“I’ll tell Charlie to stand down, but there are a few conditions...”

### ~~~308~~~

I listen and nod, and promise. No picking up guys on street corners, (not a problem). No looking for Isaac... that one hurts but I have an idea that doesn’t involve leaving to implement. Letting Charlie stand inside the apartment if have clients over.

I choose to ignore the if. I have a client booked for tomorrow morning. Okay, so the new deal says I have to tell him that. It’s almost eleven when I finally tell him. He stares and nods. “Let me see the book.”



I get it for him because the argument would end this way anyway.

~~~309~~~

Peter was right. I don't like doing it but apparently someone has to 'til he can do it for himself. I cross off the symbol that means there's no safe word and the one that indicates that drawing blood doesn't require that the client stop immediately. "No more of those."

He nods. He's transferred his decision making from Isaac to me. Great. So to him, this is love. He sits next to me on the sofa. His warm body curled around mine. "Are you going to help me practice?"

Holy fuck. What have I gotten myself into? I shake my head.

Hustler Justin XXVIII

He seems upset that I asked him about practicing. His body got tense and his hand was running through my hair, now it's kind of gripping my neck. "Brian?"

I feel him let out a long breath.

He turns to face me. "You don't need to practice anymore."

"But..."

"Listen to me. Those weren't for you. I don't believe for a second that he didn't get off on it. And even if I did, it doesn't matter. You don't so we're not doing that."

"I didn't say he didn't get off on it. But that's not why he did it."

~~~311~~~

"He did it just so you could take the better paying clients?"

Justin nods, and his brow crinkles.

"Doesn't sound right when you say it out loud does it?"

He shakes his head. "But..."

I pull him close again. "I know. It's a lot to take in. But Justin, this is why everyone you tell is so upset. It's clear what he was doing, to everyone but you."

He's looking up at me. "Why are you doing this? I mean if you don't get off on it at all..."

"Because you can't just go back out there alone. You'll die."

~~~312~~~

"You know what I don't get?"

He laughs a little. "The list is too long to start guessing."

“Everyone is so worried that I might die. Debbie makes sure that we’re all being safe, you, the clients who wanted to ‘save’ me. Their answer was always that if I kept up like this I’d wind up dead. Every outreach program that tried to haul me off to some foster home had the same argument.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while.

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why it matters.”

His grip around my shoulder tightens. “I know you don’t.”

~~~313~~~

He really doesn’t understand and it’s nothing I can explain to him tonight, or ever. Someday, he’s just going to have to care if he lives or dies. “Justin, for now, can you know that I care, and tomorrow, can we think about making sure that you care.”

He shrugs. “I guess. You should go. I’ve got a client in the morning.”

I nod. “So do I”

He looks at me, clearly confused. I laugh. “Different kind of client.”

I get up to leave and kiss him gently. “I’ll send Charlie home if you promise leave the apartment tonight.”

“Promise.”

~~~314~~~

I lock the door behind them and then lock the bedroom door. The alarm is set for five, which gives me two hours before my client. That should be enough time to get ready. I curl into bed but I’m not really tired. I try to draw something that expresses what I’ve been through but in the end, it just ends up as words. I fill more than a dozen pages with my rambling before I feel like I might be able to sleep. I dream Brian’s running a bulldozer through the practice room while I beg him not to.

~~~315~~~

I pitch the client on the new exiting way to sell their low fat cookies and pretend to be considering their input. When my phone rings I excuse myself. Charlie tells me that Justin’s client has left and Justin swears he doesn’t have anything else booked for the day. I tell him to go home and wait for Justin to call. It takes him about ten minutes.

“You’re supposed to call as soon as they leave.”

“I figured you’d want to give Charlie a chance to report first so you could check our stories.”

“Twat.”

“Later?”

“Later.”

I hang up.

~~~316~~~

I need a couple of things. I didn't promise him I wouldn't go out today; besides, he wants me to do stuff on my own, just not dangerous stuff. I decide to wear the clothes he bought me. What I bought is the kind of thing Isaac and my clients liked me in. I think I like the way I look in the dark red button-down and jeans better. When I get home at four I'm the proud owner of a laptop with a wireless Internet connection and a printer. I'm setting it up when Brian comes in. He's early.

~~~317~~~

He drops what he's doing to greet me, and I kind of wish he wouldn't. "What's that?"

"I bought a laptop."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted one and it's my money."

"I can't really argue with that."

"Don gave me that whole list of websites to visit. I could keep a database of my clients and stuff. Plus this one plays music and games so I don't need a TV."

It's the first purchase he's made that seems to be just for him. I decide I don't care how much he overpaid. He's still playing with it when the pizza comes.

~~~318~~~

I barely hear Brian calling me because I'm playing some new song that I downloaded. He waves a slice in front of me and I wrinkle my nose. "I don't like mushrooms."

He rolls his eyes. "You couldn't have mentioned this preference before I ordered the pizza?"

"I shrug, trying to find the mute button. "I forgot."

"What about the other two times we got pizza?"

"That was before I knew you wanted me to be honest."

"Can you pick off the mushrooms?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Have you eaten?"

I take the slice. He glares at me. "Tomorrow, you eat."

~~~319~~~

Every time I think we're over some hurdle a new one pops up. He doesn't eat without reminders. I glance at the receipt. He spent way more than he had to on that computer, he still won't sit on his own furniture unless I'm here with him. The phone rings and I hear him interview the potential client. I want to grab the phone out of his hand, but I think he should do this part himself. When I hear him say that Justin will not be able to accommodate him I smile. He's terminates the call quickly after that.

~~~320~~~

I had a twinge of doubt but his smile makes me think I did the right thing. He offers me another slice of pizza and I take it and sit on the barstool. He wanted fuck me bareback. Brian scowls. "Was that all he wanted?"

I shake my head. "You'll get mad if you hear the rest."

"Not at you. You said no."

"How am I going to pay my rent if I keep saying no?"

"We'll figure something out but don't worry about it. Keep saying no."

"No."

"Huh?"

"I was practicing."

He laughs. "That we can practice together."

## Hustler Justin XXIX

He cleans up the pizza and walks the box to the trash. He spends another forty minutes making sure every crumb and scrap of packing material is gone. I stop him when he pulls out the vacuum cleaner a second time. "Justin."

"It can't look lived in."

"You live here."

"I live there" he points to his room.

"That's why you don't sit on the furniture?"

"I'm just not used to it."

"To what?"

"Using it. Isaac..."

He trails off and leaves me with the image of him sitting at Isaac's feet like a puppy never allowed on the sofa.

~~~322~~~

He's upset again. I pull him to the sofa and sit next to him. "See, I'm sitting on it."

"Because I'm here."

"I sit on it if a client is here and wants me to. They usually don't."

He gets that blank stare.

"I'm going to stop talking about what clients ask for."

"I don't want you to stop that."

"Yes you do."

"It's hard to hear. That doesn't mean I shouldn't hear it."

"You want a written report?"

He looks at me thoughtfully.

"I was joking."

"I like the idea."

"Shouldn't someone find this sick?"

"Not for that, twat."

~~~323~~~

I stare at him for a minute and he starts to fidget.

Justin... can you write it all down, everything, start with... home, your mother, all of it and just keep going 'til you get to... here."

"Well, I wanted to learn to type, this would be good practice."

What I'm thinking may be wrong, but then again, people love to hear about the horrors others have been through. I think I've found my ghostwriter.

"No one's going to care."

"Justin. If you don't want to do this you don't have to. We'll change your name. You can be anonymous."

~~~324~~~

He's out of his fucking mind. No one wants to hear my story. It's boring. "Will people think it's you?"

"No, they'll think I made it up, no one will believe it's real."

"But it is real. It's my real life."

"Do you want people to know that?"

"Yes. I made choices and I'm here and I'm not ashamed even if you are."

"I'm not ashamed of you. I just wasn't sure..."

"Well I'll write it, because you want to read it. But I don't think anyone else will."

No one else will be interested but Brian wants is...

Hustler Justin XXX

Justin leans his head on my shoulder. "Don't you want to go out?"

"Do you?"

"No. I'm good here. I just thought you might want a change. You can't be happy being stuck here with me every night."

He's right. I can't, so why am I? I'm sure it'll wear off once I'm sure he's safe.

He kisses my jaw. "I'm safe and I'm in for the night with no clients booked for tomorrow. Go have some fun. I'll see you on Monday."

I nod absently but when I stand up, I'm pulling him with me. "Let's go to bed."

~~~326~~~

He's moving me towards the bedroom. I didn't expect that. As he pushes my shirt off my shoulders I move to retrieve it, but he shakes his head, pulling me by the waistband of my jeans. "Leave it there."

He pulls off his own shirt and my hands are working at his belt. I pull it out of the belt loops and toss it on the bed. He picks it up and tosses it out the door. Something in my stomach relaxes. I forget sometimes that this room doesn't have to be about pain. I forget everything when we're naked.

~~~327~~~

Once I realized what he was doing with the belt I got angry. I bit back the rage and tossed it. His expression made some of the anger dissipate but not all of it. He shouldn't be so grateful for small gestures. I pull him on top of me when we're naked. I love watching him get lost in pleasure, as if he's discovering it for the first time. Maybe he really is. He presses his body against mine and our cocks, both wet and hard, slide against each other. He reaches for the lube and I watch his face.

~~~328~~~

One of the things I love about doing this with him is that he's always watching me. It should feel creepy but the way his eyes follow my every move, the way he makes sure that our bodies never fully lose contact, it keeps us connected. It reminds me it's him and not a client. He's careful with me but doesn't make me feel broken.

He's the only one to ever fuck me and make me feel like a man.

And I do know I shouldn't get too used to it. I still have a few good little-boy year's left.

~~~329~~~

He's thinking about something. I wish I could read his mind. Then when I think about some of the things he's told me, I'm kind of glad that I can't. I usually love it when a trick gets lost in his own world, but he doesn't do that. He goes blank, hides in his own head. There's a difference and I don't want that to happen. "Justin."

He looks at me and I smile, reaching up to brush the hair off his face. "Hi."

He kisses me. "Hi."

"Don't disappear."

He nods. He knows what I mean. I kiss him.

~~~330~~~

He rolls us over so that he's on top of me and I wait to feel the panic that usually rises when I feel trapped. It's not there.

I assume that eventually I'll have to squeeze my eyes shut and hide but his movements are carefully planned to make sure that I'm never uncomfortable. He touches a tender spot; a barely discernable bite mark and I guess I flinch. He kisses it gently and then kisses my belly and my thighs. When his wet finger slides inside me I bite my lip, remaining silent. "Justin, I want to hear you."

~~~331~~~

Justin's POV

He presses inside me. I cross my ankles behind his back and let his tongue plunder my mouth. The feeling is delicious. I don't think I've ever felt like this, not even with Isaac. He's moving inside me, finding my prostate and making sure he hits it often enough to keep me gasping but sporadically enough to keep me from coming. I move with him, angling towards those perfect long strokes that make me groan. He speeds up and we come together. For the first time my body and mind are in complete agreement. Neither wants to let him go.

Hustler Justin XXXI

~~~332~~~

Still Justin's POV

He moves off of me, his head falling on the pillow. I instinctively move closer to him. He smiles and kisses the side of my mouth, running his hand over my face. "You're beautiful."

I turn away from him.

"Hey." His hand is on my shoulder. I shrug it off. "Hey." This time his hand and his voice are more insistent. "Justin. Look at me."

I turn before I know I'm doing it. He swipes a thumb under my eye. I'm so stupid.

"What's wrong?"

I shake my head. He doesn't need to know how stupid I am. "I'm fine."

~~~333~~~

Brian's POV

I shake my head and wait. Sometimes that works. He closes his eyes and another tear falls. I kiss that one and more follow. "Hey, Justin. Talk to me."

I'm holding him against my chest but he pulls away. "I don't need you to lie to me. I can accept what we have without all the pretty words."

Huh? "Huh?"

He's sitting up now. Anger overcoming sadness. "I know I'm not beautiful, okay? I don't need you to say I am. I'd actually prefer that you didn't lie."

“Justin. I don’t lie. Ever.”

“Bullshit.”

I shake my head for emphasis.

~~~334~~~

He can be so frustrating sometimes. Just because he thinks I’m nothing but a dumb kid doesn’t mean I’m completely oblivious to reality. “Brian, I’m blond, and young. I know that, hell I get paid good money for that.” He cringes and I feel a little satisfied at the moment. “Don’t start feeding me pretty words. I don’t need them, I don’t even want them.”

He just stares at me. “Why would I lie about something like that?”

“Because you’re one of those ‘nice guys’. The kind who tell you what you want to hear.”

He starts laughing really hard.

~~~335~~~

I’m not laughing at him, but... I pull myself together. “Justin.” I take his head in my hands and kiss his forehead. “You’re fucking adorable.”

“Fuck you.”

“I have never said anything nice to anyone just because they wanted to hear it, and you are beautiful.”

He’s shaking his head adamantly. “I’m not, Brian, I know I’m not.”

“Because Isaac said that you weren’t?”

He shrugs and I know I’m right. I light us each a cigarette.

“We shouldn’t smoke in here.”

“Would your clients disapprove?”

He looks down, twisting his fingers.

“Or would Isaac?”

His expression says it all.

~~~336~~~

He’s so sure it’s all Isaac’s fault. And the way he says his name, it’s like a curse. “I wish you wouldn’t hate him”

He shrugs and exhales a long stream of smoke. “I can’t help it. I hate him.”

“You don’t know him.”

“I know enough. What he did was sick, and twisted. Justin, he hurt you in every way possible.”

“He saved me. Why can’t you understand that? He saved my life.”

“He stole your childhood. He stole your money. He stole...”

He’s out of words. I shake my head. “You don’t know him. You don’t know anything!”

~~~337~~~

“So tell me.”

He sighs and throws both our cigarettes out the window.

“You should get an ashtray in here.”

He shudders and shakes his head. “No cigarettes, that’s my rule.”

When what’s he’s telling me registers I pull him close. He’s crying again. “I tried to stay still.”

“I know.” I whisper it across his ear, my arms tight around his waist. “No more cigarettes. I promise.”

He shakes his head. “You can’t promise that.”

I push him away so he can see my eyes. “I promise.”

He rests his head on my chest. My hatred of Isaac burns.

~~~338~~~

I just rest, but he won’t let the subject go as easily. “Why do you think Isaac saved your life?”

“I don’t think, I know. I was thirteen, my father hated me, my sister was three and he barely had time for her. I knew I was gay, and so did some of the kids at school. Add that to short, and bad at sports and life was a living hell.”

I know he’s listening. His arm tightens around me.

“So I decided to get out of it.”

“Out of what?”

“Life.”

“You mean?”

I nod. He’s shaking. He understands.

~~~339~~~

I stay silent, willing the rage in my body not to overwhelm me. If I let it out now, I’ll scare him.

“How did you meet Isaac?”

“He found me. I was stupid and I didn’t know what I was doing and he found me sitting on the playground trying to slit my wrists.”

“And then he just took you to his place.”

“No. Yes... kind of... we went back to his place but only so he could help me clean up, so my father wouldn’t find out.”

I think about asking what Isaac was doing on a middle-school playground

~~~340~~~

His body is completely still now, and I can't look at him. "I didn't have any friends. He was my friend. I hung out there after school. He fed me, and we laughed and played games and he convinced me that maybe checking out wasn't the best idea. He gave me a reason to live. I lived for him."

"What would have happened if your father had found out?"

"He would have made me see a shrink." He makes a sound and I can tell he thinks that would have been preferable.

"So how'd you end up living with him?"

~~~341~~~

He hesitates before answering.

"Soon we were together all the time. My dad was mad because my grades dropped. I was never home to watch Molly. He grounded me."

"So you ran away."

"Yeah, but I thought he'd come looking for me."

I turn my head to look at him. "He didn't?"

He's crying. I feel the tears fall onto my chest. I just keep running my fingers through his hair.

"I guess he was glad I was gone."

"Did he know where Isaac lived?"

"I was always there."

"He dropped you off, picked you up?"

"No Isaac drove me."

~~~342~~~

He waits for a couple of minutes before he says anything. "You never went back to school did you?"

"I hated it there."

"How long 'til you and Isaac moved?"

"A long time, like two months."

"Justin..."

"It's okay Brian. My dad didn't love me. I got over that."

"How old was he?"

"My dad?"

"Isaac."

He's angry again. He's always angry when I talk about him. "Twenty six I think."

"Jesus Christ."

"I know, but he..."

"Loved you... yeah. There are laws against 26-year-olds loving 13-year-old boys."

"Why?"

He's upset I asked. I think I'm just supposed to know.

Hustler Justin XXXII

I don't know if it's better that he doesn't know how wrong what was done to him is, or if he should be as full of rage for himself as I am for him. I don't think he even really comprehends what he just told me. His face could have been on milk cartons, his father could have tried, but he was a kid who didn't even know he was abducted. At that age, they usually assume he ran away. I hold him and he's looking up at me. "You're angry."

I nod. "But not at you."

"At Isaac again."

~~~344~~~

I wish he could just accept that my past was my past and it wasn't so bad. "Brian, I won't talk about Isaac anymore, not if it's going to upset you."

He shakes his head. "You talk about anything you want."

"Do you really want me to write your book for you?"

"No. But I do want you to write it all down. For you."

"But I already know it."

"I know, but they say it's helpful, and besides, it'll give you something to do when you're busy not seeing clients."

"At all?"

"I think you should take a sabbatical."

~~~345~~~

I actually hold my breath waiting for his response. He launches off me, and pulls on his robe. "Fuck you!" He storms out and slams the door. Well, that went better than I thought.

I wait a minute before I follow him. He's on the computer but I'm not sure what he's doing.

"Show me how to use this thing."

"For what?"

"I want my own website. I want to advertise. I want clients who don't ask questions and actually want me."

“You think I don’t want you?”

“You want something I don’t know if I can give.”

“Please try.”

~~~346~~~

He looks so sad I don’t know what to say. “I won’t stop taking clients. I can’t. I have expenses.”

He nods but he’s trying to find some way around it. I can practically see him thinking. “I’m handling your appointment book. No more than one client a day.”

“I can handle three. Hell, I’ve done four before. Once I did six.”

He doesn’t seem as impressed with that as he should be. “Two.”

I do the math in my head, two clients six days a week. I nod. “Two, but high paying ones.”

“Safe words. No blood, and Charlie’s there.”

~~~347~~~

He agrees and it doesn’t make a fucking difference. He won’t use the safe word anyway. I sit down and watch him think. He bites his thumb and when he turns to face me his anger seems to be gone. He lets his robe pool at his feet as he kneels in front of me.

“I’m sorry I yelled.”

I try to pull him up. I hate when he does this.

“Brian, let me apologize.”

“You just did.”

His mouth is on my cock. His face doesn’t show anything but pleasure. I stroke his hair while he blows me. He’s good.

~~~348~~~

Isaac always said I was a natural at this. I don’t remember much about the first few times we did it except that I kept thinking I was going to choke. That doesn’t happen anymore. Isaac helped me practice until he said I was pretty good. I actually like the way Brian tastes, and I love doing this for him. He loses himself in what he’s feeling. He stops looking so angry and sad. I hold his balls in my hand while I take him all the way into my throat. He groans when I swallow, moments later, he comes.

~~~349~~~

I come and he doesn’t stop until I’m soft again. He pulls off me, licking his lips. I pull him towards me. Kissing him. His mouth, and then when he’s standing between my knees, his chest. I stand up, turning him around ‘til he’s on the sofa, and I’m between his legs. He’s only uncomfortable with the idea for a moment, then his hands are twisted in my hair and he’s moaning. I don’t stop either. Not until he pushes me off, laughing. Swearing that he needs at least three minutes before he can go again. I’m happy to wait.

~~~350~~~

"You should sleep at your place tonight." He nods but he's half asleep on my chest as I say it. I guess we're both sleeping here. It's okay though. I don't mind sleeping in that bed when he's there with me.

I push at his shoulder a little and we both sort of stumble into the room and fall onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. He reaches for me in the middle of the night and fucks me so gently I'm not sure he was completely awake. Neither of us is really awake until almost noon. It's nice.

## Hustler Justin XXXIII

I wake up and he's wrapped around me. Occasionally he whimpers in his sleep but he doesn't fully wake up 'til almost noon. He smiles at me sheepishly, pulling away. I just keep my arm around him. "He hated when I was too clingy."

"Did he?"

He nods against my chest. "Sometimes I slept in the practice room so that he wouldn't have to deal with me."

"You chose to?"

His forehead wrinkles. "Not really, it just seemed..."

I kiss his forehead. "Let's get showered and get something to eat."

It's a while before we get out of the shower.

~~~352~~~

When I'm getting dressed I think about what he said. It's weird. I remember a lot of things being my decision but when he asks me about them I realize that maybe they were Isaac's. There must be something wrong with my memory. Writing it all down might be a good idea. I keep getting confused about how things happened. He kisses the back of my neck. My hair's still wet. "What are you thinking about?"

I smile. "You."

He rolls his eyes and we go to the diner.

Debbie smiles at us when we sit down. "I knew it!"

~~~353~~~

Debbie doesn't know a fucking thing. I grimace and shake my head. She just fills our coffee cups and laughs. Maybe she knows more than I think. Michael comes in and pushes me over to sit next to me.

"Michael, Justin, Justin, Michael."

He nods. "Treating them to breakfast too? You're getting soft in your old age."

I shake my head and Debbie kisses Michael. He's too busy complaining about the lipstick to want any more details on Justin.

Michael's chatter fills the booth. He's talking about fat Marcie from work. Justin is inhaling his pancakes. I drink my coffee.

### ~~~354~~~

Michael is talking to Brian; he barely seems to notice me, which is fine. When I finish I get up to leave. Brian reaches his hand out, stopping me. "We've got things to do."

"We do?"

He nods and drops money on the table, prodding Michael who looks at him oddly but lets him out of the booth. "Will I see you later?"

Brian kisses Michael on the lips. "Of course."

Debbie brings Michael his eggs and we slip out, avoiding further commentary.

"Where are we going?"

Brian shrugs. "Anywhere you want."

"You won't want to go there."

"Try me."

### ~~~355~~~

A museum? I shake my head but I did leave it up to him.

He's captivated. "I've wanted to come back here for so long."

"Come back?"

He nods, engrossed by the paintings in a new exhibit. "We came here on a sixth grade field trip."

He's lived in the city his whole life and never been back? He keeps moving, as if he has to see everything today.

"Justin. Slow down. We can come back. you can come back."

He flashes that smile when he realizes it's true. "Whenever I want."

I nod. "Anytime it's open. Don't break in."

### ~~~356~~~

We move on to a new photo exhibit. "Picturing Childhood: Pictorialist Family Photography" I freeze.

They don't all look happy. Some of them look downright miserable. I wonder what happened to them. I reach out to touch a photo of a boy who looks about twelve. Brian touches my hand and I pull away. When we're finally in another room I feign interest in the impressionists. Brian faces me. His finger under my chin, so our eyes meet.

"Okay?" I nod but I know he's not buying it.

"Want to get out of here?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

~~~357~~~

It wasn't my favorite show either. Pictures of families, little kids. You either feel bad for them, wonder why they're so fucking happy, or realize they're probably dead now. Something hit him harder than that though. I sit next to him and he just stares at the Monet, zoning out. "My mom had a framed print of this. I used to stare at it for hours. I bought one and put it in the practice room, but Isaac took it down. He said it was a crutch."

I pull him to me. "We'll buy one today."

He shakes his head.

~~~358~~~

He means well but he doesn't understand. "Let's go."

Brian nods and we leave. "I still want to come back."

He stops me at the front desk and buys me a membership. "Now you can, whenever you want."

I smile and refuse to cry. We head back to my apartment. Once we're there I sit on the floor and look up at him. "It's like, all of a sudden, nothing makes any sense."

He nods. "Reality hurts."

"But my reality made sense."

"But it wasn't reality."

"I want it back."

"I know."

He pulls me onto the sofa with him.

~~~359~~~

He needs to talk to Peter, maybe every day, or twice a week, or at least once. He's starting to break down and that's good, but I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

He shakes his head when I mention it. "I'm not crazy."

"You're not sane."

"Brian."

"You're not. And this new reality, he can help you process it."

"I don't want to process it. I want it to go away."

"It won't. It's real. There will be things that remind of that every day."

"Not if I don't leave the apartment."

"Is that really what you want?"

~~~360~~~

I have to think about his question for a minute. When I lived with Isaac I only left to see clients. It wasn't so bad. I had what I needed. Isaac loved me. He did. His way of showing it may not have been conventional but he wouldn't spend the kind of time with me if he didn't love me. He helped me practice so I could do my best, be the best that I could be. Brian's hugging me and I close my eyes. I just wish he'd stop asking me to be so independent. "Brian, fuck me. Please."

~~~361~~~

I pull back to see his eyes. He's here, present, hurting. I remove his clothes slowly, checking at every step to make sure he hasn't disappeared. He doesn't. He clings to me like a lifeline but he doesn't go blank. I lean back on the sofa and let him ride me. He's less hesitant about it now. He puts the condom on with his mouth. Leaving my cock spit slicked and ready. He lowers himself onto me and moves my hand to his cock. He's so beautiful when he's like this. His focus is on nothing but his own pleasure.

Hustler Justin XXXIV

I push back the fear. I want that moment. The one that I first discovered with Isaac, before he started training me. The one I'd almost forgotten about until Brian. His hand pulls at my cock while I ride him and I can feel it approaching, complete abandon, one that will have no consequences. I raise myself up and slam down hard. He grunts and pushes into me, hitting just the right spot. I rock back and forth. My eyes closed, my mouth open and when it courses through my body I let myself groan loudly, then I fall forward.

~~~363~~~

His sweaty body is pressed against mine. I'm still inside him. He moves, sliding himself over my cock, kissing my shoulder, my jaw, whatever he can reach. I wrap my arms around his waist as I come. He smiles at me then he gets quiet and I assume he's sleeping but then I feel the tears against my chest.

"Hey."

"Brian?"

"Hmmm?"

"Is it always like this? I mean for most people. Is this what sex means?"

"Well, most people aren't gay men. So no."

"Is this what it's always like for you?"

I'm not sure how to answer that.

~~~364~~~

He's silent. I see him roll his lip into his mouth, which means he's not sure what to say, not that he doesn't want to say it. "Brian?"

"It's not usually like this."

"Is it usually better?" I'm tracing my finger around his nipple, watching the way the skin puckers. He shakes his head.

"No. It's usually less personal."

“I mean for you. I know it’s not personal with me.”

“I mean for me. I’ve usually forgotten about who I’m fucking as soon as I get off, sometimes before that.”

“So this isn’t normal?”

“Justin, nothing about you is normal.”

~~~365~~~

I push him off of me. “I should go home.”

He nods. I can tell he’s hurt but he won’t say anything. He’s standing next to me. I kiss his forehead and then his nose. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“I have a client.”

“I know. I’ll come by after that.”

“He’s booked ‘til eleven.”

“Justin...” I’m buttoning my shirt.

“Monday.”

“I kiss him again as I’m pulling on my coat. “Call me if you need anything.”

He nods and I hear him lock the door behind me. I know his reality is melting away, the problem is, so is mine.

~~~366~~~

He always ends up leaving me with more questions than answers. I’m not tired so I lock myself in my own room and turn on the computer. I have the list Don gave me of sites to visit. I start with the first one on the list but it’s full of pictures of men with clients. I already know what that looks like. I move on to the next site and start reading about things from the sub’s POV. I wonder how much someone gets paid to write this stuff. It’s all such bullshit. No one actually likes getting hurt.

~~~367~~~

Once back at the loft I shower and then find myself pacing. It’s after eleven. I change my shirt and go to Babylon. Michael’s dancing with someone I’ve never seen. Ted is holding up the bar and Emmett seems to be dancing alone, or with three other men, I can’t quite tell. I order a drink and stand near but not with Ted. Michael sees me and pulls his dance partner over. “Brian this is David. David, Brian.” We exchange pleasantries and I walk away, dragging a hot guy with me. Justin’s only different because it had been a while.

~~~368~~~

I’m engrossed in what I’m reading. Even if I don’t believe half of it, the other half is still interesting. A few of the sites Don told me to check out weren’t about BDSM at all and I ignored them at first but when I went back to one a few things caught my eye. Now, just because Isaac did some of these things doesn’t mean he abducted me. I went voluntarily. He didn’t seduce me. I seduced him. That’s when I realize that Brian’s right. I need to write this all down, because people are making some false assumptions.

~~~369~~~

He’s got a talented tongue. I put my hands against the wall because his hair has way too much product in it. He’s sucking me hard and I lean my head back, enjoying the sensation but I realize I’m nowhere close to coming. I close

my eyes and images of Justin flash. I curse and when I do this guy pushes it into overdrive. I finally come and it's a relief when he gets up and leaves. I don't give a fuck about him, and I'm going to ignore the fact that Justin, the trained professional, does it much better.

~~~370~~~

I yawn and realize it's after two. I crawl into bed and as soon as I close my eyes my phone rings. "Brian?"

"Hey."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I called to see if you were okay."

I laugh, I can't help it. "I haven't left my apartment. I haven't left my room. I'm fine."

"Right. You should go to sleep."

"What are you on?"

"Just some stuff. Are you going to sleep?"

"Only if you are. You're still healing."

"Shhhh, that's a big secret."

"You're a dork."

"That's a big secret too."

"Goodnight Brian."

"G'night sunshine."

I hang up and smile.

~~~371~~~

He sounded almost happy, but hell, so do I. Of course I'm so altered at the moment I probably am happy, just too drunk to tell. I wonder if he's altered too. I consider calling him back to ask but then I remember that he's supposed to be sleeping. As I consider that I'm also supposed to be sleeping I wonder if I should call peter and make him an appointment. He'll probably go if I tell him he has to. I must pass out because the next thing I know it's eleven thirty and someone's banging on my door.

~~~372~~~

I panic when I realize it's after one but then I remember there's no one to punish me. I pull the covers back over my head. I shower at around three. When I'm done I check myself in the full-length mirror. There's still a fading bite mark otherwise I don't think my skin's been this unmarked before. I pull on Brian's sweatpants and his shirt. I should probably give them back but they're really comfortable. When I pull my laptop to me I start to type. It's slow at first but the story just seems to pour out of me.

~~~373~~~

I answer the door and Lindsay hands Gus to me. "You were supposed to be there at eleven. She looks around and seems satisfied that there are no strangers in the loft. "You promised to watch him, remember?" I nod, carrying Gus with me as I sit down on the chair.

“Sorry, It’s been a rough week.”

“He’s a little fussy, so give him a bottle whenever he’ll take it. Don’t put bourbon in it just to quiet him down and tell him mommy misses him.”

I roll my eyes and she kisses my cheek. “I’ll be back by midnight.

Hustler Justin XXXV

I start with the evening I met Isaac. I should probably write in order but I can’t do that. I’m kind of figuring out the typing thing as I go. I end up getting lost in memory. He was my savior. I know I wouldn’t have died that night, but only because I was too stupid to know what angle to use and that bleeding stops unless it’s under water. I know a lot more about bleeding now. He was everything I wasn’t, confident, sexy, cool. And he liked me. Me! The last person to like me was my mom.

~~~375~~~

Gus is a more than a little fussy. I try every toy in his bag, and every trick I can think of. He doesn’t seem to stop crying. Lindsay was kidding about the bourbon, but I can’t help considering it. In the end I get him to take his pacifier and he falls asleep on my chest. I search frantically for the phone when it rings. I don’t want to wake up Gus.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Why are you whispering?”

“Gus finally fell asleep.”

“Oh.”

“Justin, Gus, my son.”

“Right. Well, I’ll let you go.”

“You’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Later.”

~~~376~~~

Well, that makes no sense. Jealousy? Huh. Weird. I go back to my writing. I wanted Brian to read what I had but he’s busy. Yeah, I’ll have to do something about that jealousy. I don’t even want him here all the time, how can I be upset that he’s not? I go back to Isaac. How nice he was to me. How he listened, really listened to me. How he made me feel like it was okay to be myself. I knew it was love and I never understood ‘til now why he insisted we didn’t tell anyone else.

Hustler Justin XXXVI

Once Gus is asleep I gently transfer him to his carrier and buckle him up. We’re going for a drive. Justin didn’t sound “fine”. I don’t speed, I don’t smoke and Gus doesn’t wake up. I ring the bell and shift Gus to my other hand. He looks confused when I open the door. “What are you doing here?”

“Gus was bored.”

Gus is sucking on his pacifier, his eyes still closed. "He looks perfectly content."

I move to come in. "You don't."

He shakes his head. "Brian, get him out of here."

"Are you with a client right now?"

~~~378~~~

He moves Gus's carrier further away, as if just having him near me could damage him. "No, just... I don't like babies."

He nods. "I don't either. Gus is a special case though."

"Because he's yours."

Brian smiles. "I guess."

"Well, he's not mine. He shouldn't be here, babies are messy and gross."

He nods. "We'll go. Did you feel this way about your sister?"

"No. She was kind of a special case for me."

He tilts his head and then pushes past me. Setting Gus down on the breakfast bar and sitting on the stool. "Gus wants to stay."

~~~379~~~

His reaction to Gus seems almost irrational. He won't look at him. He sits on the floor as far away as possible. I make sure Gus is secured and walk over to him.

He shakes his head. "Can you and that... and Gus go. I'm in the middle of something."

"Really? What?"

"I'm writing. That's what you told me to do."

"Can I see it?"

He retrieves his laptop. "No one understands. I think this will help."

I nod and go over to read by Gus. After the first few sentences I'm sitting next to him. Amazed at his strength.

~~~380~~~

Gus is awake now and he's gurgling. I want to scream. Brian's arm is around me but he looks up occasionally to check on Gus. His arm tightens and I can tell he's not happy with what he's reading. "I know. I mean, I only finished the seventh grade, so my punctuation probably sucks. The computer tells me when I've spelled stuff wrong but..."

"Justin. That can all be fixed."

"But I can't be. That's what you're thinking, isn't it. 'Poor little Justin.'"

He stares at me and runs his hand along the side of my face, shaking his head.

~~~381~~~

He's not entirely wrong. My rage at Isaac is battling with my sorrow for what Isaac stole from him. What really kill me are the loving terms he uses to describe what can only be defined as a sick seduction. The way Isaac slowly introduced the topics of sex and kissing and progressed from there. Justin portrays Isaac as being hesitant, and maybe he was, but not for the reasons Justin thinks. I feel sick. Justin's narrative is not linear. Isaac wanted him to seduce some other kid? I read that part again and look up at him, not understanding.

~~~382~~~

The alien look again. Great. Gus makes a noise and he gets up and takes him out of his seat, holding him. "Why didn't you do it?"

"Do what?" I never said no to Isaac, what's he talking about?

"Seduce another kid. Get your own little money maker?"

"What the fuck would I want with a kid who doesn't know shit?"

"What did Isaac?"

"That's different. Isaac loved me. He just wanted me to lie to some kid so our future would be more secure."

He looks like he's about to say something but stops. "Even when Isaac was gone?"

~~~383~~~

Part of me wants to celebrate. He's not capable of what Isaac did. Part of me wants to shake him. How can he not recognize that if there's something wrong with doing it to some other kid, there was something wrong with what Isaac did to him? I just wait for his answer. "I don't have the kind of strength Isaac did. It takes a lot of discipline to train a kid."

"No pun intended?"

He gives a half smile. "I just prefer my men to be..."

"Men?"

"Yeah."

"But wouldn't a kid have been safer?"

"Not really, kids talk."

~~~384~~~

The logistics of it all are still beyond him. "Brian, kids get scared, they go home, they cry, they ask for help. That's all a risk, and it's worth it if you love them but..."

He stands up. He's holding Gus to his shoulder. "He didn't love you."

I actually flinch from his tone. Gus starts to cry and Brian searches with one hand for something. He rinses the pacifier and puts it in Gus's mouth. "Love does not involve training a kid how to stay silent. Didn't you ever get the whole 'bad touch' lecture?"

"This wasn't like that."

~~~385~~~

I try to soothe Gus while I'm trying not to throttle Justin. I give up. I'm not going to convince him today that a slow seduction of a 13-year-old by a 25-year-old man is the same thing as a stranger touching Gus. Instead I just sit down on the floor directly in front of him. "Want to hold him?"

He shakes his head, and there are tears. "Miss your sister?"

The tears flow and he nods. I transfer Gus to his arms and he laughs when Gus grabs onto his finger. "He's got good hands, just like his daddy."

## Hustler Justin XXXVII

He leaves me with Gus while he warms up a bottle. There's no denying he's Brian's son. I move him in my arms 'til he's more comfortable and then sit back, watching Brian and trying not to think too much about Molly. It's not that I miss her, she was four when I left, just a baby still, but I do wonder about her. Brian comes back with the bottle and hands it to me. Gus takes it contentedly.

"I did this a lot for my sister. When my mom was sick and my dad was with her."

"I figured"

~~~387~~~

He's good with him. We sit in silence and I can tell he's fighting back tears. "You grew up fast."

He shrugs. "Someone had to watch Molly."

"There wasn't a babysitter? You were seven."

"I think there was. I just ignored her though. I knew what Molly needed."

I shake my head, "always taking care of others."

"Someone has to."

"Who takes care of you?"

His blue eyes seem to burn into me. "You do."

I don't know what to say to that. I want him to take care of himself but if he won't, someone has to. I nod.

~~~388~~~

Brian leaves at around four and I go back to writing. I keep rushing forward and then realize that I don't have to write in order. I tell the story of the first time I was with a client. I hardly remember what the client did. Isaac was there for a little while, telling me what to do. I was proud of myself. Then Isaac left and I was alone with a man older than my father. He put me through my paces. I did everything he asked. I hesitated once and was punished. I didn't hesitate again. Not ever.

~~~389~~~

I order dinner at eight and pull a file I'm supposed to be studying for a client meeting on Tuesday. Lindsay calls, again. I assure her Gus is fine, again. When she comes to pick him up her eyes shine. Christ she loves him. I knew she would. I want to warn her about men like Isaac, and lost thirteen-year-old boys, but we both know. Once the loft door closes I call Justin. "Brian, you don't have to call me every fifteen minutes."

"It's been eight hours."

"Oh. Time flies."

"Writing?"

"Yeah. I'll let you read it tomorrow."

~~~390~~~

I'm writing about our practice sessions. I hated them at first. I cried through them and Isaac kept whipping me, telling me that crying would make it worse. He was right. Then I learned to shut it out. To follow directions and block out everything that wasn't his voice, I stopped crying. Hours later I'd be sore and he'd show me a tape, doing things I didn't even remember. I'd curl up against him and he'd tell me how proud he was. I ache. I miss him so much. I wonder if he'd be proud of me now. Probably not.

~~~391~~~

I can't sleep. I close my eyes and the images of Justin at fourteen, wide eyed and believing in Isaac's love haunt me. I light a cigarette and try to think of something else but then I'm back to the gory images of my own surgery, the memory of vomiting 'til my body ached and I couldn't breathe without pain. I stand up and pace the loft just to prove to myself that I have the energy to do it. I light another cigarette and sigh. Sleepless nights aren't listed as a side effect of cancer, but they should be.

~~~392~~~

I write most of the morning on Monday and jot down some notes to remind myself of things I want to mention later. By two in the afternoon I start to get ready for my client. It takes longer than it used to. Besides spending more time making sure I look young, there's the part that Isaac didn't teach me. Meditation, focusing on something else. It's easier to do it before we start. It used to be easy. Today I can't seem to get there. Brian's voice is echoing in my head where there should be a distant white noise.

~~~393~~~

I schmooze the client. I have lunch with a potential client and probably drink a little too much. I watch the clock and grit my teeth. At three I call Justin.

"Yes?" He sounds aggravated.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, I just have a client coming in a couple of hours and I'm trying to get ready."

"I'll see you at eleven?"

"Yeah."

The phone goes dead with a loud click. Something's wrong, but it's not necessarily something new. Something's been wrong with the kid since I met him. I try to work but Justin's voice is echoing. "Isaac loved me."

~~~394~~~

I greet him at the door. He's younger than I expected. I smile and pour him a drink, sitting by his feet. The door stays open so Charlie can follow once we're in "the office". He pets me and whispers sweet words. I lean my head against his knee. He follows me to the bedroom. My mind is pure white noise but his voice is low, soothing and familiar. He tells me how beautiful I am. I turn my head. He whispers how he's going to train me to be just what he wants. Now I'm crying, pushing him away.

~~~395~~~

The phone rings a little after eight. "What happened?"

I can hear a high-pitched sound. Charlie's telling me he doesn't know, he just heard him screaming and chased the guy out. I'm already on the elevator. Stopped at a light, I can still hear Justin... "Put him on." There's a thunk. "He won't take the phone."

I don't stop at another light and when I find them Justin's pressed into the corner of the room begging Charlie to stop. "What did you do to him?"

He waves a hand in front of Justin's unseeing eyes. "He's not talking to me."

~~~396~~~

He touches me and I flinch away. "Isaac!" He shakes me. I open my eyes. Not Isaac. "Brian?"

"Yeah. He's kneeling on the floor, in front of me. "What happened?"

I run a hand through my hair and try to stand up. "Shit, where's my client."

"Charlie got rid of him. What happened?"

I'm angry. "You! You happened! I was doing okay and now I can't even remember the good things without freaking out. Thanks a fucking lot!" I push at his chest. He falls backwards.

I stand up and point. "Get out, of this room, of my life! Go!"

~~~397~~~

I don't move. I nod to Charlie who motions to let me know he'll be just outside the front door. Justin stamps his foot. "Get out." But he's not yelling. He sounds tired.

"Tell me what happened."

He sits down on the edge of the bed. His body is shaking.

"Did he hurt you?"

"No. He just wanted to..."

He's biting back the urge to vomit. He loses and runs to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later he's leaning his head against the tile wall, and rocking. "Oh god, oh god."

"Justin..."

He rocks, banging his head against the wall, hard.

~~~398~~~

I can feel the words building; the thoughts swirling and I keep hitting my head, hoping it'll crack open. If it does the thoughts will leave. I want them gone. I lean forward thrashing my head back but it doesn't hit the tile. Brian's hands are there, stopping me. I try to squirm out of his grip but he won't let me. "Brian, please."

He just shakes his head and pulls me forward. He holds me and I try to bite him. I don't want his fucking comfort. This is all his fault. "Get away from me." I head out.

~~~399~~~

He lunges for the door. I'm right behind him. Charlie's there, blocking his exit.

He slumps. I catch him just before he hits the ground.

"Justin!"

He opens his eyes and struggles but I won't let him go. He tries to bite me again and I move my hands 'til he can't. I'm against the breakfast bar and he's between my thighs. His back and head against my chest. His arms crossed in front of him and mine wrapped around his wrists. He tries to slam his head into my chest but I hold him tighter. "Shhhh"

"Charlie, call Peter!"

~~~400~~~

I try to get out of his grip but he won't let me. "Brian, please."

He whispers in my ear again. "No, you're trying to hurt yourself."

"I just want it to stop. Get it out of my head."

He wraps his legs around me. "I wish I could."

"I think... I..." I stop because I can't say it out loud.

"What? Justin, you can tell me."

"I think maybe Isaac didn't love me."

He kisses the back of my head. "I know."

"Brian, no one has ever loved me."

He rocks us from side to side. "That's not true."

Hustler Justin XXXVIII

He's still crying but he's stopped struggling. I release his arms and he pulls away from me, moving to the far corner. His knees are pulled up and his forehead is resting on them. He's hiding. "Justin." He ignores me, or doesn't hear me. "Justin." A little louder this time. He's finally aware of me again and he stands up. But he doesn't move towards

me. He opens his bedroom door and has it shut and locked before I can even get to him. I bang on it. "Justin!" I hear the other two locks click. Now I'm scared. "Justin."

Hustler Justin XXXIX

I hear him banging and yelling and I cover my ears. When I do the reality starts swirling and settling, so I curl up in my chair and let the sounds of his panic become white noise to cover my own rising sense of the same. When I close my eyes images flash. They're skewed, they can't be right. Isaac never looked happy or turned on when we practiced...did he? I hear a noise and realize it's me. I'm keening. Isaac would tell me to stop. I try but I can't. He's not here to stop me. I get louder.

~~~403~~~

The same high-pitched sound I heard in the background when Charlie called. I yell to Justin. He doesn't respond. Is he hurting himself? I push at the door and it doesn't budge. He had the doorjamb reinforced with metal. Expensive locks don't mean shit if you can splinter the cheap wood. I throw my shoulder against it again and the sound gets louder. "Justin!" I move back and get the bar stool. It dents the cheap hollow core door. I do it again and the wood splinters. Charlie takes the other one and helps. I have to get to him.

~~~404~~~

Something comes through the middle of the door. I open the window, my need to escape is overwhelming everything else. The window doesn't open all the way. I start to crawl out. A loud bang startles me and then Brian's pulling at my leg.

"Justin. No!"

I kick at him, and he lets go but then there are arms around my waist, pulling me back in. Charlie is standing in front of the window. His large frame blocking my escape. Brian is trying to keep his hold on me. I squirm out of his grasp and unlock the decimated door.

~~~405~~~

I crawled through the splintered opening. He's unlocking it but I'll be damned if I let him go. He keeps trying while I hold him. Unlocking it myself, trying to get him out of here. I don't know what I'm going to do after that. Is there anywhere he'll be safe?

I open the door and he tries to bolt. I hold him firmly, which isn't easy; he's doing everything he can to make me let go. I pull him close. "Justin. Stop." He's kicking and flailing his arms. I move us towards the sofa. Keeping him pressed to me.

~~~406~~~

I keep trying to escape but I feel my energy waning. Eventually I stop. Sweaty and breathing hard. He doesn't let go. "Brian." I feel him shake his head. He's out of breath too. "I'm not letting you go."

"I'm okay now."

"Bullshit."

"I just want to lie down."

He moves us so that we're both lying down, trapping me between the back of the sofa and his chest. "I..."

He shakes his head and strokes the hair out of my face gently. "I'm not letting go."

"Please."

“I’m not letting go.”

He tightens his hold to emphasize his point.

~~~407~~~

I hear Charlie moving around. I guess he’s cleaning up. I hold Justin’s gaze until he closes his eyes. His body is tense. He’s not asleep; he’s just avoiding looking at me. “Justin.”

He shakes his head. “It hurts.”

“Where?”

He moves his arm between us and presses at his chest. “Here.”

I ache for him. I kiss his forehead. I’m afraid to say anything, afraid of what he’ll do to himself. Where he’ll go. Somehow, I don’t think tying him the bed, no matter how suited it is for such activities, is going to help. I kiss him again.

~~~408~~~

I need to get out of here. I try to relax, give him a sense that I’m okay, that I’ve conceded. He kisses me and I try to kiss him back. Distraction might work. I move my hand away from my chest and slide it under the waistband of his pants. He presses me close and pulls my hand away. “What are you doing?”

“All this excess energy, I just want to…”

He shakes his head. He’s not buying it. Fuck.

“I’m okay now.”

He doesn’t believe me.

“I just got thrown.”

“Justin.”

Shit, I’m crying again. That doesn’t help.

~~~409~~~

He’s crying. I prefer that. I’d rather he was honest than trying to buy his way out of my arms, and the truth, with sex. Right now fucking him is the last thing I can think about. All I want is for him to be safe and he’s not. Not from himself, and how do you keep someone safe from a threat you can’t remove? I hear someone clear their throat and turn my head. It’s Peter. “Hi.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Emergency?”

I nod and Justin takes the opportunity to escape. I grab him before he can go anywhere.

~~~410~~~

The man standing over us looks older because of his gray hair but he’s not that old. I smile up at him. “He won’t let me go. Convince him I’m okay, please.”

He shakes his head. “Why don’t you convince me that you’re okay.”

I try to sit up, Brian resists. Charlie says something and Brian nods. Peter pulls a chair close. We both sit up. Brian doesn't let go of my hand. I smile sweetly at Peter and look up at him from under my lashes. "I freaked out a little, but Brian overreacted. He does that sometimes."

~~~411~~~

Peter smiles back at him and I'm about to scream. Is he buying this bullshit? He puts a hand on Justin's knee and Justin can't help it. He pulls back, instinctively. Curling up and pressing himself closer to me. "Something scared you."

I relax and stroke Justin's back. We're nowhere near okay but at least Peter sees that too. Justin is clutching my shirt and the confident flirt of ten seconds ago is completely gone. "I wasn't scared."

"What were you?"

"I was just... yeah, I was scared."

He's lying again. I raise an eyebrow. Peter shakes me off. "Justin..."

~~~412~~~

His voice is even, but not in the same way that Isaac's was. He's not trying to... I press my face into Brian's chest. I can't think about Isaac. "Justin. What were you thinking about when you started to get upset?"

"I wasn't supposed to be thinking about anything."

I don't look at him. I'm sure he'll have that same alien expression Brian gets. "But you were thinking about something."

I can only imagine what Brian wants to do to me. He let me see clients; he trusted me, and I fucked it up. I shake my head. "I wasn't."

Hustler Justin XL

"Justin."

He looks up at me. "I promise, Brian, I wasn't scared."

He was scared then, and he's scared now, but I don't think it's the same fear.

"What do you think's going to happen if Brian knows you were scared?"

He doesn't look at Peter he looks at me. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He hides again. Great.

"Justin, why are you apologizing to Brian?"

He still won't look at Peter. "He trusted me and I messed up."

"And you think he'll punish you?"

My head shoots up. Is Peter insane? I'd never... Justin's nodding against my chest. Motherfucking Isaac.

~~~414~~~

Brian's hand twists in my hair. I wince quietly. He lets go of my hair but tilts my head up so I can see him. "I'm proud of you. I would never punish you."

"Not even if I took clients who want to brand me?" I'm smirking it was a joke. I don't think he finds it very funny. I think he's going to cry. I shake my head. "I wouldn't, Brian. You told me not to."

He exhales and doesn't let go of me. "Yeah. You don't, because I told you not to."

Why doesn't that make him happy?

~~~415~~~

I look up at Peter to see if he's starting to understand what I'm dealing with. I think he is because he seems a little shaken. When you're so fucked up you can make a shrink cringe, then you're pretty far-gone.

"Justin, were you trying to hurt yourself?"

Justin shrugs and Peter tries another way. "What did you want to do?"

"I didn't want to remember."

"But you do remember?"

"I don't think I remember it right."

"Why not?"

I'm afraid to even breathe.

"Because Isaac didn't want to hurt me."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Yes but only for practice."

~~~416~~~

"I'm tired."

Brian looks like he's going to let me go to bed but Peter starts talking again. "Why do you think Isaac hurt you if he didn't want to?"

"Because he loved me."

"Do you hurt people you love?"

"I only love Isaac and maybe Brian a little."

"Did you hurt Isaac?"

"No. That wasn't how it worked. He didn't need to practice."

“Because he didn’t have those kinds of clients?”

“He didn’t have clients. I was enough for him.”

“Why don’t you hurt Brian?”

“He doesn’t like stuff like that.”

“Do you?”

I don’t know how to answer.

### ~~~417~~~

He freezes. I don’t know what the issue is. I’m shaking my head. He doesn’t like being hurt. He turns to face Peter. “I like the money I make doing it. I like that it makes Isaac proud of me. I like that it makes me special.”

Peter nods. “It’s important to make people you love proud?”

“Well, yeah. Why? does that make me crazy?”

“I didn’t say you were crazy.”

“But you think I am. Everyone does lately.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m stronger than they are. I put up with what they can’t so they think it’s nuts.”

I sigh.

### ~~~418~~~

My anger is building again and I turn to Brian. “You know it’s true. You told me the first time you met me that I was out of my mind.”

“You are. And just to clarify. Isaac didn’t love you, and he’s gone so you can start speaking about him in the past tense whenever you’re ready.”

I recoil from his anger. He reaches for me but I pull away. “I love him. No past tense required. You can’t just walk in and tell me that everything he taught me was pointless. That I’m pointless!”

“I never said you’re pointless.”

### ~~~419~~~

Peter is watching every move we make. I’m surprised he’s not taking notes. Justin’s anger is flaring again and he’s pushing away from me. I check quickly to see if Charlie noticed. He has. He’s blocking the door.

Justin’s staring at me. He turns to Peter, “Are you going to lock me up?”

“What?”

“I’m underage. Don’t you have to hand me over to a social worker or put me ‘in care’ or something.” He uses the air quotes.

“Is that where you think you’d be safest?”

“I’m not safe anywhere. I was fine and then...”

“You were not fine.”

### ~~~420~~~

“Brian, I’m really tired. It’s been a long day. Go home. Take Peter home. Send Charlie home.”

“Your locks are broken.”

I look over and see that Charlie has taken the door off its hinges. I want to weep. “I’ll sleep in the other room.”

He raises an eyebrow and stares. “I’ll sent Peter and Charlie home. I’m staying.”

“On the sofa.”

“Fine.”

“And...”

He shakes his head. “That’s all the negotiation you get tonight.”

I fall back on the sofa, physically and emotionally drained. He walks Peter to the door.

Now I just need to get rid of Brian.

### ~~~421~~~

Peter promises me that he won’t call social services as long as he can see Justin by Wednesday. I nod and lock the door behind Peter and Charlie.

I turn back to Justin who looks like he can barely keep his eyes open. “C’mon. You can sleep in your room. The door here is locked, and I’ll sleep in there.”

He shakes his head but doesn’t fight me when I guide him to his own bed. I pull the covers over him and take his laptop with me when I leave. I’m interested in seeing what he was writing earlier.

### ~~~422~~~

I wake up and there’s an odd glow from the living room. I stumble out and find Brian leaning against the arm of the sofa, his shoes off and feet up, using my computer. I squint and he moves the machine off his lap and stands up. His shirt is open; his tie’s hanging loose around his neck. He puts an arm around me. “Go back to sleep.” I yawn. “You’re working?”

He shakes his head. “I’m reading what you wrote.” We sit on my bed. He leans back against my headboard and pats his thigh. Lie down.

I do.

### ~~~423~~~

He’s asleep. I just want him to stay that way. I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight. Not after what I read. Not after what he said. He still hasn’t figured out that I’m not going to punish him? He still thinks men who want to brand him are a harmless joke. We’re going to see Peter tomorrow. He’s going to see Peter every day for the rest of his life if he has to. I can’t be angry with him just because he thinks he still loves Isaac, or that Isaac ever loved him, but I am.

~~~424~~~

I wake up again. He's shaking my shoulder.

"What?"

"You were having a nightmare."

"Well I didn't notice 'til you woke me."

He laughs and I close my eyes. "You can go home, Brian."

He doesn't move. I fall back asleep, I guess. When I wake up again he's there. I'm sweaty and panicky. I guess I had another nightmare. He shushes me back to sleep.

I lose count of how many times it happens that night but at nine I get out of bed and give up on the sleeping thing altogether. I don't think he's slept at all.

~~~425~~~

He heads towards the kitchen but seems to lose his momentum halfway there. He turns and goes into the bathroom. I sit and wait. He reemerges almost forty minutes later, freshly showered and dressed. "Brian, don't you have to be at work?"

"I called out, we have an appointment at noon."

"I'm double booked?"

"No. We're meeting Peter."

"Brian I have a client at one."

He's fucking kidding me right? "No Justin. No more clients."

"Because I got scared?"

"Because you fucking lost it. Because it's not safe. Because you're seventeen and can't keep doing this"

"I'm not fucking going."

~~~426~~~

I'm cursing the day I ever let Brian into my life. He's messed up everything. "I have to get the door fixed."

"Not if you're not bringing clients here anymore."

"That's not for you to say."

"Justin, listen to me. If I don't bring you to see Peter he has to call social services."

I panic, he's right. "I'll leave."

He closes the space between us in two quick steps. "You're not going anywhere."

His hands are on my shoulders. I look up at him. "I don't want to go."

He nods. "I know."

I wish he'd stop saying that.

~~~427~~~

I called someone to come in and fix the door. No need getting the super involved. Charlie's gonna let him in and have it all repaired when we get back. I also cancelled Justin's appointments. Charlie tells me over the phone that it's the best news he's heard in a while. "That kid shouldn't be letting people hurt him." I couldn't agree more. We stop at the diner before the appointment. I mainline the coffee and bite back a yawn. Justin shreds his burger into little pieces. He manages to avoid eating any of it, but we can't avoid Debbie.

~~~428~~~

Debbie is so loud I jump when she greets us, and again when she delivers our order. Brian's not eating but she doesn't let me get away with the same thing and brings me a burger. When I've shredded the burger 'til you can't tell if I've eaten any or not she points at me. I flinch away but she just smiles and takes off. "What was that about?"

Dinner, she wants both of us there tomorrow night.

"I have a..."

He stares at me and I slump down. How am I going to pay my rent? I need a plan.

~~~429~~~

We drive to Peter's office and Justin looks like he's about to bolt through all of it. The receptionist hands me a bunch of forms. Peter greets Justin and takes him into his office. I'm hoping Peter's can help. I don't know if I can, or if I even have. They come out 45 minutes later and I get five minutes to myself with Peter. "He's in a dangerous place, don't leave him alone."

"Very soothing."

"I'm not trying to soothe you. If I put him in care, he'll run. He trusts you."

"Transference."

"Use it or we'll lose him."

~~~430~~~

I don't know what to say to Brian. I tried to convince Peter I'm okay. He seemed to believe that I didn't need to be in care. He's not required to call social services unless I'm being abused. He said he thought what Isaac did could be classified as abuse and that if I wanted he could have them track down my father. My father didn't want me then, I'm not exactly more desirable now. I thought we'd head back to my apartment, or the loft. Brian's still wearing his suit from yesterday, but we end up at the museum.

~~~431~~~

I'm trying to process what Peter said. Justin smiles when I park. He has his pass in his wallet. No driver's license. No credit cards. Not even a library card but Peter's business card my card with my cell and his membership card are there. In some ways, he's still 14 years old. I let him wander. He's safe here and I can think. Did Peter mean that he'd leave or hurt himself? Does Peter know? He tried like hell to hurt himself last night. He was scratching at his body in his sleep trying to rip the memories away.

~~~432~~~

Brian's watching my every move. He's trying not to be obvious about it but if I turn a corner, so does he. It's kind of comforting today. I'm tired though. I sit in front of an abstract and sort of lose myself in a corner of it, following the bursts and forms when I feel a hand on my shoulder. It feels too heavy to be Brian's. I look up. Shit. I smile. "Hi."

"Haven't seen you around."

"Changed locations."

"You available?"

Brian's here, removing the man's hand from my shoulder. "No."

"Hey, let him talk, we go way back."

~~~433~~~

Justin stands up and I move, pushing Justin behind me a little. "He's out of the business."

The fat bastard holds his hands up in surrender. "Hey, I didn't know he'd found a sugar daddy. No hard feelings."

I take a menacing step forward and he steps back. Justin's hand is on my arm. "Brian, let's just get out of here. I'm tired."

I nod and put an arm around Justin's waist. The man turns and walks away. And only when I see him leave to I feel safe turning my back on him.

"Old friend huh?"

He just shrugs.

~~~434~~~

"Did Isaac introduce you to him?"

I nod and wait for him to start the car but he doesn't. "Justin..."

I look up. He wants to say something but can't seem to. I save him the trouble. "Yes, he hurt me. They all did. I met him again after Isaac left. He was... he... when... the... my back."

Brian seems to put it all together. Last week? That's the motherfucker who hurt you last week?"

"Would he be a better person if it had happened a year ago?"

He deflates but jaw is still clenched as he starts the car.

~~~435~~~

If I hadn't been there would Justin have gone with him? I want to ask but I'm afraid of the answer. We're at the loft. I need to shower and change my clothes and maybe get some sense of sanity that I can't quite find in his apartment. I set the alarm once we're inside. If he tries to leave I'll hear him. I needn't have worried. He follows me into the shower. He drops to his knees and I close my eyes as I reach for his arm to pull him back up. "No."

“That’s all you ever say.”

~~~436~~~

He washes my back, shampoos my hair and makes me feel good, but I can do these things myself. Why doesn’t he want me? We don’t speak and when I’m dressed again I think about what Peter said. “I need to go home.”

He nods. “Let’s go.”

I shake my head. “Alone.”

He crosses his arms. “No.”

“That’s all…”

“And it’s going to be all I say for a while. Get used to it.”

“I just need…”

He’s staring at me and I give up. “Never mind, we can stay here.”

He sits back and tosses me the TV remote.

~~~437~~~

He seems calmer but Peter said it’s not safe to leave him alone. So what do I do? Sitting here and staring at him seems a little creepy. We could go out but then even the museum is crawling with men who want to hurt him. What’s safe? I look at the clock, it’s almost six.

“C’mon”

“Where are we going?”

“To get a drink. Meet some people…”

“They won’t serve me.”

I roll my eyes and he even smirks a little. He knows it’s true.

I reconsider the idea at least a thousand times on the way to Woody’s.

~~~438~~~

I’ve never been here. They don’t cater to my clientele, and Isaac was always the one to find me clients before that. Brian waves to a few people and then joins a group at the bar. They look me over and it’s kind of nice to be admired again. One of them seems to be admiring me less. “You’re still hanging out with him?”

Brian nods. Michael snorts. “Never figured you for a chicken hawk.”

Brian actually laughs and kisses Michael. He orders us both a shot and a beer. I’m startled when Emmett puts an arm over my shoulder.

~~~439~~~

I take Emmett’s hand off of Justin’s shoulder and pull him a little closer to me. “Leave the kid alone.”

Emmett ruffles his hair and does everything but pinch his cheeks. “Rough day baby?”

Justin nods and plays the coy little boy. I'm going to strangle them both. "He's not a baby."

I motion to the bartender and he refills both our shot glasses. Justin looks around. I know that look. I pull him closer. "We're not here to recruit clients."

He nods as I whisper it to him.

Ted can't tear his eyes away. This was a bad idea.

~~~440~~~

I need some time to myself, but until I can get it, I'll just keep drinking the shots. Ted looks like an easy mark. Nothing too rough is my guess. A little regression on my part, a little letting him be in complete control. I smile at him shyly and hear Brian growl in my ear. I bite my lip. He doesn't like that either. "Leave Ted alone."

I can't help it. He's already practically drooling. The conversation turns to stars they'd never have guessed they'd still want to fuck. I don't recognize any of the names. I zone out.

~~~441~~~

His eyes are blank. We lost him. He matches me shot for shot. I shake off a couple of guys cruising me. He doesn't shake off the ones cruising him. He does that lethal flirty gaze from under the lashes. Smiles this half smile and then bites his lip. One guy is actually drunk, or stupid, or mesmerized enough to approach. I pull him in for a kiss. He lets me for a couple of seconds and then pushes me away. "That's not fair."

"We're not here for..."

"I know but..."

He downs his shot. "Can I just get laid?"

~~~442~~~

He gives me a look that makes me blush. We both know that's not what I want. He shakes his head and I take my beer. We move to a table. Michael convinces Brian to play pool. He doesn't take his eyes off of me while he breaks.

"So what's the deal with you two?"

I shake my head at Emmett. "I thought he was just a trick, turns out, he's a fucking baby sitter." Emmett laughs. I'm not ready to be amused.

"He does seem a little possessive." Emmett runs his hands through my hair. Brian glares at us.

~~~443~~~

He's playing Emmett differently than he was playing Ted. He's good. I lose the game because I won't take the time to line up any shots that require having my back to him. When we're done Michael's gloating and I'm just ready to get back to Justin. Peter's words keep echoing and I don't know what the fuck to do. We're both drunk now and Justin's a lethal flirt. Eventually he sits on my lap and starts kissing my ear "take me home."

I put my arms around his waist and bite his earlobe. "The loft."

He nods. We leave.

~~~444~~~

He's kissing me and guiding me back to the loft. When we're inside he sets the alarm but it takes him three times because he's drunk. I pull him towards the bed. He stands in front of me, taking his clothes off. He really is beautiful. I pull my own clothes off but don't toss them far. He fucks me, face to face, kissing me, and telling me I'll be okay. I come, gasping and already missing him a little. He passes out when he comes and I crawl out from under him, dress quickly, deactivate the alarm and leave.

## Hustler Justin XLI

Justin's at the museum. When I walk towards him the creep from last night is suddenly on him, fucking him. Justin's crying. I move quickly but I'm then I'm strapped to a table. I'm in a hospital gown. I call for Justin and I hear him calling for Isaac. Anger fills me and the nurse pats my hand and tells me that if I don't calm down they'll have to remove the other testicle. I pull out of the restraints but when I get to Justin his back is bloody, like the first time. He slips into a painting, frozen.

~~~446~~~

My heart is racing when I first get out of the building. A block away I realize he's not following me. I take a deep breath and try to figure out my next move.

If I go back to my place, he'll find me, besides, he might have thought ahead. Charlie might still be there. If I go to the diner Deb might be working. It's bitter cold. I shove my hands into my jacket pocket duck my head and start walking.

Hours later I'm sitting on the swing in the park where I first met Isaac. I miss him.

~~~447~~~

Justin's face is forming in a silent scream. I can't rescue him. When I try, the canvas rips and his image disappears. I tear the painting to shreds and turn to find him standing behind me, laughing. I shake my head and move to pull him close but he turns and walks away. I follow him, trying to touch him but he's always too far away. His back bleeding in a pattern that's burned into my memory. I call out, reminding him to dress the wounds but he just shrugs and kneels in front of a man I've never seen.

~~~448~~~

I move away from the swings and go to the corner where Isaac found me. Was it really only four years ago? I sit against the tree and remember how lost I felt then. I want to shake my 13-year-old self. I didn't know what lost was. I do now. Every time I think I'm as far down as I can go, I end up falling further. I stand up and move away from this place. It hurts too much to be here alone. We were happy together. No one's going to rescue me this time. No one wants to.

~~~449~~~

I wake up in a cold sweat. I light a cigarette and reach for Justin. He's not in bed. I don't see him out on the sofa. He must be in the bathroom. The door's open. The light's off and the cold sweat of my nearly forgotten nightmare returns tenfold. I call out for him. No response. I look everywhere, but the alarm's off and he's gone.

"Transference"

"Use it or we'll lose him."

I can't get the words out of my head. I get dressed and call Peter. He hasn't heard from him but agrees to meet with me.

### ~~~450~~~

I don't think about it, I just keep walking. No one cares. No one's ever cared. If Peter and Brian are telling the truth then I'm completely alone and too fucked up for anyone to ever give a shit about. I try to convince myself that they're wrong but something about what they're saying hurts too much to be a lie. I finally understand what Brian's been telling me. I'm fundamentally fucked up. I remember my mother; even she didn't love me enough to fight. I'm just an abandoned kitten, a useless feral animal. You drown kittens right? I jump.

### ~~~451~~~

I storm into Peter's office. "He's gone. No note, nothing. Where the fuck did he go?"

Peter pours me a cup of tea and I ignore it. "Where is he?"

"Brian."

"Peter, why?"

"What's your middle name?"

Great, Peter's lost his mind.

"Brian, I've called the hospitals and some of the rescue groups for runaways. There are people looking for him. Now answer the question."

"I should be looking for him. Why did he run? We were getting somewhere."

Peter nods. "Your middle name?"

I sigh running a hand through my hair. "Alistair."

"What if I told you you're wrong?"

### ~~~452~~~

It hurts. The water is really cold and my jacket seems to weigh a thousand pounds. I gasp and feel my lungs filling with water. The sharp pain is soon replaced by a dull pervasive ache and I close my eyes. My shoes and jacket are pulling me under and I'm content to just float in the quiet. I disappear into that safe place, the one I've been trying to get to for days. There's nothing but white noise and dark. I feel a pressing weight on my chest. It's the need to breathe. Once I give in. It's over.

### ~~~453~~~

"Peter, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your name isn't Alistair, it's Patrick."

"No it isn't."

"How do you know?"

"This is just shit you know."

“And even if I told you that you’re 100% wrong and everyone thinks you’re wrong. Would it stop being your middle name?”

I start to understand what he’s saying. “So it’s hopeless.”

“No. People change religions, change belief systems, change, period. But it doesn’t happen overnight and it hurts.”

“I let him down.”

“No Brian, everyone else let him down.”

“You said to watch him.”

“You fell asleep after 39 hours hardly criminal.”

~~~454~~~

I’m ready to take that final breath. There’s a sharp pain. I’m not floating anymore. I hear voices and I want to get back to the water. Everything was peaceful there. I try to move but my arms and legs seem too heavy to maneuver. There’s a bright light and I can’t turn my head away from it. I can’t shut my eyes. I’m being roughly handled and restrained. I try to scream but I can’t. I want to tell them they have to pay good money for this. The buzzing in my head gets louder. I go to sleep.

~~~455~~~

I press my hands between my knees. “And beer. Don’t forget the beer, and shots. I thought it would help him sleep.”

Peter nods and his phone rings. It’s four thirty in the morning, how many emergencies does he get in a night? He looks up at me. His face is grim. He jots down some information and hangs up. “They found him.”

“Where is he?”

“Brian...”

“Is he...” oh fuck. He’s dead.

“Someone should... I guess I could at least identify the...”

“Brian. He’s not dead. They fished him out of the river.”

I’m going to kill the kid.

## Hustler Justin XLII

That same bright light wakes me up again. I try to close my eyes against it but I can’t. When it goes away there are voices. I open my eyes but the overhead light seems insanely bright. I close my eyes and turn my head. I’m not sure what I’m doing here, or why they’re bothering but they’re covering me in a silver blanket and there’s an IV in my arm. I go back to sleep. I close my eyes and ignore it all. When I open my eyes again it’s because someone keeps repeating my name. Great, Brian’s upset.

~~~457~~~

They talk to Peter and not me. Together the psychiatrist and Peter decide what’s best for him. I don’t argue. I’m clearly in no condition to make that decision. I was warned and I failed him, again. I wait and when they finally let me see him he’s still a little blue. His body temperature is up but he won’t talk. They say another couple of minutes

and he would have had a heart attack... at seventeen. I sit next to his bed and slip my hand under the warmth of the heated blanket. Rubbing my thumb over his knuckles.

~~~458~~~

He's saying my name. His thumb rubbing over my hand. "Brian...what...?"

He nods. "That's what I'd like to know. What the fuck were you doing?"

"I'm hopeless." I turn my head away from him, remembering how I came to the conclusion in the first place.

He rests his hand on my shoulder and I try to shake him off. It doesn't work. "Justin, no."

The tears slide down my cheeks. I just remain still. Maybe he'll think I fell asleep. Maybe he'll go away.

"Talk to me."

His voice is cracking. I turn. He's really upset. "Are you in trouble?"

~~~459~~~

I stare at him, not comprehending. "Trouble?"

"Me, underage, hustler. Are they going to arrest you?"

I hadn't even thought about that. "No."

"Then what's wrong?"

I stand up and lean over him, enunciating clearly. "What's wrong? You almost had a fucking heart attack, which would suit you just fine, because that's what you're trying to do. You almost died. What could possibly be wrong?"

Peter's at the door blocking the social worker's entrance.

Justin looks at me. "You give a shit?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Justin."

"You give a shit!"

He's fucking gleeful. He's also right.

~~~460~~~

I'm not just some burden he accidentally picked up on a bad night, or if I am, he's started to care and I didn't notice. I notice now. I smile up at him. "If I say I'm sorry are you going to yell?"

He laughs. "Not this time. Sorry isn't bullshit, not if you mean it."

I nod. "I didn't mean upset you."

He frowns and sits down. "I kind of wish you didn't mean to die."

I shrug.

"You're going to try again?"

Peter clears his throat. There's a woman with a clipboard next to him.

"This is Jenna."

~~~461~~~

Jenna, the social worker, is dressed in beige, her hair matches. She blends into the walls. I wonder if that's her plan. She starts to talk to Justin. Asking him a series of personal questions that I can tell he doesn't feel comfortable answering.

"He's tired."

She nods. "Justin, can we finish this tomorrow?"

He shrugs.

"Tomorrow?"

"Brian," Peter looks scared to talk. I'm not going to like this. "Justin's going to be admitted to the Southwood adolescent unit."

"Brian, no!"

I shake my head. "Justin, it's probably for the best."

"But..."

"It won't be forever."

"Please, don't make me!"

~~~462~~~

Brian says he doesn't have a choice. That's bullshit. He could just take me home. Peter and Jenna tell me that he's not allowed.

"I have my own place."

"You're being involuntarily committed, Justin. You tried to hurt yourself."

"I won't try again."

Brian holds my hand, ignoring them. "Promise?" He's looking in my eyes and I look away. He nods and kisses my forehead. "When you're ready, they'll let you out."

"They don't have to."

Brian squeezes my hand. "Trust me, Justin."

I want to but... "Brian couldn't I just come live with you?"

"I can't keep you safe."

~~~463~~~

"I promise I won't do anything."

"Justin, you can't promise that right now."

"You don't want me."

I bite my lip. I don't know what to say. I go with simple. "Yes I do."

"But not at the loft."

"Not until you're better."

"I'm not sick."

I kiss his forehead. "You're fucking insane."

He looks up at me, so scared. He's breaking my heart. "Will you come visit me?"

I look towards Jenna. She nods. "Yeah."

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

"Will you drive me there?"

"I can't. But I'll come to see you as soon as I'm allowed."

"I'll wait for you."

~~~464~~~

Brian leaves and I'm stuck with Peter and Jenna. He made me promise to answer all their questions. I don't think it's a good idea, the more they know, and the less they'll like me. I answer anyway. Peter would mostly know if I was lying.

Jenna tries to be cheerful but I've seen the same smile on clients just before they tied me up and hurt me. She makes me nervous.

"Justin, I'll come to see you every day, Brian will be there sometimes too. And maybe we can find your father."

I shake my head. "Don't look for him."

~~~465~~~

Debbie's getting ready for her morning shift. She's running back and forth from the kitchen to the living room until I drop the bomb. "You want me to what?"

"Let him stay here. He can't stay with me. He needs someplace safe."

"What happened?"

I sit down and end up telling her an edited version of the truth. She's crying. "That poor kid. He's safe now though?"

"I think so. I'll help Deb, with money, he needs to focus on..."

"He needs to get his GED and then a job."

I smile. Maybe a mother is just what he needs.

### ~~~466~~~

I'm in hospital scrubs. Peter says that Brian can get him some clothes for me tomorrow. Jenna remains chipper and then we're there. They lead me in and two men greet me. They're just wearing jeans; if it weren't for the nametags I wouldn't even know they were employees. They escort me back to my ward and hand me a baggie with a comb and a toothbrush in it. I move to close my door but one of them sits a chair in front of it. "Sorry, you're on SIPs."

I brace myself for what happens next. Refusing to cry.

### ~~~467~~~

Peter calls as I'm leaving Debbie's. I meet him at Justin's apartment.

"How is he?"

"Subdued. Scared. Depressed."

I don't say anything as I search Justin's drawers. "How long is he going to be stuck there?"

"Hard to say. We have to find his family. If they won't take him, he'll stay there 'til his 18th birthday."

"When's that?"

"Not for three months."

I tell him about Debbie.

"It'll be a tough sell. I'll see."

Peter better make this work. Justin's counting on me.

I pack a duffle bag that still has tags on it and hand it to Peter.

### ~~~468~~~

I squeeze my eyes closed and wait but I don't hear him move. I look over but he's just sitting on the chair making a note on a clipboard.

He looks up and smiles. "Scared?"

I shake my head.

"Do you talk?"

I nod but I might be lying.

"Self injury precautions, I can't leave you alone, but I won't hurt you."

I don't believe him.

“Do you want to talk?”

I shake my head and roll over pulling the thin blanket around my shoulders. I can hear him breathe. My body tenses in anticipation. He'll make his move soon.

~~~469~~~

I drag myself into work. Everything is in chaos. Fucking Marty sold the company. The new owner gives me a week to prove myself. I tell him to fuck off. No job, not a hell of a lot in savings, fuck, no more health insurance. I don't care. I don't have the kind of time he's asking for. Justin needs me. Cynthia stops me in the garage and tosses a few things in the back of the jeep, including the boards for Remson Pharmaceuticals and my laptop. “Be sure to remember me when you've put this asshole out of business.”

~~~470~~~

At nine he watches me take a shower, handing me a capful of shampoo like I'm planning on drinking it. He won't let me shave. There's a pair of fresh scrubs on the bed. I try to convince myself this is just another hotel and another trick. I plaster on a fake smile. When I look up he's handing his clipboard off to someone else. He doesn't introduce himself and his look is one I recognize more readily. I drop my towel and move towards him, my smile still in place. Maybe he can help me get out of here.

## Hustler Justin XLIII

On the drive home I call Peter. “I have time. I want to see him.”

“Brian, I have to meet with him first, it'll be at least 48 hours until he's allowed visitors.”

“He'll hate that.”

“I'm sure he will.”

“They'll...”

“Brian, he's on a suicide watch. They'll make sure he's safe.”

I relax a little. I want to see him. I think he wants to see me. He must be scared, or maybe he's blowing the orderlies so he can get out. Neither thought makes me happy. “Peter...”

“I'll do what I can, but you can't see him yet.”

~~~472~~~

“Get dressed.”

I ignore him and let my hips sway a little before I drop to my knees in front of him. He takes a step backwards and shakes his head. “It's time for breakfast.”

“Mmm a high protein breakfast” I reach for his fly. He backs up and brushes my hand away.

“Kid, I'm not gay. If I were, I still wouldn't let a patient blow me. Put some clothes on. You need to eat.”

I'm surprised. I give him my best wide-eyed look. "I don't mind."

"I do." He brushes past me holding out the scrubs. "Get. Dressed."

~~~473~~~

Peter has an appointment to see Justin at one. I insist on going with him. They may not let me see him...but then again... in the meantime I make a few phone calls. Remson, Eyeconics, most of my top shelf clients. I need to find office space, get a business plan together and all I can think about it Justin, with no clothes of his own, being watched twenty-four hours a day, thinking I abandoned him. I wonder if I can get him a letter... what the fuck happened to me? I'm passing notes like a fucking high school girl.

~~~474~~~

"I'm not hungry."

I crawl back into bed but he's standing next to me shaking his head. "You have to eat."

"This is a hospital, can't you just bring it to me?"

"It's not that kind of hospital. C'mon, breakfast is almost over."

I follow him, scanning for any way out of here, or any likely prospect. He pushes open a door and the noise is deafening, there are fifty kids all talking and laughing. I shrink back but he smiles and nudges me forward. "You'll be fine. C'mon, let's get you some cereal."

"I'm really not hungry."

"Gotta eat."

~~~475~~~

I have appointments most of the day tomorrow and a dinner appointment tonight. If all goes well, I won't even miss a paycheck. I meet Peter at the hospital but he just shakes his head. "They won't let you see him."

"Peter, I'll stay away if you think it's what's best for him but if you don't... I'm going to see him."

He shrugs and runs his card through the reader. The doors unlock and now I'm just sitting and waiting. Two of my least favorite things.

This is beyond fucked up. I need to see him. Is he okay?

~~~476~~~

I tell him I can't drink milk and pick at my cereal. Special K... I like cheerios better. I convince him that I'm done, having eaten less than half of the dry flakes. He takes me to the nurses' station. She hands me a few pills, takes my temperature, and heart rate. She puts a hand on my back, and I flinch away. "It's okay, I just need to measure your breathing."

I close my eyes and realize until I see Brian I need to disappear. My head starts to buzz and I just go wherever the clipboard leads me.

~~~477~~~

Jenna approaches. Smiling. Does she ever stop smiling? "Good news."

I raise an eyebrow.

“We think we found his family.”

“How is that good news?”

“He can go home.”

I nod. I have a lot of questions for his father.

She sits with a massive briefcase, overstuffed with files and I wonder how many kids she stays falsely cheery about in a day. In the end I go out for a cigarette. Her constant smiling, her perpetual beige and the fact that she doesn't want him to come back to me all make me want to grab Justin, and leave.

~~~478~~~

The background noise has stopped. I'm staring at an ugly painting when I realize someone is calling my name. “Peter?”

“Where were you?”

I shrug and wrap my arms around my knees. “It's cold in here.”

“Brian packed you some clothes. You'll get them when we're done.”

“I can't go home?”

“Not today.”

“Where's Brian?”

“It'll be a little while before you can see him.”

“But today?”

“No Justin, probably not for a few days.”

“I need to see him.” I feel myself start to cry.

“Follow their rules, show me that you're getting better and Brian can come visit.”

~~~479~~~

All I can do is pace and smoke. It accomplishes nothing. That's what I can do for him, nothing. Peter can help him. I can't do a fucking thing. I get in my car and leave. He's got the whole hospital staff. They'll put him back with his family. He'll be fine. I'll just fuck him up. He doesn't need me. There's nothing I can do for him. I'm on Liberty Avenue when I remember the letter. It's still in my pocket. I shove it in the glove compartment and go home. I feel like I haven't slept in years.

~~~480~~~

Peter asks if there's anything I need.

“Brian.”

He nods. “Not yet kiddo.”

Jenna comes in, all smiles, and I tune out. When the session's over Peter reminds me to follow the rules. I nod and hide in my own head again. Jake, that's this afternoon's clipboard, leads me back to my room with my duffle bag. I pull on Brian's sweatpants and shirt and sit on my bed. They took metal spiral out of my sketchbook. I wonder how I could kill myself with that. My charcoals are there, so I start to sketch ... blocking out everything else.

~~~481~~~

Peter calls me to tell me he's doing "as well as can be expected". Shrink code, for "a goddamned fucking mess." I wonder if he's eating, or sleeping, or even aware of his surroundings. He's probably just disappeared. Is there anyone who'd notice if he was completely vacant? I doubt it. Not if he never lets them see him present.

"You'll be able to see him on Saturday."

I don't say anything. He needs to be free of me.

"Brian..."

"Hmmm?"

"Saturday. He asked for you."

Of course he did. He doesn't know anyone else. I grunt and hang up.

~~~482~~~

I wonder if the meds made me tired. All I know is by five I'm asleep but some new clipboard is prodding me. "Dinner."

I remember what Peter said. Follow their rules and I get to see Brian. I pull on my shoes. They took the laces. I shuffle to the dining room, and pick at the food. I nod when he asks me a question. Suddenly I'm in a common room with everyone else, they're all talking and snacking while they watch a movie. I concentrate on the top right corner of the screen and block out everything else.

~~~483~~~

Woody's and Babylon are once again my domain. I drink, and find new ways to combine my favorite pain management techniques. Passing out every night, sleeping dreamlessly until it's time to go and schmooze a potential client or meet with the bank or the realtor. Remson signs. Eyeconic and Brown athletics follow right behind them. Theodore gets fired from Workschafter and I offer him a ridiculous amount of money to handle my books.

It's been three days. I barely think about him. He's in good hands. If a flash of blond makes me turn my head, well, that will pass.

~~~484~~~

Peter comes every day. The clipboards only check on me once an hour. Jenna smiles don't know what she says. I've gotten good at ignoring everything except the board that tells us the day and date. Today is Saturday, December 1st. Brian's coming today. I wait and wait and after seven I wonder what's taking him so long. Visiting hours are over at nine and by nine thirty I finally accept that he's not coming.

I go back to my room and find what I need. I wrap the belt around my neck and hook it to the shower rod.

~~~485~~~

It's ten thirty, still early, but I may take this one home. He's got a tight ass and I want to see him sweating and groaning against my blue sheets. I want to fuck something, hard. It's Saturday. I've started a business and

hospitalized a twink this week; I think I deserve a reward. I'm pressing him against the loft door, biting his nipples when my phone rings. I ignore it but my cell vibrates in my pocket, while Peter's message reverberates through the loft. "Brian, where the fuck are you? That kid needs you. Brian, he tried it again."

Hustler Justin XLIV

I let my feet slide off the ledge of the tub. I try automatically to get my footing again but then close my eyes and go back to floating, the way I have been all week. Soon I won't have to worry about it anymore. I can hear voices down the hall but they won't be looking for me yet, not for a while. He dumped me here. He wouldn't just leave me on the street, and once he thought I was safe, he was gone. I don't blame him. Isaac was right; no one would want someone like me.

~~~487~~~

I grab the phone, turning my back on the trick. "What?"

"He tried it again. I'm on my way there now."

"I'll meet you there." My heart is racing and I know this is my fault.

"Don't bother, not if you're only going to show up for shit like this."

"I was busy."

"Don't bullshit me Brian. If you don't want to be there for him, fine, but you can't play with him like this. It's unforgivable."

He's right. "I'll meet you there." Fuck! He tried it again, and it's my fault. I dismiss the trick and move quickly. Goddammit!

~~~488~~~

I'm gasping for air. Someone's holding me down, I fight, scratch, claw. They're not letting me go. I lunge for the exit; they wrestle me to the floor. I ignore the pain, I'm good at that, but when one man has my legs and there is someone holding each arm I start to really panic. When I feel the restraints go around my wrist I scream. I bang at my head with the buckle on my wrist. My legs are tied down I give up and go limp. It's no worse than being with a client. Everything is suddenly silent.

~~~489~~~

I beat Peter to the hospital but they won't let me back to see him. Peter nods at the nurses and uses his pass to open the door. He motions for me to follow him. They say nothing. Smart. The place is cold, clinical. They tried to make it friendly, painting murals on the cinderblock walls, putting a bright colored carpet down, but it's a hospital and nothing can camouflage that. Peter stops at the nurses' station and then pushes open a door.

"Get him the fuck out of those."

Peter puts a restraining hand on me.

"Untie him. Now!"

~~~490~~~

I keep my eyes tightly closed. I hear voices again but they're just passing by and muffled. I'm in Brian's bed, and his arms are around me. He's telling me I'm going to be okay. I nod, because I believe him. I know how to make it

okay now. Then his voice is louder, demanding. It's like he's here with me and I smile. Settling into the mattress. I don't care who's coming to hurt me. I don't care what they do. All I want is to keep hearing Brian's voice. Even when he's angry, I feel safe. "Thanks Brian."

~~~491~~~

Peter's getting someone with the keys. A nurse is there with a needle. "What are you doing?"

"We need to sedate him."

"He's tied to a bed, what more do you need?"

"And you are?"

"The guy who's telling you not to fucking sedate him. He's allergic to everything."

She goes back to check his chart and Peter returns. Someone's with him, unlocking Justin's wrists. I take his hand. "Justin. Where are you?"

"With you."

"Where are we?"

He shrugs.

"Justin, open your eyes."

He does. When he sees me he smiles. Then he looks around. "Shit. It didn't work."

~~~492~~~

Brian's standing there, but my legs are still tied down, and Peter's behind him and I'm still in the hospital. "Brian, I need to get out of here."

He glares and Jake unbuckles my legs. I sit up. Brian hugs me. "I'm so sorry."

"Where were you?"

"I got busy. Justin you have to..."

"Shhhh." I don't want to hear excuses. Right now, for this moment, I just want him to hold me. It didn't work, but I can do it again, and until I do, he's here. That's enough.

"Why, Justin? What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. I'm sorry."

~~~493~~~

The nurse comes in with a needle but Peter shakes his head. "I'm his current guardian at litem, and you don't have my consent."

The nurse looks aggravated but she leaves. Peter pulls the door closed behind her and sits on the one chair in the room. I'm still holding him. I can't seem to let go.

"Brian. I need to speak with Justin."

I pull away. But he shakes his head as I move towards the door. "You're welcome to stay if you'd like, with Justin's consent."

Justin's hand reaches for mine.

I'm not sure I should be here.

~~~494~~~

I pat the bed next to me and Brian sits down. He doesn't want to be here. "It's okay Brian, you can go if you want."

He shakes his head.

"Justin, what happened?"

"I got lost."

"Lost?"

I hate when Peter just repeats the last word I said. I lean against Brian's shoulder. "Is it because I didn't visit?"

He asks so quietly I wonder if Peter heard him.

"No. It's because no one loves me."

"Hey, that's not true."

Peter nods. "Debbie has agreed to let you live with her when you're better."

"You don't want me?"

Brian freezes.

~~~495~~~

I'm afraid to say anything. I'll make it worse.

"I can't keep you safe. You shouldn't count on me. I'm a bad bet."

He pulls back and stares. "You're the only cards that I've got."

"They're trying to find your family."

"I don't want my family. I want you!"

"Justin, I'm 29 and you're 17. You can't have me."

He's crying and I don't know what to do. I look to Peter for help. He motions to me to keep going. "I'll see you, visit you, be your friend, but I can't be Isaac, or your lover, or your father."

~~~496~~~

"You could be my lover. We're good together."

"Justin, you can't keep buying your way through life like that."

“I’m not talking about buying anything. You like fucking me. I know you do.”

Peter's taking notes and Brian looks like a deer caught in headlights. “I do, but it’s not good for you, it’s not normal.”

“I’m not normal. Brian, I don’t want to be here ‘til my birthday.”

“You don’t have to be if...”

“If they find my family, if they approve me living with Debbie. I want to live with you!”

“Justin, we’re going in circles.”

“Brian, please.”

~~~497~~~

I’m waiting for Peter to interrupt but he doesn’t, even when I throw a pleading look his way. He studiously keeps his face down, taking notes. “Justin, listen to me. I can’t take care of you; there isn’t room in the loft for both of us. You’re in a dangerous place, if you fall... I’d hate that.”

He smiles. “You really care?”

“Yes.”

“Do you promise you’ll see me when I’m out?”

“Only if you stay here until they let you out. As your friend Justin, that’s all we can be.”

He nods seriously. “Friends.”

I kiss his temple. “Friends.”

~~~498~~~

Brian leans back on the bed and I rest my head on his arm. Pfft. Friends. I don’t think he knows how to be friends with me. He can define it any way he wants.

Peter starts asking questions about what happened. Brian’s body tenses. His grip on my shoulder tightens. I explain about the guys and the clipboards and waiting and then realizing that I was all alone with no one but the clipboards for company.

“So when you ‘go away’, how aware are you of your surroundings?”

“I don’t feel too much pain, but I can hear commands.”

~~~499~~~

“Where do you go?”

He doesn’t understand the question. “Is someone else there instead of you?”

“I’m not crazy!”

I hold him tighter and shush him a little. Someone’s peering into the room and shaking her head.

“Ignore her. Justin, where do you go?”

He shrugs and points to the back of his head. “Somewhere around here.”

“So you just slide back further in your own brain?”

“Yeah, I’m like, on auto pilot.”

“What if they ask you to do something wrong?”

“Like what?”

“Hurt someone, or break a rule.”

“I don’t know. That’s never really happened.”

“What about Isaac?”

~~~500~~~

“What about Isaac?”

Brian snorts. “He set you up to get hurt all the time. Why did you listen to him?”

Peter is glaring at Brian. I just shake my head. “You’ll never understand. Isaac took me in when I had no one.”

“No Justin, you could have gone home.”

“He didn’t want me, he never looked for me.”

Peter looks sad. “He looked for you for years. You never went back to school. He didn’t know anything about Isaac, which was probably not his real name. Justin, he wanted you.”

I’m crying. “He wants me?”

Peter’s shaking his head.

~~~501~~~

I look up; this is the first I’ve heard of this. “His father...” I see Peter's expression. “Where’s his father?”

“He moved, last year, to Rhode Island.”

“But...”

“Justin,” Peter turns his attention away from me. “He’s got Molly to consider, and...”

“I’m broken, and still gay.”

Peter nods.

“He doesn’t want me.”

“He’s giving up an opportunity to know an amazing boy, his son.”

“But he is giving it up.”

My heart breaks and I sit up, wrapping my arms around Justin’s waist. “He’s an idiot.”

Justin sniffs. “Yeah, he doesn’t even want to be friends.”

“But I do.”

~~~502~~~

Brian tries to make me feel better but there’s nothing to feel better about. “I’m tired. Can I just go back to my room?”

Peter looks apologetic. “You’re spending the night in the observation room. After what you tried to do, you’re going to be on a 1 to 1 for a while.”

“But I’m sorry!”

“Justin. If you go back to your room now, what are you planning to do.”

I can’t meet Peter’s eyes. Brian’s voice is harsh “Justin.” I can’t look at him. He turns my head until our eyes meet. “No. Justin, I’m telling you, no.”

~~~503~~~

He looks away. “Justin. Promise me.”

“I can’t do anything anyway, they’re putting me in a padded cell.”

I see Peter nod in confirmation. It shouldn’t make me feel better, but it does.

“When you’re out of that though...”

He shrugs and I force his chin up. “Justin, do you want to be friends? Do you want me to come see you?”

He nods.

“Then no. It’s that simple. No.”

He nods and I’m hoping he’s hearing this as one of those orders he mindlessly follows. I’ll take whatever I can get for now.

“I promise.” It’s the tiniest whisper.

~~~504~~~

Brian hugs me tight. “And I promise I’ll be here, tomorrow.”

I nod, but I’m not sure I believe him.

“If I can’t make it, I’ll send word, always.”

I believe him. He’s lied about this before but something about the intensity in his gaze makes me.

The truth slips out before I can censor myself. “Please Brian, you’re all I’ve got.”

He kisses my forehead.

They both leave and two clipboards escort me to the observation room. It smells and the mats on the floor are thin. I go away, and let Brian's promise echo in the empty space.

Hustler Justin XLV

~~~505~~~

Peter and I walk to our cars.

"He's not going to make it is he?"

"He's a strong kid. I think he will, but he can't do it alone."

"I get it, I won't abandon him."

"It's going to take more than you, more than me. He needs..."

"A life."

Peter nods. "Friends, purpose, and most importantly, a sense of self that isn't based on who wants to fuck him."

I get in the jeep. "Well, where can I buy a life?"

Peter laughs and points at me. "Tomorrow. You promised him."

I nod and light a cigarette. "Goodnight Peter."

~~~506~~~

The room is cold and a burst of noise draws me back to the present. I'm not allowed a blanket or pillow so I just sit and shiver and hope the night goes quickly.

Some kids, patients are laughing and joking, occasionally peering in through the window to see who got locked up. I don't know any of them and they don't know me.

I wish I could talk to Brian some more, or even Peter. But then I remember about my dad and I just want to run.

The hallway is quiet again and I let myself slip away.

Hustler Justin XLVI

I work on the new Remson campaign until three. I've smoked two packs of cigarettes, finished my last bottle of beer and still can't sleep. His fucking father. I want to hunt the man down. I want to ask Peter why the fuck he had to tell Justin about it. I want to talk to Justin. He promised he wouldn't do anything, hurt himself, kill himself... and he can't, because he's locked in a padded cell. Alone, and locked up, that can't help him emotionally. I can't help him emotionally. Visiting hours aren't until five. I'll be there. I promised.

~~~508~~~

I'm led down the hall by my elbow. Great, I'm on a 1:1 within arm's reach. A week ago I didn't know what that meant. I guess this is at least a learning experience. I wish I could have a little privacy but they don't trust me. So I shower with the curtain open and put on clean clothes. No shoes, they think I'll go AWOL. I eat because if I don't, they'll say I'm non compliant and they won't let me see Brian, that's assuming of course that he does come. They take me to see Peter at noon.

~~~509~~~

Peter's at the loft at quarter to five. "What's wrong? Did he..."

Peter shakes his head. "I'm here to make sure you're going."

"I'm on my way now. Why? Is he worse?"

"Brian. He's waiting for you. All he does is kill time until you're there."

"That can't be healthy."

"It isn't but would you rather he kill something else?"

My stomach lurches, I light another cigarette and get in my car, ignoring the sick sense of dread. I'm going to see him and prove to myself that he's not planning any more escape attempts, from Southwood or from life.

~~~510~~~

Brian comes at 4:59. He hugs me and I just let him, inhaling his warm scent, burying myself in his chest. He kisses the top of my head. One of the nurses makes a disapproving face. I don't care. I missed him and she can't tell me not to touch him.

"I brought food."

"I'm not hungry."

He nods and leads me to one of the "visiting" rooms. There's a sofa, a chair and table, it's the same place Peter talks to me, Brian pushed a Styrofoam container at me and hands me a fork. "Eat." I pick it apart.

~~~511~~~

"Justin, do you want to get out of here?"

His eyes light up.

"Eat something."

He takes a small bite.

"Mountain dew, Shhhh, I told them it was sprite."

He drinks it greedily. They shouldn't make anyone go cold turkey from caffeine.

"You need anything?"

He shakes his head.

“You’ve almost stopped talking completely?”

He seems to think about it and then nods.

“Why?”

He finishes his soda. I hold mine up. “It’s yours if you eat.”

He takes another bite. I move to the sofa, he eats while leaning against my chest. My arm around his waist. He sighs.

~~~512~~~

Brian’s doesn’t cause panic when he touches me. I lean against his chest. His leg stretched on the sofa, the other on the floor. “Thank you.”

“I figured the food sucked.”

“Not just for that.”

“You’re talking.”

“No one here knows what to do with me. They don’t listen.”

His arm gets tighter. “Just let them keep you safe. You won’t get better overnight.”

I put my food down. I can’t even look at it. He hands me his soda. I’m not sure I can get better at all. If say that Brian will give up, so I say nothing.

~~~513~~~

He doesn’t say anything. “You still here?”

He nods and settles against my chest. “They won’t give me any privacy.”

“Can’t jerk off, huh?”

“They watch me in the shower.”

“What?”

“They think I’m gonna...”

I move so I can see his face. “Do they...”

He shakes his head. “I wish. But no, they don’t want to fuck me. They just don’t trust me.”

“Can’t really blame them.”

“You don’t trust me.”

He’s right. “Prove me wrong.”

“You hate being wrong.”

“I’d be pretty happy to be wrong about this.”

“What do I get when I prove you wrong?”

“Out.”

~~~514~~~

One of the clipboards barges in just as I’m about to kiss Brian. “Hey, I’ve been looking for you.”

I don’t say anything.

“You’re not supposed to be out of arm’s reach. I could get in trouble.”

Like I give a fuck. “I’m with Brian, see, arm’s reach.” Brian’s arm is around my shoulder, my head’s on his chest. “Closer even.”

He stands in the corner of the room. “I won’t say a word but I have to be here.”

I sigh. “I guess I can’t blow you today.”

Brian doesn’t laugh. “Jokes like that will get me thrown out.”

~~~515~~~

He has no sense of propriety. I usually find someone like that amusing, hell, I am someone like that, but not when his life is on the line, his freedom, and my ability to see him. I push him away and pull a deck of cards out of my jacket pocket. I want to push the clipboard guy out of the room myself but he’s doing his job. He’s not hurting Justin. I might be. I deal the cards. He just stares at them.

“Do you know how to play?”

He shakes his head. Fucking great, we’re back to silence.

~~~516~~~

Brian’s pretty patient with me. In a half hour he’s explained the basic rules of poker. He tells me about having a poker face and I roll my eyes. He can’t hide a damn thing he’s feeling from me. I’m really good at faking it. I win more hands than I lose, but we’re not playing for money, so it doesn’t matter. He keeps his leg stretched out and I put my foot on his thigh while we play, ignoring the clipboard’s constant eyes on me, just touching Brian. I’d be willing to just sit like this. Fuck the game.

~~~517~~~

He smiles a few times. He laughs once or twice. He works his foot onto my leg. My hand strays there to give him an occasional reassuring squeeze. He’s got a good poker face but I could have guessed that. When it’s time for me to leave he’s clearly not happy. I hug him. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“But late, you have a meeting with the contractor for the new building tomorrow morning and Telson at four.”

“I’ll be here though. I promise.”

He nods.

“You’ll be here?” I lift his chin.

“I promise.”

I kiss his forehead, and leave.

~~~518~~~

Peter tells me that I need to interact with the other patients. I don't see why. They have no money, all but two of them are straight and what good does it do me to be friends with messed up kids?

He insists and I try but the only time I'm not miserable is when Brian is here. He's working hard at getting his new business off the ground. I give him the names of some really high-end guys that I know, large corporate types. He refuses to take them; I write them down and slip them in his pocket.

~~~519~~~

I'm sleeping better. My days fall into a rhythm. I schmooze and cajole and try to represent KinnetiK, Justin's idea for a name, as though I'm not operating out of my loft, while I'm renovating the old baths on liberty to be my new offices. I do my best to be there to see Justin at five, but sometimes I'm not there 'til six. Then I go to Babylon and get wasted, get laid, and start over in the morning. I figure if I can keep up this pace for another few years, I might just make it. Maybe not.

~~~520~~~

Brian looks like shit. He's tired, there are circles under his eyes and I think he's lost weight. “Brian...”

He looks up at me from the monopoly board. Neither of us is paying attention to the game but until I'm off fifteen minute checks, it's all we can do. “Are you... is the... are you okay?”

“I'm fabuloso senior.”

He's lying. “You look like shit.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

“What's wrong?”

“I'm fine.”

“Did you call those clients?”

“I'm not using your connections, Justin.”

“But they have money, they need your services. It's a win-win.”

He glares at me.

~~~521~~~

“Is that what Isaac told you?”

He flinches; he can't stand hearing Isaac's name anymore. All the bullshit that Peter's gotten him to remember has made him more nervous and skittish. “Brian...”

“Justin, KinnetiK is doing just fine without taking money from sadistic pederasts.”

“But you’re tired, and you... you look sick.”

“I’m not sick, I’m just busy, spending three to four hours a day keeping you from falling over the edge doesn’t help.” Even as I hear myself say it I want to take the words back.

I can see his panic. He doesn’t cling though. “Then fucking go.”

~~~522~~~

I panic at the thought of him leaving. I say it anyway. “You don’t have to be here. No one’s forcing you.”

“Right, and then one day you succeed in one of your stupid attempts and I never sleep again.”

“You’re absolved.” I make a cross with my hands. “You are not responsible for me. Do whatever you want.” I’m looking at the floor, waiting for him walk out. He just tugs on my ankle. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“But...”

He pulls me forward hugging me. “You’re so fucking brave, and I’m not leaving.”

I melt in his arms. Relieved.

## Hustler Justin XLVII

We haven’t quite worked out the goodbye part yet. Around nine, when visiting hours end, his demeanor changes abruptly and he starts to retreat. I’ve tried to bring him back, convince him to talk to someone other than Peter. It didn’t work. I’ve tried slipping away without a formal goodbye. They sedated him that night. If Peter hadn’t been there to forbid it, they would have restrained him. Now I just hold him. I promise him I’ll be there the next day and he promises me he’ll be waiting. We both fear the day the other doesn’t keep his word.

~~~524~~~

I hate watching him leave. It’s easier if I start to slip away just before he says goodbye. He hugs me, and tells me what time he’ll be here tomorrow and a clipboard walks me to the nurses’ station, I take my meds. Invariably they try to get me to participate in whatever activity is still going on. I just want to go back to my room. I sketch, I read, I cry, I write, I’m still working on my story but now I have to write it long hand. The only thing I don’t do much of is sleep.

~~~525~~~

It’s 9:45; Peter and I are in his office. I’m pacing, Peter’s drinking tea. It’s been almost a month. Justin’s progress is slow. In six weeks he’ll be eighteen and they won’t be able to hold him. He talks to Peter, he talks to me, but he won’t talk to anyone else. I light my fourth cigarette and almost feel guilty. Peter can only share information because Justin signed the release form. He signed the form because he trusted us and we’re here trying to make sure he doesn’t get out. I don’t want him there... but he can’t leave.

~~~526~~~

The nurse glares at me as I take my meds and open my mouth to prove I swallowed them.

I’m on hourly checks now. Peter says he’s trusting me. Clipboard offers to take me to the gym to shoot hoops. I shrug. He signs out a basketball and my shoes. He has to keep his hand on my elbow the whole way. He never pulls me behind a tree or into a discreet corner. The gym is busy and loud. He actually wants me to play basketball? The noise is too much and I try to leave. He follows me.

~~~527~~~

Peter calls me at ten am. The construction crew is finishing the interior walls. It feels like they're drilling directly into my skull. I think I slept for two hours last night. I walk outside. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He's asking for you."

"Did he... what did he..."

"They called me, I called you, I'll meet you there."

I beat him there. He needs a faster car. He's in the observation room. I follow Peter in and Justin stands up, throwing himself at me. I hold him, ready to kill whoever set him back. "Justin, tell me what happened."

~~~528~~~

Brian guides me to the floor. I curl my body up to his and press my face into his chest. "No suit."

"No clients today. What happened?"

"Dandy Lube?"

"They rescheduled. Justin, what happened?"

I mumble the story into his chest. His body tenses, his heart rate goes even higher. He tilts my chin. "Justin. Did he try to...?"

"He didn't want me."

"And that's why you're upset?"

I pull away from Brian. I pull away from everything.

It's harder to do because Peter and Brian think I should stop. I hear their voices when I start to slip away.

~~~529~~~

"Justin, come back."

His eyes open, he's not completely gone. "Justin, talk to me."

His blank stare is creepy and when he's back I am almost relieved. "You thought he wanted to have sex with you."

He nods.

"And you went with him." I don't know what to say. He's so upset, and I just want to shake him. "Why?"

"It's been so long, and maybe he'd let us be alone together, if I was nice to him."

"We get time together. We'll get more when you're out. Justin, did you want to be with him?" He shakes his head.

~~~530~~~

Peter interrupts. "Justin, did you find him sexually attractive?"

"No."

“Then why?”

Brian’s staring at me like his life depends on the answer. “It’s good to have people owe you instead of the other way around.”

“Isaac said that?”

I nod.

“What did we talk about?”

I sigh. “I know you said not to pay attention to what Isaac taught me, but not everything was wrong. Brian was talking yesterday about calling in a favor from a friend.”

“So Brian let someone use him in a way he didn’t want, in order to get something from him later.”

I frown.

~~~531~~~

For a smart kid, he can be painfully dense. He shakes his head. “I don’t think Brian would do that.”

“So what does calling in a favor mean?”

He sits in silence and finally shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Justin. I recommended someone to a large firm, now he can help me get information on new accounts in play.”

“Oh. You didn’t have sex with him?”

How do I answer that? I did fuck him, but I also fucked two guys I didn’t recommend. “Our relationship wasn’t based on that.”

“But if he’d give us more time, or privacy...”

“Justin, no.”

~~~532~~~

It hurts. I thought he liked spending time with me. He moves closer.

“I do want to spend time with you, but not at that cost. Nothing is worth that cost.”

“So I blow him, is it such a big deal?”

Now he’s frustrated. “Yes. Justin, your body is... yours. You get to say who uses it and who doesn’t.”

“But I was saying he could. It doesn’t matter. He didn’t want me.”

“That’s not the point. He shouldn’t want you. You’re a sick little boy. You can give it to anyone you want, for pleasure, not as currency.”

~~~533~~~

“Do you want me?”

I freeze. Justin’s not breathing, waiting for my answer. I think Peter’s waiting too. This kid has a way of backing me into a corner...

“Yes Justin, I do want you.”

He smiles.

“But I won’t do anything about it. Not while you’re figuring shit out.”

“I’m not confused Brian. I know what I want.”

“Me?”

He nods.

“Because I don’t hurt you.”

“Because you saved me. You keep saving me.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“But...”

“No, not ever as payment. Do you understand, at all?”

His expression makes it clear. Not really, not yet.

## Hustler Justin XLVIII

I’m so glad they took down the Christmas decorations. The holidays were always rough. I’ve been talking to Peter about it. When my mom was sick we pretended she wasn’t. When she died, we pretended, for Molly that we didn’t miss her. When I was with Isaac the clients were rougher. Isaac said it’s because they hated their families and needed to relieve stress. I just know that we used to joke about me taking a couple of days off after January first. It was just a joke though. I never took time off. I guess now I’m off forever.

~~~535~~~

Lately he’s been opening up but he’s quiet today. I brought him a set of pastels and a new sketchbook, no spiral binding. I ask to see what he’s been drawing but he just shrugs.

“Have you been writing?”

He shakes his head.

“Are you not speaking on purpose?”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry...”

“Bullshit, I know. I just want to get out of here.”

“Next week, if you keep up with the good behavior we can take a walk.”

“Is it still cold out?”

”Yeah, I’ll have to bring you a coat.”

“You could take me home. I’m better now. I swear.”

~~~535~~~

“It looks like you’ll get out on your birthday.” Now he looks sad. I ignore my cards and gesture for him sit near me. “What’s wrong with having a birthday?”

“If I say it you’ll just get mad.”

“I won’t if you’re not lying.”

“I’ll be eighteen.”

“I know.”

“Well, there’s not much market for what I do if I’m legal, is there?”

He’s right. I’m mad. I just hold him tighter. “You don’t do that anymore.”

I reign in all remarks about how much more of a market there is for someone who looks like him and is legal.

~~~536~~~

I said something wrong. I can always tell. “I don’t mean I’d... I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

He grinds his teeth. Wrong again.

“Justin, I only want you to fuck men that you want to fuck, because you think it would be fun.”

“You’re the only one that’s ever made it fun... well, and... Isaac but only at first.”

“But there are lots of beautiful men out there. People your own age.”

“I only want you.” I don’t know how many times I have to tell him this but he just doesn’t get it. I’ll make him.

~~~537~~~

I change the topic to Michael’s new boyfriend he seems less gloomy. By the time I’m snarking about Emmett’s ideas for KinnetiK’s grand opening event he’s actually smiling. He finally shows me what he’s been sketching. I ask if I can take a couple of them. He offers them all to me. I only take a few. He should hang some of them in his room. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to get comfortable here. He’s just passing through. I can’t really argue with him. He knows he’s going to Debbie’s. Sometimes he calls the loft home though.

~~~538~~~

He tells me more about Debbie, and excited she is to have me. I don’t believe him but he swears she was born to take care of lost boys.

“Is that what I am?”

He nods. "More lost than most."

"Hey!"

"You are, how the hell do you find your way down the hall every day. You're head's not on straight."

"You're teasing the poor lost boy? That's just mean."

He looks chastised for a second, realizes I'm playing him and tosses a now cold French fry at me. "Not fair."

"Life's not fair. Deal with it." He stares.

~~~539~~~

Sometimes he says things that just... hurt. I put the takeout containers back into the bag and deal a fresh hand. "My dad used to say that."

He nods. "Mine too. And... Isaac."

I'm surprised. "You complained to Isaac?"

"At first. He wasn't always so strict."

Isaac wasn't strict, he was mean. I don't correct him.

"We had fun at first. Once it wasn't fun, I just figured that everyone lived like that."

"Now you know better."

"Well, you and Peter keep telling me I'm wrong, but Isaac, the streets or an institution. You'll tell me when it gets fun?"

~~~540~~~

He holds my gaze and keeps repeating my name before he leaves. He doesn't want me to disappear. I try. I've learned a few of the clipboard's names. I don't talk to them, or the patients but all the patients that were here when I got here are gone. All the ones who came after that are gone too I think. No one spends this kind of time in a place like this. No one's as crazy, or alone as I am. And on that thought I'm in my room, where I can disappear and no one calls me back.

~~~541~~~

I call Peter before he goes to see Justin the next day. "Get him a weekend pass."

"Why?"

"Because I'm asking you to."

"Brian, I'm not sure how stable he is. If something happens..."

"I'm not taking him out of state, but he's right. He's never lived anywhere comfortable. I'm taking him to Debbie's. He needs something to look forward to."

Peter is silent and I know I'm taking a risk. Fully responsible for the kid for 48 hours? Maybe I'm the one who's insane.

“I’ll see what can be arranged, but I still expect to see him every day.”

Hustler Justin XLIX

I’m nervous. It’s the first time I’ve been outside in almost two weeks. The snow crunches on the ground.

“We can go shopping later if you want. I don’t really know your taste in clothes.”

I shrug. I don’t either. It feels weird to be wearing jeans, sneakers and a coat. I’ve spent so much time lately in sweatpants. Brian wraps his arm around me and takes my bag onto his own shoulders. I lean up to kiss him. He turns his head and guides me to the jeep. Once he’s secured my seatbelt he lights a cigarette and smiles.

~~~543~~~

He takes a cigarette out of my pack and really, I’ve been feeding him caffeine and he’s not fucking people for money, I won’t say anything about the cigarette.

He’s quiet though, which means he’s thinking about something he doesn’t think I want to hear. I look over at him. He bites his lip. I raise an eyebrow and he runs a hand through his hair.

“What if she doesn’t like me?”

“What?”

“Will I have to stay at Southwood?”

I’m grateful that he doesn’t know he can’t stay once he’s eighteen. I should feel guilty but if he knew...

~~~544~~~

He doesn’t want to tell me something. He always looks away and rolls his lips into his mouth when that happens. “She’ll like you.”

“If she doesn’t?”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“Can I stay at the loft with you?” he doesn’t want me at the loft, but I wish he’d tell me outright. I guess he thinks he’ll hurt my feelings. He doesn’t want to fuck me anymore. Hell, who would? I light another cigarette.

“Debbie’s having a lot of people come for dinner. You up for it?”

I nod. I feel like I know them. Brian tells great stories.

~~~545~~~

Three or four hours nightly with nothing to do but talk. I had to start telling other people’s stories like an old gossip queen. He gets a kick out of them. I think for him, the normal boring bullshit seems as fantastical as a soap opera. I’m not too worried about Michael, or Emmett, they’ve met him once. Mel and Lindz concern me. I can’t decide if they’ll hate me for looking at him or want to adopt him. Hell, I hate myself for looking at him the way I have, the way I still do. I shouldn’t want him.

~~~546~~~

He stops in front of a small house and looks at me. “You ready?”

I nod even though I'm not sure I am.

He pushes the door open a little and it seems to fly out of his hand as Debbie flings it backwards and pulls me in for a rib crunching hug. "Sunshine!"

"Deb, let him breathe."

She pushed me back so she can look at me. "You've lost weight."

"Can we show him around before you try to fatten him up?"

She takes my hand and drags me upstairs. I look back frantically to make sure Brian's following.

~~~547~~~

He looks more panicked than I've seen him in a while. Maybe this was a bad idea. I put his duffle bag on Michael's old bed. She's talking but he's drawn to the corkboard over the desk. "Is this you?"

I look and consider denying it. "That's us when we were sixteen."

"You two were trouble, that's what you were."

Justin laughs and Debbie drags him downstairs to feed him milk and cookies calling back over her shoulder. "Brian, I'll see you at dinner." I'm dismissed.

I sit in my car and hope that I've done the right thing.

~~~548~~~

Debbie talks enough for three people, which is good. I don't know what to say. She's telling me how long it's been since she's had a teenager in the house, but that if she remembers right all we want to do is eat and jerk off. I want to tell her I'm not like that. I barely have an appetite lately, and jerking off is a different issue entirely. I don't want her to know how abnormal I am so I eat the cookies and let her pat my cheek. I recognize the look she's giving me and smile back.

~~~549~~~

It's eleven in the morning on a Saturday. I end up back at the KinnetiK offices, reading through the new Dandy Lube contract, wondering how Ted got them to agree to it and thinking about Justin. I want to give him time to adjust at Debbie's. At noon I'm knocking on Michael's door. I push past him and am surprised to find Ben there. "I thought you..."

Michael pushes me towards the door. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"See you tonight?"

He rolls his eyes. "Like I could get out of it."

I kiss him and leave. Now what?

~~~550~~~

Vic joins us while Debbie's telling me about the time Brian and Michael tried to convince her that their marijuana was oregano.

She snorts out a laugh. "They tell this to me. I was at Woodstock and I'm Italian."

“Sis, he probably has no idea what you’re talking about.” Vic take’s a cookie and Debbie gets up to make him some tea.

“Sorry kiddo, she’ll talk all day.”

I shrug and put the cookie down.

“Not hungry?” He frowns.

I finish the cookie. He looks tired, Debbie hands him a bunch of pills with his tea. I guess he’s sick.

~~~551~~~

I end up on Peter's doorstep. “This was a bad idea.”

“Did something happen? Did he take off or...”

I shake my head and then realize he could have and I wouldn’t even know. I call Debbie’s. She swears to me that she’s looking at him and he’s just sitting at the table talking to Vic.

I hang up. “He’s not ready to be out of the hospital.”

“Or you’re not ready for him to be out.”

“Either way.”

He steps aside to let me in. “I don’t need a fucking therapist.”

“You look like you could use a friend.”

~~~552~~~

Vic and Debbie start discussing what to serve for dessert. I yawn and stretch. She kisses my cheek and tells me to take a nap if I want to.

I go upstairs but I’m not really tired. I walk around the room a couple of times. My own room. I wonder if any of the stuff from my apartment is still around. I really liked that chair. If I moved the desk over it would fit under the window. I hear them yelling and realize I can’t stay here. They get along so well. I don’t want to cause problems.

~~~553~~~

I end up talking to Peter about Justin. There’s nothing new. Nothing he doesn’t already know. He reminds me that the weekend pass was my idea every time I start blaming him. I can’t help thinking that he’s the professional, he should have said no. He laughs when I tell him that. I admit I was pretty adamant. In theory it is a good idea. The reality however is that he’s in a house, not a hospital. For all we know he tried to hurt himself again. Peter ushers me out when it’s time for him to go see Justin.

~~~554~~~

Debbie and Vic are standing toe to toe. “Cannoli!” “Grandma’s Italian rum cake!”

I slip past them unnoticed and push open the door just as Peter was about to knock. “Justin. Did you want to go out while we talk?” He looks pointedly at my coat and scarf. I shake my head and take it off. Debbie looks like she’s about to say something. Peter just leads us upstairs. I sit on the bed; he sits at the desk and doesn’t say a word.

I hate when he stares like that, so disapprovingly. “I wasn’t going... I can’t stay here.”

~~~555~~~

When I get to Debbie's house at five Justin and Peter are still upstairs. I pace. Debbie tries to calm me down. Vic offers me a drink. After fifteen minutes Peter comes down. "He'll be okay." Which means he's not now. I take the steps two at a time.

Justin's curled up on the bed. I sit on the edge of it. He turns and lays his head on my thigh. He's been crying. I run a hand through his hair. "What happened?"

He shakes his head and closes his eyes. I lean against the headboard. We sit in silence.

~~~556~~~

I don't know what Peter told Brian. I don't know how angry Brian is. I'm afraid to ask. Deb knocks lightly on the door and pushes it open. "You two, come down for dinner."

I close my eyes. Brian's hand moves from my hair to my shoulder. "We'll be down in a few."

"Justin, baby. Vic and I argue like that all the time. We want you here."

I guess Peter told them I knew what they were arguing about. I hear the door shut. Brian shakes my shoulder. "She means it, and she'll disembowel us if we miss dinner."

~~~557~~~

He was going to bolt. Vic and Debbie didn't notice. If Peter hadn't... I move, dislodging Justin. He sits up and stretches. "I've already eaten my weight in cookies."

"There's no getting out of this."

"Brian..."

"Justin, for this weekend, don't leave this house without telling someone where you're going."

"So it's like jail?"

"It's like family."

"They're not my family."

He's right, they're not, but there the closest thing he's got. "C'mon, Sunshine, Dinner awaits."

He follows me because... because he'd follow me over hot coals. We'll deal with that. For now, we just need to deal with dinner.

Hustler Justin L

Michael is here with a really buff guy. Emmett is talking to Ted. Lindsay and a woman I assume to be Mel come in, with a bundle of winter clothing that I guess is Gus. They're saying their hellos. Everything is so loud and then it all stops when Brian moves away from the stairs and they see me. Brian wraps an arm around my waist and steers me forward. "This won't hurt...much."

He smiles; he thinks it's a joke. I realize there's only one way to get through this. The white noise is my friend. I let myself disappear.

~~~559~~~

I look down and he's gone. Fuck. I pull him off to the side out of sight of the other guests. I take his face in my hands. "Justin. Justin!" He blinks and smiles. "Is it over?"

"Don't disappear. Stay here, with me."

He still looks unsure. I take him out back. Debbie yells after us. "You've got eight minutes!"

I light a cigarette. "Stay. You'll like these people."

He takes a drag from my cigarette looking at me doubtfully. Eventually he nods, "for you."

I'd like him to do something for himself. Tonight's not the night to push it.

~~~560~~~

We go back inside. I sit next to him. Deb never seems to sit down; she circles the table refilling everyone's glass and plate. I just stare at mine. I can't keep up with the conversation.

Brian nudges me. I look up at him. "Eat something."

I shake my head. We've had this conversation more than once. I can't eat when I'm nervous. He pours me a glass of red wine and I gulp it down. He shrugs and then refills it for me.

Everyone seems to be talking. I can't figure out whom they're talking to. No one's listening.

~~~561~~~

After his fourth glass of wine he starts to eat. That's good. Debbie will have him stuffed like a thanksgiving turkey if she doesn't see him eat and she's been watching. So has Lindsay, so has Ben. I thought Michael had decided that the HIV thing was too much to handle. I guess not.

When dessert comes around there's cannoli and rum cake. I ignore all of it but Justin's pleasure in the cannoli is fucking pornographic. I laugh and he looks at me. "What? I've never had them. They're really good." He feeds me the last bite of his.

~~~562~~~

Lindsay glares at me and stands up, tugging at Mel's sleeve. "Let's go."

I don't understand what I did to upset her. I start to apologize but Brian cuts me off and the two of them disappear together. I apologize to no one in particular.

Emmett reaches out to touch my hand. "It's not your fault, sweetie." I don't believe him.

The cacophony starts back up as though two members haven't just stormed off angry with each other. I'm scared for both of them and wonder what will happen when they come back. Debbie hands me a piece of cake.

~~~563~~~

"What's your problem?"

"My problem? Brian, that boy is sick and you're playing games. It's disgusting."

"Lindsay, I'm trying to help."

“By acting like his boyfriend? I’ve seen the drawings he’s done. He’s in love with you. And Brian ‘I don’t do boyfriends’ Kinney, is leading him on.”

“He’s talented.”

She nods. “He’s got an amazing eye, especially for someone so young, and damaged.”

“You see that too?”

“Brian, those drawings are disturbing.” She takes a drag from my cigarette. “He needs help.”

I nod. “More than I can provide.”

She stares at me and sighs. “Let’s go back inside.”

### ~~~564~~~

Brian and Lindsay come back and in. They don’t mention their argument. Brian takes Gus and just kind of stares at him for a while. He drapes an arm over my shoulder and leans back. I rest my head on him and just sort of enjoy the smell of food and Brian and baby all combining with about six glasses of Chianti. Several people say goodbye, asking Brian if they’ll see him at Babylon. He shakes his head, never taking his eyes from Gus. “Not tonight.” Everyone seems surprised. I close my eyes. “Brian, you should go.” He just shrugs.

### ~~~565~~~

Debbie and Vic are cleaning up. Michael stayed to help. Ben is working on some book and went home. I feel Justin pull away from me and tighten my hold a little.

“I should help Debbie.”

“Sunshine, you just sit there and rest.”

“He’s not an invalid, Ma.”

Michael’s right so I relax my grip and Justin carries a few dishes to the sink. Gus reaches out a hand and gurgles. I smile and hand him back to Lindsay, who swaddles him against the blizzard we’re not having. Justin’s laughing at something Michael said. Maybe this wasn’t a bad idea.

### ~~~566~~~

Michael tells me that he’s never seen Brian be so nice to anyone before. I’m surprised

“Brian’s always nice to me.”

“You must be some kind of boy wonder.”

I laugh. We finish doing the dishes and I can’t help remembering a lot of things, sort of all at once. My father and mother standing together after my sixth birthday. The cake was still on the counter. They were washing something else and I took a big handful, they laughed. Isaac, and one of my clients... fuck. My head starts to feel a little fuzzy.

My knees are rubber. “Brian.”

### ~~~567~~~

I look up in time to see him crumple.

I’m at his side. His eyes are closed. “What the hell happened?”

Debbie is slapping his face. "He passed out."

Michael brings me a damp cloth. Vic is calling 911 when Justin opens his eyes. He smiles at me and then frowns. I see his eyes cloud with pain and go blank. Whatever he was thinking about hit him hard. I let him escape. He needs it. Vic says they're not sending an ambulance. I tell him to call Peter.

Justin's easily maneuvered when he's like this. I lead him upstairs.

### ~~~568~~~

I hear Peter calling my name and try to just ignore it but his voice has that demanding tone it gets when we're in session and I try to hide. I blink and focus on him. He's kneeling in front of me. Brian is pacing behind him. "Justin. What happened?"

I shake my head. I don't want to think about it. I don't remember but I know it was overwhelming. "Nothing."

Brian leans in, his nose millimeters from mine. "Don't lie to me."

I flinch away from him and he backs up. Leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. Waiting.

### ~~~569~~~

The way he disappears like that is disconcerting at best. I know how to pull him back but I didn't think it was safe. I waited for Peter and even then, we both had trouble. Now he's denying that anything out of the ordinary happened. I swear half the time I spend with him is waiting for him to come back to me.

"My mom and dad used to laugh with each other when they did the dishes."

What does it say about both of us that I understand why that's a memory worth escaping?

"Take me back to Southwood."

### ~~~570~~~

I can't believe what I just said but Brian looks so angry. Peter looks worried and I'm clearly more than Debbie can handle.

Brian frowns. Peter smiles at me. "I know you think you'll be safer there but the memories will come back, no matter where you are."

I shake my head. He doesn't understand. "I'm upsetting everyone."

"Let us decide what we can handle."

I look at Brian. My eyes feel hot and the tears are coming. He hates that. "What happens when you decide you can't handle me?"

He doesn't say anything. Someone knocks on the bedroom door.

### ~~~571~~~

Deb bustles in, putting clean towels and a plate of cookies on the bed. She pats his face. "You feelin' better, kiddo?"

He nods. She smiles. His being here won't help if she believes every lie he utters. I follow her, leaving Peter to explain that we're not going to abandon him.

Deb turns to face me. "He's a fucking mess."

I nod, wondering if Debbie thinks it might be too much.

"He needs to get here as soon as possible. Fuck-all a hospital knows about caring. Hell, when Vic was sick..."

I cut her off, kissing her cheek. "Thanks."

### ~~~572~~~

Brian probably went to tell Debbie that she doesn't have to do this. He comes back in and sits on the bed, pulling me back against him. Peter has an odd expression but I don't care. I put a hand on either of Brian's thighs and close my eyes.

"She thinks you need more cookies and a big hug."

I almost laugh. "I may need more than that."

"No shit, but it beats staying at Southwood, right?"

I nod, but I'm not sure. The hospital has some advantages. They'll still feed me and clothe me, even if they don't care.

### ~~~573~~~

I look up at Peter who's staring at what probably seems like a really unhealthy tableau but there's nothing sexual about it. He doesn't like to look at me when he talks about things he thinks I don't want to hear, which is almost everything about his past or fears for the future. It's easier this way.

"Justin. We're not going to abandon you. I'm not going to abandon you."

He shrugs. "The hospital isn't so bad"

"Don't lie to me." I tighten my arm around his waist, letting him know I mean it.

"It's not a lie."

He's lying.

### ~~~574~~~

What do you like about Southwood?" Peter is standing at the end of the bed, watching us. I don't think Brian's held me like this in front of him in a long time. He seems distracted by it. He might be jealous. Why wouldn't he want to fuck Brian?

Peter repeats the question when I take too long to respond.

"They don't bother me, and they don't remind me of things that hurt."

"Do you want to stay there?"

I nod. I don't really but at least they won't be disappointed in me, the way Brian always is.

"Bullshit, Justin."



~~~575~~~

"It would be better for everyone Brian."

"Do you like it here?"

"I don't know. It's loud, and I can't bring..." he stops.

I bite back the fury I feel. "Can't bring what?"

He shakes his head.

"Clients. You think you're going back into business?"

"I doubt Peter's seeing me daily for free. Plus the clothes, and Debbie. I owe you a lot."

"No clients. That's not up for debate."

"Just regular ones, Brian. Nothing that..."

I want to scream with frustration. "Justin. You owe me nothing. I told you what I want when it comes to you and sex."

~~~576~~~

Peter asks me what Brian's told me about that.

"He wants me to have sex with people I find attractive and would have fun with. He doesn't want me to charge them."

"What do you want?"

"I want a big chair under a window, and a bed that's just mine, but I can't have that without owing everyone something."

"Even if it's a gift to you?"

"Why would they do that?" Peter and Brian both get that expression and I stop talking. I'm making them angry.

"Haven't you ever wanted to give something to someone you cared about?"

I nod.

## Hustler Justin LI

I've given up being hopeful that Justin's answer will be something that won't make me cringe.

Peter asks a follow up question and Justin looks at me. "I want to do things to make Brian happy."

Peter frowns. I don't say a word.

"Things of a sexual nature."

“That’s what he likes.”

“What else does he like?”

“Telling people what to do, winning at board games, and Gus.”

“Justin, are you telling me you lose on purpose.”

“Brian, it’s a sucker’s play to buy Boardwalk without Park Place.”

“You actually throw monopoly games?”

He shrugs and I shake my head.

### ~~~578~~~

I don’t know why he’s upset. He likes to win so I let him. Peter looks at Brian and then back at me.

“Justin, Brian doesn’t need you to throw a board game for him to feel good about himself.”

“But he’s terrible at it. He buys everything and then...”

He holds his hand up. “This isn’t about his game playing, it’s about not just allowing him to win. You’re allowed to win.”

I don’t get it. I don’t care and Brian does, so what’s the difference. Peter leaves; he’ll see me tomorrow. I nod and lie down. I’m tired.

### ~~~579~~~

Justin’s half asleep already and Peter didn’t touch on a couple of issues that I’d like to know more about but I guess he gets it better than I. I turn out the light and Justin calls to me.

“Hmmm?”

“Can you stay?”

“Where?”

“Here?”

“Justin, you...”

“I’m not trying to... it’s for me. I hate being alone and...”

I sit next to him. He asks me to lie down. He rests his head on my shoulder and his arm over my chest. When Deb comes in twenty minutes later he’s asleep. She backs out and closes the door quietly.

### ~~~580~~~

I wake up in the middle of the night and Brian’s staring at me. “Nightmare?”

I nod.

“You get them often?”

I don't say anything.

"Justin? Every night?"

I'm not sure if I should tell him the truth but his look insists that he wants to know.

"If I sort of zone out before I go to sleep then I only wake up once or twice."

"And if you don't?"

"Depends. I'll wake up in a cold sweat and not go back to sleep or keep waking up all night long."

"So you don't sleep?"

"It's always been like this."

### ~~~581~~~

He doesn't sleep. I can relate, but the always part throws me. Always. he closes his eyes and I marvel at him. This is his reality and he's just... adapted. Twisted his brain, or allowed his brain to be twisted until all of this was normal. Ritual abuse. Adults paying for the privilege of hurting him. Rape. His childhood memories make mine seem like a Norman Rockwell Painting. His breathing evens out. He's asleep again. I'm up for the night. I sit in vigil, wishing I could just will the nightmares away, or better yet, the events that caused them.

### ~~~582~~~

I wake up again and Brian's there. I sit up, my heart racing.

"Bad one?"

I nod.

"Try to get some more sleep."

I pull the covers back, making room for him. "I will if you will."

"Justin."

"You're tired, Brian, I can tell."

He looks at me and I know he wants to deny it but in the end he slides under the covers and I rest my head against his back.

We wake up at six. Brian kisses my temple and leaves. I shower and realize that no one's watching me. I stay there for a long time.

### ~~~583~~~

When I get back to Debbie's she's serving Justin breakfast. He eats without prompting. She puts a plate down for me and there's no point in arguing. I eat too.

"Neither of you look like you've slept in a month."

"He doesn't sleep. He just works and then passes out."

I glare at him. He shrugs, buttering another piece of toast.

Debbie's attention is turned fully onto me now and I realize that the fucker did that intentionally. I decide I'm too old to kick him under the table so instead I give him the finger while Debbie's not looking.

### ~~~584~~~

I shrug and eat another piece of toast. It's not cold the way it always is at the hospital, and Debbie seems happier when I eat, so I can do that for her. She puts a plate of waffles in front of me and Brian shakes his head. "Making up for lost time?"

"I hate the food there."

Debbie smacks the back of Brian's head. "You have to bring the kid some food."

He glowers at me. I eat the waffles and realize that Debbie's might not be so bad. Brian promises to pick up lasagna next week for me.

### ~~~585~~~

"So, what would you like to do today?"

He shrugs and I just continue to stare. He chews and swallows, seeming to actually contemplate the question.

"I want to go to my apartment."

Debbie turns around quickly, the soapy pan still in her hand. I take a moment, trying to avoid yelling. "Why?"

"I want to get some stuff out of there. I was wondering if maybe Debbie could hold onto it for me until I get out." He blinks at her. She smiles and I relax.

"Fine, once you get your stuff, I'm getting you out of that lease."

### ~~~586~~~

He's quiet on the drive there and even quieter once we're inside. He's never liked this place. The door to the bedroom is repaired but the locks are gone. Brian has brought me most of my clothes, I know the laptop is at the loft, but I want my sketchbooks and a few other things. Brian watches me while I crawl to the back of the closet and retrieve a large plastic Ziploc bag.

"I was wondering where you kept that."

"You could have asked. I know I owe you but I want to give some of it to Debbie."

### ~~~587~~~

He pulls out a stack of bills and counts out the last two months rent. "Here, I know you covered it for me."

"I don't want it."

"Brian, you can't just pay my way through life."

"I don't want that money. Keep it. Spend it on yourself. You earned it." He did, the hard way.

"Will you just hold on to it while I'm at Southwood. Use it if you have to, for KinnetiK."

There's only a few thousand dollars. Not enough to cover a day's operating expenses. "Justin, KinnetiK is doing fine on its own." It's not a lie.

### ~~~588~~~

I take the small baggie from the bottom of the bag and shove it in my pocket. Just a few things I want to have with me. I know he wants to ask, but I also know he won't.

I know I can't bring the furniture with me, so I sit in the chair one more time. Enjoying the feel of the late morning sun on my face.

I walk through the apartment. My stomach clenches when I get to the other bedroom but I know I have to go in.

He stops me as my hand turns the knob.

### ~~~589~~~

He looks so relaxed with the sun on his face. I leave the room silently and wait. Eventually he walks past me, opening and closing the kitchen cabinets but not removing anything. He goes into the second bathroom and seems a little tense when he comes out. I'm standing by the kitchen counter, a few feet from the bedroom door. There can't be anything in here that he needs or wants. He puts his hand on the knob. "Justin."

He looks up, seeming a little startled. "I just need..." he trails off but opens the door. I'm right behind him.

### ~~~590~~~

I hate Southwood. I hate the antiseptic smell and the sterile feel that no amount of primary colored murals can erase. I hate the clipboards, the nurses and my room, the one with no privacy. I am the only one on the ward that's never had a roommate but I've never been off SIPs. Someone's always watching. I stand in this room, a black leather strap hanging from a hook on the wall. A crop lying on the floor. I long for my sterile hospital room, for primary colors, the strong smell of Lysol and bored eyes behind a clipboard.

### ~~~591~~~

He takes two steps into the room and freezes. I move to the side. I want to pull him out, but if he needs to be here, I don't want to hamper the healing process. He opens the bottom drawer in the armoire, takes a deep breath and throws the doors open. When he starts packing things into the bag I decide Fuck the healing process and stop him.

He resists, wrapping the items carefully and placing each one neatly. The image of his fingers combing through the flails of a flogger nauseates me. "Justin, what are you doing?"

### ~~~592~~~

I look up. "I can sell a lot of this stuff. A few haven't been used at all, and I might be able to return them. Besides, I have to tell him I'm out of the business or he'll keep having clients call."

"You can just change your number. You don't need to give two weeks notice."

He continues packing the instruments of his own torture. "You want me to be a normal person? Normal people don't walk away from thousands of dollars. Normal people pay their own way."

"Adults, you're just a kid."

“I’ll be eighteen in five weeks.”

### ~~~593~~~

I want to tell him that eighteen is still a kid but he’s right, for him, childhood has been over for a long time.

“I’ll return them, tell him you’re out of the business and put the money aside for you.”

He tilts his head and looks at me. “You don’t trust me. You think he’s going to talk me into taking clients.”

“Last night you tried to talk me into your taking clients again.”

“But you said no.”

“Justin do what you want because it’s what you want. Don’t do it for me.”

He sits down, his confusion clear.

### ~~~594~~~

What I want. I don’t know what I want. All I know is that I don’t want to always be in pain. Peter says to stop defining things by what I don’t want. I can’t. Everything I’ve known turns out to be just another exercise in what I don’t want. Everything except Brian. I zip the bag closed and nod to him.

“No more clients, at all. And I’ll leave Southwood as soon as they let me. That’s what I want.”

He hugs me. It’s friendly and platonic. When I’m out, I’ll work on changing that. He’s what I want.

## Hustler Justin LII

I ask him if he needs anything else. He shrugs, I glare and then he answers. “They won’t let me wear shoes and my feet get cold.”

Should I be happy he’s telling me now, or get aggravated he hasn’t mentioned this before? We go to a sporting goods store and he insists on paying for his own thermal socks.

I glance at the bag in the backseat. “I’m returning that shit for you tomorrow.”

He nods and I actually worry. Justin can be a pain in the ass, and stubborn, but he’s at his most dangerous when he’s compliant.

### ~~~596~~~

I forgot how easy it was to make someone else happy. Brian wants to return them. He doesn’t want me to see clients. I want Brian, so I’ll do what he says. I need him as much as I want him. At my age, the clients are going to dry up soon anyway.

He seems tense, but the best way I know to relax someone doesn’t work on Brian, not yet. I just have to figure out how to make him want me. “Brian, can we go to Babylon tonight?”

His head turns so quickly I think he hurt something.

~~~597~~~

It's not what I expected and the idea is the opposite of appealing. "Why?"

"You said I'm supposed to figure out what I like. I can't do that if the only man I ever meet is you."

He's got a point. I'll admit, however, that I was thinking he'd figure it out somewhere else... then I realize that would be somewhere I couldn't keep an eye on him. Fuck.

"It's loud there. You might not like it."

"I promise I'll tell you when I'm ready to leave."

"Let me buy you something to wear."

He nods. Compliant again. I'm worried.

~~~598~~~

I talk to Peter about deciding what I promised Brian.

"Are you doing this because it's what you want?"

I only lie a little. "I don't know what I want. You keep telling me that Brian wants me safe and happy. That's what I'm supposed to want, right?"

He nods.

"I'm going to do what he wants, trust that the goal really is me, safe and happy. If it works, then don't we all win?"

He asks me about Isaac again. I don't know why he always wants me to talk about him. It never does anything but upset me.

~~~599~~~

I drop him off at Peter's offices at four. Peter will still be seeing Justin daily once he's at Debbie's, at least for the first month. I consider buying the clothes for him but Justin needs to learn to make decisions about what he wants so I return a few phone calls and make sure Emmett and Michael are planning on going out tonight too. Justin could use the support, and they're at least two other men who won't try to fuck him.

He meets me at the car. He's been crying. "Peter says to call him tomorrow."

I nod.

~~~600~~~

Brian won't pick out what he likes. So I try to read his expression as I choose clothes. He doesn't like bright colors. He doesn't like the things that seem familiar to me, the kind of things Isaac would choose. He doesn't seem happy when I pick out things that look like what he'd wear either. I have no idea what size I wear, so he makes me try everything on. He doesn't like when things are too tight. He doesn't like my body. I end up with a couple shirts and two pairs of cargo pants, khaki and black.

~~~601~~~

He picks out clothes that make him look even twinkier. When he realizes I don't like those, he chooses black jeans and sleeveless black shirts. I almost laugh. I'm not trying to turn him into a mini-me. In the end, I smile at what he looks most comfortable in. They're not hideous and he seems happy. I pay and we head back to the loft. "Call Debbie."

"Why?"

"She's worried sick."

"How do you know?"

"Call Debbie."

When I get out of the shower he's at his laptop, frowning.

"Go take a shower."

He's so fucking compliant. I call Peter.

~~~602~~~

He's right. Debbie was worried but I promised we'd be back for breakfast tomorrow before I had to return to the Southwood.

She made me promise to be careful. She knows Brian is going to be there, why would she think anything could happen to me?

I stand in the shower and get hard, just the smell of him, so strong in here, his soap, his shampoo, his cologne. I remember the times we showered together. Before he stopped liking me. I don't touch myself. I know better than that. When I'm really clean I borrow his razor and shave.

~~~603~~~

Peter seems surprised about Babylon. "He didn't tell you?"

"He thought I'd object."

"Do you?"

"Not really. Just be careful he's trying to please you."

"He thinks I want him compliant?"

"You hate when he disagrees with you."

"Only when he's planning on doing something that might hurt him."

"Which you perceive to be everything."

"Am I wrong?"

"Quite possibly."

“So you want me to fuck him?”

“No. This is where your black and white thinking causes problems.”

“This isn’t about me.”

“He’s making it about you. Tell him what you do and don’t approve of, and tell him why”

~~~604~~~

Brian seems distracted when I come out of the bathroom.

“You shaved.”

I turn around so he can appreciate it.

“I don’t want you to do that.”

“I thought...”

“You’re a man. I don’t want you to pretend otherwise. Not for me or anyone.”

“But...”

“Justin, do you want to shave your entire body, deny that you’re an adult, give up control over your own life?”

It’s harder to give Brian what he wants. He wants honesty. I shake my head.

“So don’t do it again.”

“But you do.” I don’t understand him.

He hands me my clothes. “Get dressed.”

~~~605~~~

I’m going to hell. I swear once Justin’s out of Southwood I’m checking myself in. How can I be angry and sickened and turned on at the same time? It’s not his compliance that interests me. That’s never been a kink of mine. His genuine innocence, the part where he really has no fucking clue, I want to teach him, I want to...

I light a cigarette and move to the other side of the loft. I want to hand him off to Michael and get my dick sucked. This kid’s killing me.

I set the alarm and we leave.

~~~606~~~

He leads me to the bar and if his hand weren’t on my arm, I would bolt. He’s right. It’s loud. There are half-naked men, and flashing lights and it’s all overwhelming.

He whispers to me that I’m still on medications and then buys me a shot and a beer. I lean against him but he moves away from me. His eyes scanning the throng for something. Someone grabs me but before he can get anywhere Brian’s arm is back around me. I bite back a smile and take a shot. Eventually Brian leads me to the dance floor.

~~~607~~~

He's a good dancer but that doesn't surprise me. He's grinding against me. I maneuver us back to the bar, ordering us each another beer. Michael and Emmett are here, of course, so is Ted, but in all fairness, I don't think Ted would actually take advantage of a sick kid. Unlike me.

I fight back the thought, kiss Mikey, elicit a promise from Emmett to look out for Justin for a few and disappear into the back room. I need to get this handled before Justin tries to handle it for me. When I come back, he's not there.

~~~608~~~

Emmett drags me onto the dance floor and it's different than being with Brian. It's still fun and the three shots and two beers have made me feel a little like smiling. The noise doesn't seem as loud and the men seem friendlier. One of them is pressed against my back; another pushes Emmett out of the way and is pressed against my chest. Their hands slide under my shirt. It feels kind of good but I panic when one lifts my arms and the other takes my shirt off. One is kissing my shoulder, the other stroking my cock.

~~~609~~~

I see Justin sandwiched between two men. I weave my way to them and put an arm between Justin and the fucker trying to get a hand down his pants. He looks at me and backs off. Justin looks up, his eyes flooded with relief. He drapes his arms over my shoulders and the other guy backs off too. "What were you doing?"

"Dancing."

I wrap my arms around his waist, whispering into his ear, "I don't want you to do that anymore."

He smiles. I'm pretty sure he misunderstands the why of it but right now, I just don't care.

Hustler Justin LIII

Brian gets jealous. It's a good thing to know. I caught a glimpse of the guy he was in the backroom with. My heart sank a little. He likes men. Tall, dark haired, broad shouldered men. I can't compete with that. But now he's dancing with me, and telling me he doesn't want me to dance with anyone else. Maybe I'm closer than I think.

He buys me several more shots and I guess I'm a little drunk when we get back to Debbie's. I lean in to kiss him but he pushes me away, "find someone your own age."

~~~611~~~

After I make sure he's safely inside, I sit and bang my head against the steering wheel. He and I are going to have to have a talk. I know it's selfish but I don't want to do it until he's back at Southwood. I don't know how he'll react. I see Debbie staring at me from around the curtains. I head back to the loft. When I'm inside I realize that I was too busy watching Justin to get drunk enough for me to fall asleep. I start working on the new women's athletic wear campaign for Brown Athletics.

~~~612~~~

With the bedroom door closed I curl up under the blankets, letting my head start to buzz. I hear Debbie moving behind me.

"What'd he do?"

"He didn't do anything."

“You can’t pin your dreams on Brian, Sunshine. You’ll be waiting your whole life for nothing.”

“He’s not nothing.”

She pats my cheek. “He’s somethin’ alright but he’s not what you need. I’ve seen people wait almost too long before they realize that.”

“Michael?”

She nods.

“He loves Michael.”

She nods again. “Not how you want Brian to love you.”

I turn my back to her. “I’m tired.”

She leaves.

~~~613~~~

At eight I pack up my computer and head over to get Justin. He’s picking at his bacon. It doesn’t look like he’s touched his eggs. “Hey.”

He looks up and smiles. “Hey.”

Debbie’s glaring at me.

“Deb, coffee?”

“This isn’t the fucking diner.”

Shit, what did I do now?

Justin stands up. “Ready?”

I’m surprised. I figured he’d be a little less enthusiastic.

Debbie grabs my arm once Justin’s headed towards the car. “That kid is in love with you.”

I don’t respond.

“He’s had enough people hurt him.”

I walk away. She doesn’t know the half of it.

~~~614~~~

We’re halfway there before Brian says anything. “Justin, you know I can’t be your...boyfriend.” He seems to have trouble even saying the word.

“I don’t see why not.”

“I know you don’t.”

“It’s not illegal you know. I asked Peter.”

“I didn’t say it was a legal issue.”

“You said there was a law against...” I stop. Mentioning Isaac never make him happy.

“That was different.”

“So you just don’t want me?”

He lights a cigarette and doesn’t say anything else for a long time.

“It doesn’t matter what I want. You don’t know what you want.”

He’s so frustrating.

~~~615~~~

“Brian, what I want hasn’t changed.”

“It will.”

“It won’t.”

“It will Justin, you’re seventeen.”

“I’ll be eighteen soon.”

“I’m too... you’re too... Justin...” I take a deep breath and he’s starting to really cry. I pull into the main parking lot and we just sit for a minute. “Justin. It would be wrong. I’d be taking advantage of you. There’re a lot of people who will love you. Who can love you, the way you deserve.”

“So you do love me.”

I can’t fucking win.

“Justin. Love doesn’t...” I can’t do this, he... fuck. “Justin, I can’t love you.”

~~~616~~~

I don’t understand what he’s saying. I know he doesn’t love me, yet. What does he mean he can’t? If there’s no legal reason... then I realize what he’s saying.

My heart breaks. I actually feel it, and I get out of the car grabbing my duffle bag and heading towards the front lobby. I need to get away from him. I need... he’s standing in front of me. Blocking my path. “Justin.”

I can’t look at him.

“Justin.”

I push him aside run. He can’t love me. He knows what I am, what I’ve done. He can’t love that.

~~~617~~~

By the time I’m at the front entrance they’re leading him back to the adolescent unit. Once I’m back at KinnetiK I take the messages from Cynthia and grit my teeth. Until the construction’s further along we’re all working out of the single functioning room. I announce I’ll be working at the loft for the rest of the day. I consider stopping in to talk to

Debbie but fuck her. I don't owe anyone an explanation. At seven I turn change and go to Woody's. I'm on my third drink when Peter walks in. My stomach lurches. "Is he okay?"

~~~618~~~

They search my duffle bag and don't even look at me. I can't stop crying. No one says a word and it's probably for the best. I stay in my room the rest of the day, completely ignoring the clipboards occasional attempts to get me to stop "isolating". At five I consider going up front but then I remember what Brian said. I'm not sure I'd want to see him if he did come but I'm pretty sure he won't be here.

At six they make me eat something. Brian's really not coming.

By seven it's all just white noise.

~~~619~~~

"What are you doing here?"

I down another shot. "Use your imagination."

"You made Justin a promise."

I drink my beer and refuse to look at him. He leaves.

Michael seems surprised to see me. "Shouldn't you be visiting Justin?"

I lean on him heavily, drunker than I realized. "Justin's got an entire hospital to take care of him." I scan the crowd looking for prey. "I'm looking for someone to take care of me."

Michael wraps an arm around my waist. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I smile at someone but Michael's steering me out of Woody's.

~~~620~~~

A clipboard brings me my meds and then sits on the bed across from mine. The one that's always been empty. I turn away from him. They always try to chat, to get me to tell them how I feel. Stupid motherfuckers. I don't want to feel... and I sure as hell don't want to talk about it. He doesn't leave. Twenty minutes they usually have somewhere to be.

"You're back on a 1 to 1 tonight."

Great, now I can't even pee without being watched. I close my eyes and ignore the tears. They mean nothing. I mean nothing.

~~~621~~~

Michael's pulling my shoes off.

"I should have told him."

"Told him what."

"The real reason."

He removes my jeans and drapes the duvet over me. "But then you wouldn't be you."

I knew Michael would understand. "Exactly"

He turns out the light. "And of course the world can't live without Brian Kinney."

I grab his arm as he turns to leave.

He gives me a peck on the lips. "I'm not going to make you feel less pathetic by being more pathetic."

I try to glare but I can't focus. I tell him to fuck off, and he does.

~~~622~~~

I'm kind of amazed how quickly I get used to things. I got used to being on the street, and then Brian, and then being in here, and now I'm used to being in here without seeing Brian. He hasn't come in ten days. At first I missed him. Last week I asked Peter about him almost every day but he changed the subject back to me. Now I don't talk about him. I try not to think about him. That only works when I disappear, but that's okay. There's no one to yell at me for doing that now.

~~~623~~~

Life is easier this way. I assure myself of that, as I drive past Woody's and head to the baths.

Okay, Debbie's not speaking to me. Michael glares at me if I show up anywhere before nine, as though not visiting Justin is some sort of personal betrayal. Lindsay told me I'm being "unbearably selfish".

I take a quick hit off my hand and let close my eyes against the burn in the back of my throat. The world gets more sharply defined and I know I'm right. This is better. Justin's better off without people like me confusing him.

~~~624~~~

Peter's here early today. He tells me that tomorrow they're going to run some tests. I nod. Having blood drawn doesn't bother me. He starts explaining that they're easy and just a bunch of questions. I shrug. Sounds simple enough.

"Justin, you have to be there for these."

I look up. He's won't let me drop my gaze. "Fully present. Like you are with me."

"Will you be there?"

He shakes his head. "It'll take most of the day tomorrow so I may not be able to see you at all."

I panic but I don't let Peter see that.

~~~625~~~

I write Peter his monthly payment, and decide I should take it to him personally. He's standing at the door in jeans, with a drink in his hand. "You could have mailed that."

I turn to leave.

"Brian."

I turn back.

"He misses you, and no, he's not okay. He's gone most of the time. Scared, and sad. What the fuck happened?"

I shrug. "I like him."

Peter laughs but it's mirthless. "That's an excellent reason to sever all ties."

"It was confusing us both."

He gestures for me to come in. when I do, he pours me a drink.

~~~626~~~

Fuck Peter. Fuck Brian. Fuck the clipboards and the stupid women who keep asking me to draw them a picture or tell them how far it is from New York to California. I zone out after they ask me to play with blocks. I'm not a fucking infant. I thought the goal was to stop being treated like one.

I answer them with a yes or no as often as possible. They show me pictures and ask me to tell them what's happening. I make up a story; how the fuck should I know what's happening? I don't know anything.

~~~627~~~

Peter's standing in front of my desk. He's never been to the KinnetiK offices before and I ignore his anger and my fear. He tosses a sheaf of papers at me.

"The kid's a fucking moron. And a genius."

"Huh?" I know, brilliant.

"We ran the standard tests on him, personality, IQ, the WISC and WIPSII..."

"We knew he was a fucking mess."

"Brian. He's smart. He can't hide that. But he's too detached to answer anything completely. They're going to keep Justin in the system as an adult if we don't re-test him."

"Re-test him."

"While he's mentally present."

~~~628~~~

Walking down the corridor, I stick close to the wall, avoiding everyone. When I turn there's a clipboard pointing in the opposite direction.

Brian's here in faded jeans. I turn away but he takes a step forward and then his warm scent is overpowering and his finger on my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes brings tears to mine. I wrap my arms around him and lean my face against his chest. "Where the fuck have you been?"

He kisses the top of my head. "I could ask you the same thing."

"I've been right here."

"Justin, I'm sorry."

Hustler Justin LIV

He follows me to the visiting room. His hand holding onto my shirt as if assuring himself I'm actually here.

I hand him his favorite. Double cheeseburger with mustard and ketchup but he pushes it and the fries away.

"Justin, eat."

He shakes his head and looks up. "Why did you leave me?"

Fuck, I guess I'd hoped after his warm welcome that we could just move past this.

"Eat and I'll tell you."

He crosses his arms. He's lost weight, he really should eat something but it won't make what I have to tell him any easier. I start.

~~~630~~~

He gives me that same pointless monologue about what he can't be for me. I tune out.

"Justin, come back."

"Why?"

He stands up, angry. I can't help flinching away.

He notices and sits back down. "You need to be here, you need ..."

"Stop telling me what I need. You don't know what I need. I need you and if you say you know, then you just chose to not give it to me... so which is the more honorable Brian? Which option was 'for my own good'?" I'm surprised at how good it feels to be this angry.

~~~631~~~

His eyes flash. He's present. Pissed off, bordering on violent, but present. I don't think I've ever been so relieved to be yelled at.

"You're right."

He seems surprised.

"Don't look so shocked. You're probably right a lot. You're a genius."

"What?"

"Those tests you took. You're severely fucked in the head, but you're also pretty fucking smart."

"So?"

“So if you don’t actually show up for the test next time, in body and mind, you’ll end up in a home permanently, with people who can’t tie their shoes.”

“So you’re here to make sure I take the test again?”

~~~632~~~

I guess a part of me thought that he might have missed me as much as I missed him. I guess he senses my disappointment because he’s moved next to me. His hand running through my hair. “No. I’m here because I fucked up.”

“And now you’re trying to fix it.”

He nods.

“Well, it’s fixed. I’ll take the fucking test again.”

“That’s not where I fucked up. I broke a promise.”

I nod. “Asshole.”

“But you didn’t break yours.”

“I couldn’t. Once you stopped showing up, I was back on constant supervision.”

He pulls me to him. “Justin, no.”

~~~633~~~

So that’s it. I visit him, he has hope. I stop and he gives up. Christ... Peter needs to work on that before anything else. That’s not fair to him... his life can’t be in my hands. My own life shouldn’t be in my hands sometimes. “Can we change the arrangement?”

“You’re not coming back are you?”

“I am, but I don’t think it’s healthy for you to see me every day.”

“I’m in the hospital Brian, with nothing but clipboards and kids. How is seeing you any more or less healthy than the rest?”

I formulate my answer carefully.

~~~634~~~

I see the wheels spinning and I shake my head. “You don’t even have a fucking answer. All you know is that you don’t want to be responsible for me, fine you’re not.”

“What are you going to do?”

I look away. “You’re not responsible. It doesn’t matter.”

“Fuck you. You think it doesn’t matter if you decide to slip away forever, or just off yourself?”

“Does it matter to you?”

“Of course.”

“Because you’d feel guilty.”

That alien stare thing again. “Because I’d miss you.”

I can’t help asking. “Did you miss me? I mean these last few days?”

~~~635~~~

Peter told me not to let him manipulate me emotionally. I don’t think he is. I don’t think he gives a flying fuck what happens to him. I sit back. “Justin, how long has it been since we’ve seen each other?”

He shrugs. “About a week I guess.”

“The last time was...”

“When I was at Debbie’s.”

“That was over two weeks ago. It’s the third of March.”

He smacks my arm. “You asshole! You left me here for two weeks?”

“You, apparently, were barely here for most of it.”

“Brian”

His voice sounds desperate and frightened. “I promise, Justin.”

~~~636~~~

I don’t even know exactly what he’s promising. I try to piece it together but one day runs into the next, and when you’ve got no reason to watch the board, is one day any different from three? I get out on the nineteenth. Possibly even the eighteenth, Peter’s working on me being out for my birthday. That’s not very far away now. I just have to make it ‘til then. Once I’m out, Brian and I can figure the rest out together.

I look into his eyes and I mean it. “I’ll be here. I promise too.”

“Thank you”

~~~637~~~

I can’t stop thinking about him the next day. It’s the kind of fear that makes me want to call every twenty minutes, or better yet, just go sit by the doors in case something happens. Of course those are both insane ideas, so I yell at one of the new guys in creative and then go to the diner for lunch.

Debbie glares at me when I order. She glares even harder when she sits across from me. “You been to see him yet?”

“Yesterday.”

“So you done for the year?”

I don’t reply and she launches into me.

~~~638~~~

The next day they take me back in for more testing. It's the same bullshit and some of it is still confusing but I don't try to disappear, even when it gets boring. Eight solid hours later, they let me go. It's after four. Brian and I didn't talk about his schedule the way we used to. I don't know what time to expect him. He comes through the doors at 4:59 holding a bag from Papagano's. I can't help but be relieved. He drapes an arm over my shoulder, kisses my temple and leads me to the visiting room.

~~~639~~~

I'm in Peter's office reading the test results. "The lad's a genius."

"A certified, three-standard-deviations-above-the-mean, mensa-level genius."

"And pathological."

"He doesn't mean to create chaos. He simply has no boundaries when it comes to interpersonal relationships, and very little impulse control."

"But will they release him?"

"I thought you wanted him to stay."

"Will he be able to leave?"

Peter nods. "In two days time, he will be a full grown adult able to get married, vote, join the army."

"Hopefully not all on the same day."

Peter steers me to the door. "He'll still need a lot of help."

~~~640~~~

I'm more scared than I was the last time. Brian's been to see me every day. I meet with Peter daily too. We've talked about it a thousand times but I'm still not sure I'm ready for this. Brian takes my bag. I keep the messenger bag he bought me, the one with my sketchbooks and notebooks. He looks at me and I meet his eyes.

"You ready?"

I shake my head. He laughs and guides me out of the unit, out of the building, and out of the system. Brian's hand around shoulder keeps me from trying to disappear.

~~~641~~~

The entire drive all I can do is hope that Debbie listened to me. She can be there, Vic can be there, hell, even Michael would be okay, but if she has the place packed with a "Welcome Home" crew I'm going to throttle her. Debbie's love might be a good thing for Justin, but it might also be overwhelming. He's smoked three cigarettes back to back. He reaches to light another and I stop him. "We're there."

He fidgets.

"Justin. It'll be alright."

"You don't know that. You can't promise that."

He's right. I grip his hand and park.

~~~642~~~

He seems hesitant when he pushes open the door. Debbie's doesn't hug me. She pinches my cheek though and tells me how happy she is that I'm finally home. It's weird to hear her say it.

Brian follows me upstairs with my bag and when the door opens I smile.

My chair is there, under the window. The furniture has been rearranged with the screen from my apartment blocking the view of the bed from the doorway.

I turn around to thank Brian but he gestures towards my stuff, "I'll let you get settled in."

I smile up at him.

## Hustler Justin LV

Debbie's all smiles when I come downstairs. "You did good."

I'm not so sure. She sees my doubt because she touches my face. "You can play the bad boy all you want, but you rescued this kid, and you did right by him. You might turn into a good man despite your best efforts."

I leave without saying a word. If she knew how sometimes think about this kid, she wouldn't say that.

I'm halfway home when my cell rings. "What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to use a phone without having to ask permission."

I laugh and light a cigarette.

~~~644~~~

Debbie comes upstairs once I'm off the phone with Brian. He handed me the cell phone as we stepped out of the hospital. "Call if you need me."

I'm sitting in my chair. She smiles and sits on the edge of the bed. "I'm glad you're here baby."

"I am too." I think it's true.

"But there are gonna be rules."

I'm not surprised. I knew there had to be something in it for her.

"No tricks after midnight, and no clients. You hear me? You respect your body and you play safe."

I nod. Not sure what to say.

~~~645~~~

I didn't tell Debbie everything. That's Justin's story to tell or not. She already knew about the hustling. I had to warn her he might go try to earn a living that way again. She was going to read him the riot act but I think I talked her down from that. She can give him a lot of what he needs for a while. He's lucky to have her. Beyond that... well,

he's going to hate the next parts but there's no way around it. I head to the office for a while. I promised I'd see him tonight.

### ~~~646~~~

I pace and then sit down with my sketchbook. I try to lose myself in it but I'm feeling anxious and cooped up. Then I remember... I can go out. I can go anywhere I want. I grab my jacket and say goodbye to Debbie. That was another rule. She asks me where I'm going. I shrug and smile. I could go anywhere. The feeling is a little daunting but it's also exhilarating. I don't know the neighborhood well but three blocks down I make a left onto 25th and soon, I'm on Liberty Avenue. My phone rings, it's Brian.

### ~~~645~~~

I hear cars in the background, and then people talking. Fucking Debbie. "Where are you?"

"I'm taking a walk."

"You have an appointment with Peter at three."

"And it's noon. I think somehow I'll make it there in time."

"What are you doing there?"

"Looking for a couple of safe regular clients."

"Is that your idea of a joke?"

"Actually yes."

He laughs. Is he high? But then I realize he's been stuck in the hospital for three months. Being giddy just to be outside and free makes sense.

"Justin, be careful."

"Yes sir."

"Later."

"Later, Brian." he hangs up.

### ~~~646~~~

I'm not sure what to do with myself once I hang up. I browse the bargain table of a bookstore. I turn around to find Melanie and Lindsay pushing Gus's stroller. They see me and approach. I'm nervous. I know Lindsay and Brian were fighting because of me. They invite me to join them and we go back to their house for sandwiches. They seem as surprised as I am when Brian comes by.

"What are you doing here?"

"He's fine Brian. We were just keeping him company."

Brian nods and sits down. "I'll drive you to Peter's."

I smile.

~~~647~~~

I had a few things I wanted to ask Lindsay about Justin's work. I won't do it while he's here. He gets self-conscious about other people seeing it. Instead he leans against my chair. I hate that. It feels too much like where Isaac kept him. I pull him up, now he's practically sitting on my lap and really, is that any better? I'm beginning to think I'm as bad for him as Isaac but he moves to the sofa and he's holding Gus, and smiling. Maybe I did one or two things right. He's close to tears. Maybe not.

~~~648~~~

When I get out of Peter's office Brian's still there. "You didn't have to wait for me."

"I was coming to see you soon anyway."

"I'm not at Southwood anymore. You don't have to follow visiting hours."

"It's probably better if I do. Peter says that..."

"Fuck what Peter says. I'm okay Brian. You can't keep doing this."

He pretends he doesn't know what I'm talking about. When he stops the car in front of Debbie's, (ten blocks away from Peter's offices, I could have walked), I turn to face him. "Do you trust me?"

He seems unsure. "Do you?"

~~~649~~~

How the fuck am I supposed to answer that? With my money? Sure. With my son, maybe. With his own safety? No.

I light a cigarette. He takes one from my pack. "Brian. I can walk a few blocks and not get hurt."

Yeah, and if something Peter says upsets him, or something brings up a memory, then what, he wanders off a bridge before he's really paying attention. I shake my head. He misunderstands.

"Fuck you. You know, I was doing fine before I met you!"

He clearly has no idea what the term fine means. "You were not."

~~~650~~~

I move to get out of the car but he leans over and holds the door shut. "Justin. You're out of control."

I turn to look at him and the anger I feel scares me. I push him away. "Out of control? Why? Because I want to control my own life? Walk a few blocks by myself?"

He's trying to keep me in the car but I slide out from under his arm. He can't hold the door closed and me at the same time and soon I'm on the sidewalk. I take off, running, not sure where, not caring.

~~~651~~~

I take off after him. He's ducking between the houses and these shoes were not meant for the slushy ground the way his sneakers are but I refuse to slow down. I don't know where he's heading. I doubt he does. I lose sight of him and my heart beats even faster. I'm breathing hard trying to listen over the thud of my heart beating in my ears. I see a flash of movement and I take off after it. When I do spot him he's trying to climb a fence between the residential section and some abandoned industrial building.

~~~652~~~

I don't know why I'm so angry. I need to run before I become the one thing I don't want. One of my clients. I understand now, why you'd want to just lash out like they did. I keep running until my path is blocked. I start to climb and feel something pulling at me. I kick it away but it pulls harder and I lose my grip, falling backwards on top of... him. He's got his arms around me. I struggle to get free but he pins me between the cold ground and his warm body. He kisses me.

~~~653~~~

He stops fighting me. His arms wrap around my neck and his tongue is on mine. I pull back, panting and sick to my stomach. What did I just do? I sit back but don't let him up. He's breathing hard too. He reaches out for me.

I shake my head. "Justin..."

He's smiling. "I knew you wanted me."

He's not the one who needs to be locked up. I am. "Justin we can't."

He nods and looks away from me but I know that expression. He thinks he's won. I'm a little worried. I think he might be right.

Hustler Justin LVI

Brian stands up and offers me a hand. I take it. My back is wet, my lungs hurt from running and crying but the anger is gone.

"You have to cut that shit out."

I don't answer him. I'd stop doing things that piss him off if I could but figuring out what will and won't upset him is exhausting, besides... he's the one who keeps telling me to figure out what I want. Well, I wanted to run. I tell him so and he shakes his head, lighting a cigarette leading me into Debbie's backyard. I take his cigarette.

~~~655~~~

He's leaning against me, we share the cigarette and I'm still not sure what the fuck just happened.

"Why'd you run?"

He shrugs and I wait. After a long exhale he looks away. "I got angry."

"Because I was telling you what to do."

"Because of a lot of things. Peter keeps telling me it's normal and healthy to be angry. I'm tired of everything that feels bad being normal and healthy."

I can't help it, I laugh. Peter is always saying something is normal or healthy. I feel the same way Justin does about it.

"Why'd you kiss me?"

~~~656~~~

I feel him freeze the moment I ask. He finishes the cigarette. "C'mon princess, let's get you inside before Debbie blames me for your next cold."

I don't move. "Brian."

He turns to look at me. "I wanted you to stop fighting me."

I don't believe that's the whole reason, and I'm about to tell him so when Debbie calls for us to get inside before we get sick. He gives me an "I told you so" look.

The mood is completely ruined. I expect Brian to leave but he leans against the wall while Debbie makes me hot cocoa.

~~~657~~~

Debbie dotes on him, and it's a good thing. It's almost five. I have other things I could do but Peter says that it's best not to completely jar Justin's schedule. I'll stick around.

"You staying for dinner?"

Justin looks at me, his eyes hopeful, and I want to run. I nod instead and go into the junk drawer where Debbie keeps a couple of decks of cards. I deal her in and Justin beats us both. I try not to think about how often he may have been letting me win. We go upstairs while Debbie starts cooking dinner.

~~~658~~~

Should we help Debbie? Brian just takes my hand and pulls me upstairs. "You'll have plenty of time to help her. Can you cook?"

I shake my head. "We always ordered out. Isaac could cook a little but he really didn't like to."

Brian's jaw clenches. He still can't stand hearing Isaac's name. "We can't do that again."

"Do what again?" I know what he's talking about but playing stupid sometimes serves me well. I lick my lips and look at him through my lashes.

"You're a brutal flirt and you know what the fuck I'm talking about."

"Nuh uh."

~~~659~~~

He takes a step closer. His eyes meeting mine, because he's also a quick study and knows I hate it when he plays that little boy submissive game with me. I take a step back but now he's literally got me cornered. I swear I haven't been this nervous since Mikey and I smoked weed in here while Debbie was working.

His body is pressed against mine and when he pulls my head down, our lips touch. His are soft and wet and his tongue snakes out to meet mine. I push him backwards and hold his wrists. "Stop That."



~~~660~~~

His expression and the pressure on my wrists tell me he means it. I drop my head and he sighs. "Justin, we can't."

"Why?"

"You know why, I've explained why. Hasn't Peter explained why?"

I flop back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. "All I ever hear is why I shouldn't try to fuck someone. Why I should figure out what I want. I want to get laid. I'm horny."

He tells me to jerk off like it's the easiest thing in the world. I sit up and glare. My anger is back full force. "Fuck you!"

~~~661~~~

He's really angry. He's pacing. His anger morphs into something else. He's crying and running a hand through his hair while he's mumbling. I'm not sure what to do or if I should do anything. He spins on his heel and pushes at my chest. I'm back up against that fucking wall. "You know it's not that easy!"

I do? "I do?"

"I can't just... is that what... do you know what happens... I... no."

I'm lost. "I'm lost."

He shakes his head sadly. "I wouldn't do that, Brian. I can't... I mean, Isaac would..."

Seriously, Isaac needs to die.

~~~662~~~

"Are you telling me you've never jerked off?"

He rolls his eyes. "Of course I have. I mean, if a client wanted to see it. Sometimes they did. Or if I was really good, then Isaac would let me but without his permission..."

"He hurt you."

Why does he keep saying that like he's just finding out about it? We've been through this. "It was just part of being well trained. It's why I can hold off so long, and..."

"Don't make excuses for him." Brian's body is vibrating with anger again. I wish could remember to stop mentioning Isaac.

~~~663~~~

I don't think I'll ever stop being amazed at how protective he is of Isaac's image. Of how accepting he is of what was done to him. I'm staring at a kid, a man who's going to be eighteen tomorrow and he's telling me he's never been allowed to jerk off. "What happened if you did?" There's absolutely no way a kid makes it from fourteen to eighteen without masturbating.

He shakes his head. "You don't want to know."

"Tell me", but I want to take the words back. He's usually right when he tells me I don't want to know.

### ~~~664~~~

I debate how much to tell him. I know that the whole truth will upset him. He lifts my chin and looks me in the eye. "If you could live with it, I can hear about it. Tell me."

So I tell him about spending two days tied up in the practice room. I tell him about being whipped like that. I tell him about spending a week serving penance at Isaac's feet, and then I close my eyes because I know he's never going to look at me again and I'm not sure I can watch him walk away.

### ~~~665~~~

He's curled in his chair. His body is tense. He's waiting for another of Isaac's punishments. My stomach clenches. I cup his face and he flinches. I smooth away a tear with the pad of my thumb. "I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. I'm kneeling in front of the chair. "Justin..."

"I deserv..."

"You didn't deserve it. Kids jerk off. Are you listening? You didn't deserve any of it."

He nods but his eyes don't open. His hand slides up my arm and then he's touching my face. He wipes away my tear with his thumb. I kiss his palm.

## Hustler Justin LVII

His mouth is warm on my palm. His thumb has moved from my cheek to my lips. I suck it into my mouth and he pulls away. "Justin."

He's not angry. I can't tell exactly what he's feeling. I reach my hand out for him again but before he can respond Debbie's knocked while pushing open the door. "You two coming down to eat?"

He nods and turns his back to me, following Debbie downstairs. I close my eyes and wipe back the tears. I think that I need to move more slowly with Brian, but I'm not giving up.

### ~~~667~~~

Debbie catches me glancing again at the staircase. "You really care about this kid."

I give her a look that shuts most people up. Debbie's not most people. She nods. "He loves you, you know."

"He doesn't know what the fuck he feels."

She kisses my cheek and pats my face. "That's you. He's young but I've seen it before. Hero worship."

"Except I'm not a fucking hero."

"I agree, but Michael and Justin, they don't."

"Michael's moved on. Justin will move on too."

She laughs. "He might, but you might want to admit that you don't want him to."

### ~~~668~~~

Dinner is a much quieter affair tonight. Vic and Debbie argue and talk and finish each other's sentences all through the puttanesca. Brian actually smiles and laughs with them both. Michael stops by, as we're finishing and joins us for dessert. Throughout the meal I want to drag Brian upstairs and have him to myself. By seven thirty he and Michael are making plans to meet at Woody's for a beer later. I want to join them but Debbie cuts me off with a look. "No way sunshine, it's your first day out of the hospital, you need your rest."

### ~~~669~~~

I almost argue with Debbie. After all, he wasn't in the hospital for a medical condition but then I remember that all this mothering is why I thought she'd be good for him. I smirk and he pouts. I kiss his temple and Deb's cheek and then head back to the loft. I've got some work to do before I go to Woody's and I need to figure out how to tell Justin about the appointments next week. I'll figure it out tomorrow, after we celebrate his birthday. I doubt it's something Isaac celebrated with him. I hate that man.

### ~~~670~~~

I offer to help with the dishes but Debbie tells me to rest. She yells not to get used to it when I'm halfway up the stairs. I don't know if I'll ever get used to how loud she is. I remember my mother being quiet but then I don't remember much before she got sick. Isaac hated a lot of noise. He wore headphones usually, said he didn't like to hear me with clients. He was disappointed when I was too loud. Debbie and Michael are laughing while they do the dishes. I don't really miss the quiet.

### ~~~671~~~

Michael and I are shooting pool. He's staring at me. I sink my ball and wait.

"What's up with you and Justin?"

"We've been over this."

"Not recently."

"He's a kid who needed a hand." I shrug and circle the table lining up my next shot.

"Since when do you reach out to help a street punk?"

Michael misses his shot and watches me intently. I kiss him and drink my beer. "You lost. Now pay me the twenty bucks you owe me or rack 'em again, we'll go double or nothing."

He rolls his eyes, but he shuts up.

### ~~~672~~~

I consider finding Woody's on my own. I've been there before but I think it'll piss Brian off more than anything and I just promised myself I'd move slower. Instead I turn on my computer and check the email account Brian created for me. There are some sites that Peter said I should look at. There are some sites I want to see if I can find on my own. When I find them I feel vindicated. Brian and Peter keep acting like what Isaac did was such a horrible thing... so why are there entire sites dedicated to it?

~~~673~~~

By the time I get back from Babylon it's almost three. I show up at Debbie's at one the next day still hung over. Justin greets me with a hug and an even bigger one when he sees the large wrapped box. "Can I open it?"

Debbie shoos us both away from the door. "Vic's still working on the cake, go sit down."

"Debbie I don't need..."

Debbie waves a wooden spoon at me. "Tell him he's getting a birthday party, if he wants one or not."

I steer Justin to the living room and pour us each a drink.

~~~674~~~

"You look like shit."

He nods, two fingers against his temple. His eyes closed.

"Aspirin?"

He nods again and then winces as someone drops something in the kitchen. I come back taking the drink out of his hand. "You shouldn't drink more alcohol, you feel like this because you're dehydrated."

"Thank you Doogie Howser."

"I don't know who that is. I'm just saying that Isaac taught me how to deal with a hangover, lots of water and..." he's glaring.

"His hangovers or yours?"

"Whichever." I run a hand through his hair. "Why does that upset you?"

He shakes his head.

~~~675~~~

"You've got appointments all next week by the way. You're meeting with a tutor to get ready for the GED and a doctor for a regular physical, and a psychiatrist because Peter thinks you need your meds adjusted."

I don't know why I blurt it out like that. He pulls away from me. "What?"

I don't respond but I do reach for my drink. He hands it to me, no longer concerned with my hangover.

"When were you going to tell me?"

"I just did."

"But you've had these set up for a while?"

I nod. He storms out. Fuck.

~~~676~~~

I brush past Melanie and Lindsay on my way out of the gate. I'm not sure where I'm going but as I turn to cross the street a hand stops me. "Didn't your mother ever teach you to cross on the green?"

I'm crying, sucking in big gulps of air and Michael's hand is on my shoulder. "Hey, you okay? Want me to get Ma, or Brian?"

I shake my head. He walks me back to the house. Halfway there we run into Brian who wraps an arm around me, kisses Michael hello and whispers into my ear. "I'm sorry."

### ~~~677~~~

Michael gives me a questioning look and I shoot him one back that says, "Fuck off."

When we get inside Mel and Lindz are wishing him a happy birthday and he's gone. His eyes are vacant and he can't feel anything. I wanted him to be here for this, and I fucked it up. I wonder if it's safe to call him back. I have to try. I pull him away from the fawning lesbians. In the backyard I take his face in my hands. "Justin."

Nothing.

"Justin!"

He blinks and then frowns. "Let me go."

"No."

"I can't..."

"Please."

### ~~~678~~~

I don't know why it matters to him if I'm here or not. I do know it matters to me. "I can't, Brian, please just let me go, just while everyone's here."

"Peter says..."

I roll my eyes. He tries again.

"You're safe, everyone in there likes you."

That's the problem. I have no way to explain that to him. I don't know the words. "Give me a cigarette."

He does and lights one of his own. "You can stay close to me the whole time."

So for him, I nod and promise I'll try. We head back inside together.

### ~~~679~~~

He's overwhelmed. He cringes at every loud noise and he looks like he's trying not to cry with every gesture of kindness, and there are a lot of them. Mel and Lindz bought him an art box. Lindsay promises to show him how to use the tools he's unfamiliar with. He nods and I almost wish he'd disappeared, the submissive, not sure how to act thing is disconcerting to watch when I know where it comes from. Emmett and Ted bought him clothes, which I hope he'll never wear in public. He looks disappointed by my gift, but he smiles.

~~~680~~~

When everyone's gone I sink into the sofa, exhausted. It's only five but I feel like it's midnight. Brian carries the TV upstairs, calling to me to follow him with the DVD player. I do, because I don't want to argue with him. I don't need a television in my bedroom. He unpacks the box and there's something else in there with it. "What's that?"

"Porn."

I blink. "What?"

"You want to figure out what you like and don't like right? Well, here you go, jerk off material that most eighteen year old boys, well, gay boys, would kill for."

~~~681~~~

He sits on the bed, turning the DVD case over in his hand. "Are you going to watch it with me?"

"No."

"Please."

He looks at me with what seems like an innocent expression but I'm pretty sure he's playing me. I kiss his nose. "Nice try. No. This is one thing every man needs to learn on his own."

"Will... I mean, what happens... what..."

He's really scared. "Justin, I swear to you that no one will punish you for this."

"But Debbie..."

"She raised Michael. I think she's used to it."

"She knows!"

"Justin, everybody knows. It's normal."

~~~682~~~

He sits on the desk chair across from me and I can't help looking at the boxes. "Is everything these men are doing normal?"

He takes one of the boxes out of my hand. "That's not... well, it is, but it takes practice."

I look down. "I've done that."

He stares at me and then points to the picture. "That?"

"Yeah, hurts."

"I would think so."

"But if it's normal and natural... so, this whole Isaac thing..."

"No. Justin, everyone here is a consenting adult. That's not what Isaac did to you."

“But this is.”

He looks a little green.

Hustler Justin LVIII

I don't care that he's done most of those things. I care that he probably didn't want to do them. They're primarily really vanilla, but then I felt guilty about trying to steer his tastes so I included a wider variety. It was probably the wrong thing to do but who do you consult about providing porn for an eighteen-year-old abuse victim? He yawns and I take that as my cue. “Watch them. Enjoy them. Have fun.”

He doesn't respond. “Justin, I'll see you tomorrow. Happy birthday.”

He nods distractedly still turning the case over and over in his hands.

~~~684~~~

I hide the DVDs under my bed. I think about Debbie finding them and pack them under some stuff in my duffle bag. I turn on the TV but nothing makes any sense to me. I know that's what normal lives are supposed to look like but they bear no resemblance to mine. Instead I take out the art box that Melanie and Lindsay gave me and just examine all the new tools. I take a few pastels out of the pack and start working with them, loving the way they smudge under my fingers and watching the colors blend.

~~~685~~~

I pour myself a drink and log online. What I need is a fast efficient no strings attached fuck from someone who won't be forever damaged by everything I say or do. I click on one of my favorite sites but I can't get the images of Justin out of my head. Great, I think we're both scarred for life. In the end I just jerk off, and refuse to feel guilty that I don't feel guilty. At ten I go to the baths and fuck a couple of guys. I go home to pass out, but just can't sleep.

~~~686~~~

I'm lying in bed, trying not to think about touching myself. I can't get it out of my head but I can't bring myself to do it. There's a clicking on the window. I startle and bring my hands above the covers. The clicking continues and I think I hear my name. Brian's on the porch roof, hauling himself up. I open the window wider and he falls through, smiling at me. He reeks of alcohol and sways a little when he stands up.

“What are you doing here?”

He pulls me onto the bed with him almost crushing me.

~~~687~~~

He smells so good and his lips are warm when I kiss him. His hands are pushing against my chest so I rise up on my arms to look at him. His eyes are dark and his legs wrap around my waist. “You're drunk.”

I nod and kiss his neck. “Brian, we should...”

I bury my nose in his hair and he sighs, his hand on the back of my head, his mouth whispering, “yes” into my ear.

We peel off our clothes, grasping at each other whenever we lose contact. He's panting and rutting against my leg. “Brian, yes.”

~~~688~~~

I'm afraid this is a dream but when he sucks on my earlobe and moves a spit slicked finger inside me I know it isn't. I rub myself against his hip as he pushes in a second finger. His knuckle brushes my prostate and I bite my lip to keep from moaning and waking Debbie. He covers my mouth with his, and somehow manages to kiss me and mumble my name at the same time. I want him inside me but before I can tell him that I feel my orgasm, so long denied, crash over me, soaking us both.

~~~689~~~

I feel the hot wet slide of his come, as he keeps moving, pushing himself back on my fingers, pressing his cock against my thigh. My own erection is sliding against his smooth skin. His hands press on the small of my back, bringing us closer and I kiss him while I come, letting his mouth muffle the sounds of my pleasure. When I collapse I feel him wriggle under me and move to avoid crushing him. I can't stop kissing his jaw or playing with his hair. He can't seem to stop murmuring my name or stop touching me.

~~~690~~~

He passes out. I turn a little in his arms and pull the blanket over us both. I wonder what this means, if it means anything. He might not even remember it in the morning. I'm afraid to go to sleep, sure that when I wake up, he'll be gone, but the comforting sound of his deviated septum and the safe warm feeling of his body against mine soothes me. My eyes close. I don't even think I dream. We're still like that when hear the door creak open. Debbie peeks her head in, sees us and closes it again.

~~~691~~~

He's smiling at me, his arm over my torso. What's he doing in my bed? I look around and...fuck. He moves closer to me, kissing my cheek. He's naked, I'm naked... oh shit. I sit up quickly and he looks scared. Dammit what the fuck did I do? I stand up; I need to get out of here before Debbie sees me. What I did is unforgivable. I start to pull on my jeans when he reaches for me. "Stay for breakfast."

I know he's insane but does he actually want me dead? Thanks, no. I'd rather keep my balls."

~~~692~~~

I don't know why he's so upset. I knew he'd freak but he's acting like someone's coming after him. "Brian, I'm okay."

"Of course, this is what you wanted."

"It's what you wanted too."

He doesn't deny it. He pulls his shirt on. "Justin, we've been over this. I'm sorry."

"Sorry's bullshit. There's nothing wrong with getting your needs met."

He looks sick. It can't be because of what I said. He's the one who told me that.

"Justin, I'm not what you need." He's looking for his jacket.

There's a knock on the door. He freezes. "Come in."

"Justin!"



~~~693~~~

Debbie pushes the door open. "Everybody decent?"

I am so fucked. Justin stays under the covers. "We'll be down in a minute."

She stares at me and I feel like I'm fifteen again and she found my cigarettes. "I'll make coffee."

She pulls the door closed and Justin stands up, getting his own clothes. "I'm starving."

"Justin..."

He turns to look at me. "Brian, we had sex. Is that so terrible? It wasn't terrible, was it?"

I don't remember much, what I do remember, warm soft skin, wet lips, his voice chanting my name... was not terrible. I am terrible.

~~~694~~~

He's about to give me the lecture on what we can and can't do. I cut him off, standing in front of him, barefoot and shirtless. "Brian, I wanted it. I wanted you. I'm healed, look." I spread my arms out and turn around, reminding him that I'm not the same scarred kid I was three months ago. "I'm of legal age and made a decision. That's what you said to do."

He won't meet my eyes. I have to stand on my tiptoes to kiss him. "I'm not going to stop wanting you just because you tell me to."

~~~695~~~

I push him away. He's not scarred, externally, from any recent issues. He still has a mark or two that will never go away from a lifetime of people using him because he's pretty and looks young, is young. I want to bolt but Debbie's calling us both and I have a feeling that I'm never going to hear the end of this. Or maybe she'll do the right thing and ban me from the house. I need to make arrangements for someone to take him to his appointments. I can be trusted alone with him. I can't be trusted.

~~~696~~~

Debbie pours us each a cup of coffee and then stands, her arms folded, watching us. "Brian, what time does Justin have to be at the tutor's?"

He looks up, seeming surprised and relieved. "One, you think you can get him there?"

"No, but I think you both need to shower before you leave the house."

"Debbie I..."

She shakes her head and I'm lost. Brian was so adamant about me going yesterday.

She pats his shoulder. "You're not bailing now." And then she hits him hard on the back of his head. "Asshole."

"Leave him alone." She kisses me.

~~~697~~~

Justin goes upstairs to shower and while I feel no need to justify my actions to Debbie, I do feel the need to stay the hell away from him.

I open my mouth but she shakes her head. "Now would be a good time to use that 'no apologies, no regrets' bullshit you're so proud of."

"It's not bullshit."

"Sure it is. Okay, so you shouldn't have moved so quickly, but you care about the kid, and he fucking loves you. Maybe it's not such a bad idea for him know that sex can be more than a business proposition."

~~~698~~~

I shower quickly, sure that if I take too long Brian will be gone before I'm downstairs. When I'm dressed I stand at the top of the stairs, listening.

"Debbie, you don't have a clue what he's dealing with."

My anger builds and I storm into the kitchen pushing Brian backwards a little. "You promised! It's my story and you fucking swore you'd keep your mouth shut!"

They both seem surprised. Brian leans against the wall. "I wasn't going to tell her anything."

"Oh."

Debbie looks at the both of us and shakes her head. "Fucking hopeless."

"Are we hopeless?"

~~~699~~~

What do I say? The truth is we probably are. If I tell him that, then what? He takes a flying leap off the West End Bridge. Or maybe he just slides back into his own head again and this time no one can get him out. I shake my head. "I don't think we're hopeless."

His whole body seems to relax, "but last night..." He takes a step towards me but I hold him back, "was a mistake."

"It didn't feel like a mistake."

"Justin, I'm going home to shower."

"I'll come with."

I'm too tired to fight him.

~~~700~~~

He tells me not to even think about joining him in the shower. I consider doing it anyway, but I'm not sure how far I can push him. I lay back on the bed, fully clothed, thinking about last night and about his body, covered in soap, the water running in rivulets down his back, I get hard. Here, it feels safe. I touch myself.

He comes out wearing a robe but stops when he sees me. I move my hand away quickly but he nods to me, he wants me to keep going. I do, never dropping his gaze.

## Hustler Justin LIX

I cross my arms and lean in the doorframe. I want to touch him but it's too important that he do this himself. I want to touch myself but that would be crossing a line I've already jumped over once too often. He arches into his own hand, his thumb swiping across the head. His mouth is open and his toes curl when he comes. His body relaxes for a moment and then tenses in fear. I move towards him, offering a damp towel. He flinches from my touch but when I kiss him gently and pull away, he's smiling.

### ~~~702~~~

He doesn't seem angry, but then I've had clients who enjoyed watching me get off. It usually took longer with them. They didn't turn me on. He's staring at me.

"Did you like that?"

He shakes his head. "It's not about what I like or don't."

He sits back, pulling away. "Was that just a show for me?"

Instinct tells me to say that it was, but when he looks at me like that I can't lie. "No. I wanted... and then... I'm..."

"If you apologize I'm tossing you out on your ass."

I laugh. "Then I'm definitely not sorry."

### ~~~703~~~

How the fuck did I end up teaching a fucked up kid how to jerk off. Okay, so I'm not teaching him how that part is self-explanatory, but that it's okay. Then I think about it... I guess everyone at some point has to figure that out. Then again, most people aren't ritually abused for the smallest indiscretions. My anger towards Isaac builds again and as he reaches under my robe and between my legs I jump backwards. I wasn't paying attention. I need to with him. He's trouble. I turn away. Clothes, this will be easier if I'm dressed.

### ~~~704~~~

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed. He offers his hand but when I take it, instead of standing up, I pull him towards me. He looks surprised. I wrap my arms around his hips and rest my cheek against the fly of his jeans. I feel his cock stir. I smile, using my teeth to lower the zipper. He grabs my arms and twists out of my grasp. "Cut it out."

He's angry and I can see the outline of his erection through his jeans. I lower my eyes and brace myself for what I know comes next.

### ~~~705~~~

His expression, his posture, it's all too familiar. Fuck. "Justin." No response. I lift his chin but he won't meet my eyes. "Justin, I'm not going to hurt you."

His hands are folded in his lap, eyes down. How the fuck did we end up back here? "Look at me."

He looks up, focusing on a point just above my eyes. This can't keep happening. Not while he's still afraid I might hurt him. Is that what happened last night? Did he even want me, or is he just conditioned to give in to whoever falls on top of him.

~~~706~~~

He tosses my coat to me. "C'mon, we've got a meeting to get to."

Not for a few hours but I don't argue with him. When we're in the jeep he smokes four cigarettes before he says anything. "Why didn't you stop me last night?"

"I didn't want to."

"And what happens when someone you don't want wants you?"

I can't answer that. I don't know what he wants me to say. "Do you want to see me with someone else?"

He lights another cigarette. Wrong answer. I think about everything Peter and Brian have said. "I'd tell them no."

~~~707~~~

I can practically hear his mind clicking through the possible responses before he answers. Of course he didn't stop me last night. I cringe and try to figure out how to make sure he gets the help he needs without my coming near him again. I'm no better than Isaac. He puts a hand on my arm. "It didn't occur to me to say no to you."

"Does it ever occur to you to say no?"

He grips my arm tighter. "If I didn't enjoy myself, would you have kept going?"

I don't answer. "I wanted you to fuck me."

## Hustler Justin LX

Once we're back at Debbie's I don't know what to say to him. "I don't want to get tutored. What's the point?"

"You won't pass the GED without help."

"Who cares if I get my GED?"

"I'm going to work. Be good and I'll pick you up from Peter's at five."

He hasn't touched me at all today. I move to hug him goodbye but he's already heading towards the door. I head upstairs but Debbie calls me back to help her make lasagna. I can't say no. I just let the white noise take over and follow her directions.

~~~709~~~

I put my full focus on KinnetiK for a couple of hours. I consider finding someone else to pick him up from Peter's office, but I can't do that. I can't even just send a car. If he thinks I've abandoned him... the idea of what he might do makes my stomach clench.

I pull up at five and he's waiting out front smoking. He's dangerously quiet. "What do you want to do tonight?"

“Just take me back to Debbie's.”

I park.

“Brian, I’m really tired and you need to work and stuff. Later.”

“Later” why am I not relieved?

~~~710~~~

After dinner Debbie goes to work the late shift. Vic is asleep by nine. The house is eerie like this. I’ve never been here when it’s so quiet.

I sit up in my room, working on an image I’ve been trying to get right. I don’t realize I’m crying until a tear smudges the charcoal. I toss the sketchbook aside and just stare. He hates me. He fucked me and I was supposed to say no. I didn’t and now he thinks I’m hopeless. He’s right, Isaac was right. I’m just a whore, and I can’t even get that right.

~~~711~~~

Michael and Emmett want to stop at the diner after Babylon. I’m pretty wasted but I know I won’t sleep tonight. I’ve gotten off with at least four different men and no one else seems worth the effort. We slide into the booth and I’m surprised to see Debbie there. “Who’s with Jussin?”

She knows I’m fucked up and disapproves. “He’s home, asleep, like you should be.”

“Coffee.”

She brings their food and my coffee and tsks at me. I hate that.

“Ma’s pissed.”

I close my eyes and sip my coffee, it’s decaf. Bitch. “She’s always pissed about something.”

~~~712~~~

I curl up in my chair and consider my options. I could take off, but that didn’t work out so well before and now that I’m too old... besides, I barely have enough money left to get me far enough away from Pittsburgh. I could start seeing clients again, make it discreet, only at motels, but I’m not sure I could hide that from Debbie. I doubt I’ll see Brian again so I don’t have to worry about him. I could... the only option that seems right is the one I made promises about. I’m afraid to make the call.

~~~713~~~

I swear to Michael that I’m fine to walk home. He can bring the jeep back tomorrow morning. He insists on driving me back to the loft and once I stand up, it doesn’t seem like such a bad idea. The counter keeps moving and when I step away from it I almost knock Debbie over. Michael guides me by the elbow. Emmett is walking ahead of us with a tall guy he must have hooked up with about three minutes ago. Debbie says something to Michael and he just pulls me closer to the door. Debbie can fuck off.

~~~714~~~

I hold the phone in my hand and dig into the nightstand drawer. The bottle is still there and I’m pretty sure this will work. I picture Brian’s eyes, dark and serious. He said this isn’t what he wanted but that was before. It has to work, if it doesn’t I’ll end up back at Southwood, and this time maybe forever. I stare at the pills and the phone and go

downstairs. I pour a tumbler half full of vodka and then milk; I've done some research on this. Back upstairs I take a deep breath, dial then hang up.

~~~715~~~

Michael's pushing me backwards into bed and not saying much. I guess he's mad too. I don't give a fuck. He pulls off my shoes and then he's gone. He used to stick around when I needed him but now he's got the good professor, and Emmett has that guy he hooked up with tonight, and I'm lying here, watching the ceiling spin while I try to focus and all I can think about is that fucked up blond. I think I might fucking love the kid, and how is that going to help him? I'm a useless goddamned mess.

~~~716~~~

The phone rings and it startles me. I don't answer it but it starts ringing again immediately.

"Hello?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just... hit the wrong button."

"Who were you trying to call at two am?"

"No one. I was um..."

"What's the matter?"

I bite back a sob. "Nothing."

"Justin, I'm glad you called. Talk to me."

"Peter, I just... I think this is too hard. I don't want to do it anymore."

I admit that I called because I promised I would. "See, I'm just a trained puppy who's not even cute anymore. No one wants me."

~~~717~~~

The phone is ringing and it won't stop. I groan and roll over, trying to focus on the clock. Whatever it is can wait. I'm about to rip the damn thing out of the wall when I remember. I mumble something and Peter tells me to get my ass to Debbie's. I sit up, more focused now. "I don't have my car."

"He needs you."

"He needs me to stay away."

"Brian, we'll address your issues later. Go talk to him. Nothing else will work right now. He thinks you hate him."

"I don't."

"Well then..."

"I'm on my way."

~~~718~~~

Peter tells me to put the pills back in the bottle or he'll call 911 and have me committed for my own safety. I do it but I don't think he believes me. I can't stop crying. "Of course I did it. I can't say no! I'm just some stupid little faggot whore."

His voice is that fake calm one that means he's mad at me. "Justin, this is simply Isaac's training. We talked about how stress would bring it to the forefront."

"I'm not stressed, I'm being realistic. I don't belong here."

"Belong where?"

Brian's leaning against the doorframe.

~~~719~~~

He's clutching a bottle of pills. His eyes are red and puffy and he's screaming at Peter "you said you wouldn't call him!"

I don't know what Peter's saying. I cross the room quickly and pry his fingers off the bottle. He resists but I'm stronger and I want those in my possession, away from him. He shakes his head at me. "Go away Brian."

"Like hell."

"Peter, tell him I don't need him."

He hands me the phone. Peter says, "don't leave."

"Not an issue." I hand the phone back and try to get my heart to beat again.

~~~720~~~

Peter is telling me that Brian's there because he cares. I shake my head. "He's here because he feels responsible and you called to tell him the little faggot was upset again."

Brian grips my knee. "Stop calling yourself that."

Peter asks me if he should come over. I tell him I don't want him here either. He says he'll see me tomorrow and hangs up. I'm left alone with Brian. "Go away."

He shakes his head. "Not on your life."

"Not funny."

"I agree."

"Just give me back my pills, please."

He ignores me. "What happened?"

I shrug. "Nothing."

~~~721~~~

He won't look at me. I want to flush the pills. I want to hold him. I'm afraid to move. He's scratching at his body, his arms and legs. I move then. Holding his wrists. "Justin."

He looks at me then. "It's no use. I can't be what you want. I can't be what anyone wants. It's too hard."

I pull him to me, cursing myself for contributing to this. "You're stronger than you think."

"I'm not. I follow orders. That's all I'm good for. And now I'm not even good at that."

"You're good for more than your obedience."

~~~722~~~

He tries to hold me but I push him away. "I'm not. That's what you really want, for me to listen to you, follow you around like a puppy, then leave you alone when you don't want to be bothered. It's all anyone wants from me and then I do it and still get in trouble."

"What trouble?"

"You. You're mad. Last night was a no win for me. If I said no, you'd hate me. If I said yes, because I wanted it, you think I'm a whore and then hate yourself for wanting a whore!"

He looks hurt.

~~~723~~~

I don't know where to start. There's not a part of what he's saying that's true. "You're not a whore."

"Then what am I?"

"A confused..."

"If you call me a kid, or a boy I'm going to scream. I may look young but I'm an adult goddammit."

"Fine, you're a confused man. I don't think of you as a whore, and I would never hate you for saying no."

"Then why are you so mad?"

"I'm mad at myself, Justin. It was a no win for me. You're not comfortable saying no. I took advantage of that. I'm sorry."

~~~724~~~

"Did you want me?"

He's hugging me now. I move so that he can sit on the chair. I sit next to him, my legs over his legs his arms around my shoulders. I can't look at him anymore. His eyes are too intense. "Yeah."

"Not just someone?"

"No. I had a couple of 'just someone's' last night."

"Why?"



He's quiet for a long time. I look up and strokes the hair off my face. "You're pretty fucking amazing."

"Yeah, I was trained well."

His grip tightens, he's angry. "I didn't mean it like that, twat."

"What did you mean?"

~~~725~~~

"You're funny, and strong, and most people would be... most people would..." I don't know what's safe to say to him.

"Most people would be dead."

I loosen my grip. I don't want to bruise him, but I can't help wanting to hold him so he can't go anywhere. "Yeah."

"So would I without you."

"Justin, what were you thinking?"

"It hurts Brian, and I'm lost and just when I feel like there's hope... it disappears."

"You mean I disappear."

"No, not just you. Peter, the tutor, it's all so much fucking work and I'm so tired, you know?"

~~~726~~~

"You promised, Justin. You told me you'd call if you..."

"I didn't want to bother you."

"You think that my coming here tomorrow to find you dead would somehow be less bothersome?"

"Didn't you ever get tired?"

"Yeah, but I have people who need me."

"Well, I don't."

"Bullshit. Peter would go broke without you."

"Not funny."

"Justin."

"Hmmm?"

He whispers it against the top of my head so softly I can barely hear him. "I need you."

"You just like to feel needed."

"Justin. Promise me."

"I can't, I can't make a promise I'm not sure I can keep."

~~~727~~~

So what do I do with that? He can't promise he'll be around tomorrow. I nudge his hip and pull the covers back. "C'mon, you need to sleep."

"I'm not..." he stifles a yawn.

"Did you take your regular meds?"

He shakes his head. I tell him to get me the bottles and after I administer them I stuff the bottles in my pocket. "I won't be able to sleep if you have them."

He winces when he drinks the milk. "Sour?"

I take the glass from him and smell it. My heart stops again. He really had this planned.

~~~728~~~

Brian comes back upstairs after locking my meds in his car. "Any more?"

He watches me carefully. "I swear, that's it."

"Justin, don't try anything like that again, please."

I don't respond. He strips off his jeans and lies down. I do too. "You stink."

He groans. "No time to shower. This man I know was having an emergency."

"It wasn't an emergency."

He pushes me back so he can look in my eyes. "Yes. It was."

I press my face against his chest and let myself feel safe and loved. It may be gone tomorrow but it's here now.

## Hustler Justin LXI

My days fall into a rhythm. I pick him up at eight and drop him off with the tutor. At one I take him to Peter's. Debbie, or Vic, sometimes Emmett or Michael, take him from Peter's to Debbie's, and I'm there by five. We eat there or I take him out, especially if Debbie's working. He falls asleep around ten; his new meds are knocking him out. I change clothes and go to Babylon. I get home in time to pass out for a few hours and then I'm there to pick him up at eight. He's never alone.

~~~730~~~

I'm walking around in a daze. I try to pay attention when Lisle, the tutor is going over test skills, but it's hard to concentrate. Peter and Brian both told me to tell the psychiatrist about it but I'm not scheduled to see him again for six weeks. Brian's around a lot but he keeps his distance. He touches me. He still runs his fingers through my hair, or hugs me but it's like he's afraid to be alone with me. Peter says that I need to learn to be by myself. It's a little difficult since I'm never alone.

~~~731~~~

He's staring at me and I don't know what to tell him. He's right, he shouldn't need a babysitter anymore but Christ, the last time he was alone... I panic thinking about it. If I hadn't gotten there, if he hadn't called Peter. I shake my head and he crosses his arms.

"I can walk from Peter's to Debbie's. I'm an adult. I want afternoons to myself. Call off the guards."

“You ready to make me a promise?”

“I’m not going to try anything again.”

“Ever?”

“It’s my option. You can’t have it.”

“Then you can’t have afternoon’s to yourself.”

### ~~~732~~~

We’ve had this conversation before. I’m really tired of it but Brian won’t budge unless I make a commitment I’m not ready to. I sigh. “I’ll call you before I try anything. I swear.”

“And if you think it’s because I don’t want you?”

“I’ll...” he waits and a part of me feels a little special knowing he’s this invested in whether I live or die. Part of me is just exasperated. “I’ll call Peter.”

“And if you can’t get in touch with Peter?”

“Brian... I promised, now can I have a goddamned afternoon to myself?”

“On Monday.”

I smile.

### ~~~733~~~

What did I just agree to? He could conceivably be left to his own devices for several hours every day. Fuck, I forgot to elicit several other promises from him while he was in the mood to make them. It’s like he can read my mind though.

“Don’t push, Brian, that’s all you’re getting. And no, I’m not checking in or giving you an itinerary.”

Fuck, he saw that coming. “The GED test is in three weeks.” Did I just tell him not to slack off on homework?

“I’ll be fine and I think my babysitters will also be grateful.”

### ~~~734~~~

I know he worries. I don’t blame him; I’ve put him through the ringer since I met him. I’ve been out of the hospital for two months though and I’m ready to try some of the independence they all keep telling me I need. I’m going to get a job soon too, but he’s so not ready to hear that yet, but I have an idea he can’t possibly object to.

He drops me off at Peter’s. I remind him that he promised to take me to Lindsay’s tonight so I can use her studio.

He nods but he’s distracted.

### ~~~735~~~

I’m fixing creative’s latest screw-up when Peter calls. “What happened?”

“Brian, he’s fine.”

“So...”

“We need to talk about changing his schedule.”

“Do you want to see him later in the day? He’s got his...”

“He doesn’t need this every day. He needs to practice his newfound skills in the real world. He can’t do that if every minute of his day is scheduled by you.”

“I gave him the fucking afternoons.”

“They’re not yours to give.”

“What if he...”

“Brian, I’ll still see him Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but he needs some time that doesn’t revolve around his issues.”

### ~~~736~~~

Emmett’s the one who walks me home from Peter’s today. “This is stupid you know.”

“Baby, we worry about you.”

I don’t know how much Emmett knows. He’s seen me come out of Peter’s office red eyed and quiet. And I guess he knows I’m a hustler. When we get home he shows me the movies he brought. “Every gay boy needs to know who Lana Turner is.”

I shrug but we eat ice cream and popcorn and the movie is so stupid that I laugh but Emmett’s crying. He pulls a blanket over us, calling himself a silly queen.

### ~~~737~~~

When I get to Debbie’s Justin is curled up with Emmett, asleep. I yank the covers off of them. They whine but Emmett sees my expression and leaves quickly. Justin folds his arms and glares. “I was tired.”

“You complain you’re always tired”

“Well, if you let me sleep...”

“What do you want for dinner?”

“Uggggh, nothing. I ate too much popcorn and ice cream with Emmett.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Brian, wait!”

There’s a note of desperation. “What?”

“I, um... did you talk to Peter?”

“Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Congratulations.”

He smiles launching himself into my arms. “Thank you.”

~~~738~~~

He's smirking at me. I kiss him and he pulls back. "Justin."

I don't care. I have weekends free. I have two days a week when I'm done by one. I'm giddy. I kiss him again. He shakes his head and laughs. "You want me to make you something for dinner?"

"You graduated beyond grilled cheese?"

"Not quite. I can make spaghetti."

"I'm not really hungry. We can go to Lindsay's if you want."

I smile wider. Today's a good day.

In the car he asks what Emmett and I were doing. I can't tell if he's jealous or suspicious.

~~~739~~~

He's so happy. I don't trust it. I ask him what he and Emmett did this afternoon primarily to get him to talk about something other than his four days a week to himself. The idea doesn't sit well with me.

When I hear the note of apology in his voice I start listening more closely. He thinks that I'm mad. "Justin, I just want to know about your day. You're not in trouble."

He visibly relaxes and I want to scream again. He still hasn't figured this out?

Lindsay and Melanie fawn over him while he fawns over Gus.

~~~740~~~

Brian seems hesitant to join us when Lindsay takes me upstairs. I wave and he follows. He hasn't been up here in a while. He seems surprised. "These are yours?"

I nod. Lindsay stands behind one of them. "Several of his pieces are going to be at the GLC charity auction." Brian makes a face and Lindsay just smiles at him. "The one you'll be attending." He nods but I can tell he doesn't want to go. I pull on a smock that's just one of Brian's old shirts and start trying again to capture the way the light falls.

~~~741~~~

I sit back and watch as Lindsay gives him a few pointers. He listens so intently. I want to think he's just interested in getting it right. I know there's a part of him that's scared to death to get it wrong. He doesn't though. He's really good. The images are powerful. Not the bowl of fruit, although there's a sinister shadow to that too... but the ones that seem to plucked straight out of one of his nightmares, or possibly one of mine.

Lindsay sits next to me and smiles. Justin's focus is entirely on his painting. It's refreshing.

~~~742~~~

When I finish Brian's gone. Lindsay helps me to clean up.

"He's downstairs with Gus. Justin, I think it's time to start putting together a portfolio for you."

"What's the point?"

“There are several good art schools in the area. With your history and financial situation, you might qualify for financial aid, or even a scholarship.”

“They give scholarships to whores now?”

Her expression reminds me of my mother when I ate all the cookie dough. “They give scholarships to talented young men.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Downstairs Brian is asleep with Gus on his chest. “He needs the sleep. I’ll walk.”

~~~743~~~

The room is dark and Gus is drooling on my shirt. I shift him gently. He gurgles. Melanie’s in the dining room.

“Where’s Justin.”

She’s doesn’t look up from her work. “He left hours ago.”

I and hand her Gus. “You let him walk, alone?”

I recognize the anger as irrational and can’t help it. Lindsay stops me at the door. “Brian, he’s fine. He said you needed your sleep. You look like he’s right. I’m sure he’s...”

“Did he call when he got home?”

“He’s eighteen, he knows the city.”

I leave, dialing Debbie’s while I start the car.

Hustler Justin LXII

I’m running as fast as I can. he’s catching up. I’m scrambling over a heap of trash when he grabs my leg, pulling me backwards. I’m on my back. I can see his face clearly. He’s smiling, “I’ve missed you.” I push him away. He seems surprised. He flips me over, stripping my clothes. his weight pressing me into the asphalt. “Isaac!” he laughs. “Thought you might have forgotten about me.” I try to move but it’s like he has more arms and legs than I do. I’m trapped. I struggle harder, begging him. his arms wrap tightly around me.

~~~745~~~

There’s no answer on his cell phone or Debbie’s phone. All the lights are out. it’s only eleven. I open the door; it’s not locked... what the fuck? I take the steps two at a time knowing he won’t be there. Knowing he’s off somewhere, in trouble, hurt, alone... or worse, not alone. I push open his door and don’t actually trust what I’m seeing. He’s sprawled across the bed, mumbling, kicking at something. I slow my breathing and try to hold him. He’s calling Isaac’s name and struggling. “Justin! Justin, wake up.” I wrap my arms tightly around him.

Hustler Justin LXIII

He lets me go. I push away from him and then open my eyes. I blink three times but it’s still not Isaac. “Brian?”

He doesn’t say anything and I move back into his arms. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re not supposed to leave without telling me.”

“Nuh uh, we changed the rules.”

“How did the walk home go?”

“I freaked out like five times, but I got home.”

He holds me tighter. “You think you can go back to sleep?”

I nod and he lies down next to me.

“Don’t you have to be at Babylon?”

“Justin, sleep.”

~~~747~~~

I drive Justin to his tutors and realize I’m going to be getting in late. I haven’t showered yet and the office is better, but the executive bathroom is still a work in progress. At least Debbie doesn’t say anything about me being there in the mornings. I guess he’s gotten used to it. I end up passing out there at least twice a week. Sometimes he seems disappointed the next morning. I guess he’s hoping for a repeat of my last mistake but there’s no way I’m going to put him through that again. He deserves so much better.

~~~748~~~

I’ve had free time for almost a month. I’m studying for the GED and getting a little nervous about it. I’m also getting nervous about money. I’m going to address the job situation with Brian tonight, but there’s no point in doing it now. He hates conversations he can’t finish before he has to get back to work. He hates conversation in general sometimes. My stomach knots when I think about failing the test. It’s been a long time since I’ve been punished and I’m not sure I can still handle it. I wonder who will do it. Probably Brian.

~~~749~~~

He’s worried about something. I touch his arm before he gets out of the jeep. “We’ll talk tonight.”

He seems surprised but nods and runs inside. I go back to the office. At five I’m there. Vic’s gone to some pos group meeting and Debbie’s working four to midnight. We’re alone. “Want to order or...”

“I’m not hungry.”

Fuck, something’s really wrong.

“I’m getting a job.”

“After you get your GED.”

“That’s in two weeks, if I pass.” His looks a little green.

“Test anxiety?”

He nods. “What ... once I’m... what happens next?”

“Next?”

“If I pass. Then what?”

~~~750~~~

He seems confused. “Then you and Lindsay put your portfolio together. Put in applications to some of the local art schools. We’ve talked about this. If you can’t get in, you do a little time at ACC.”

They’re all so sure I should go to college. Even a community college seems daunting and that wasn’t what I meant. “I mean, where will I live?”

“Here.”

“But...”

“Justin, did Debbie say something? Do you not want to live here?”

“I just... I... I figured once I was done that part that I’d be on my own.”

He just stares at me.

~~~751~~~

Two months of intensive over-mothering and he still doesn’t get it. “Justin. Let’s say you got your very own one bedroom shithole.”

He nods, dejectedly.

“How often would Debbie come over with lemon bars and rigatoni?”

He seems to actually have to think about it. “At least twice a week.”

“And Emmett... you think he’s going to give up on your education in gay culture? You’ve only seen half of the Streisand oeuvre.”

He laughs.

“And do you really think I’m done with you once you pass a stupid test?”

That scared, green thing again.

If I pass.

Oh shit.

~~~752~~~

He’s crooking his finger under my chin, so that I have to meet his eyes. He’s so close I can feel how warm he is through my own shirt. “What do you think happens if you fail?”

His eyes have that look I’ve come to recognize. The one that says that he knows and hates the answer already.

I shrug, hoping he’ll accept that. He doesn’t.

“Justin.”

“You’ll punish me. You’ve spent so much money and time and...”



He's hugging me tighter than Debbie does. My face is pressed against his chest and he's just whispering over and over, "no."

~~~753~~~

I'll make sure Peter articulately reminds him, again, that neither I, nor anyone else, will physically punish him for anything. Right now I need to hold him and hope if he won't feel me shaking. Fear and rage mix until they're inseparable. He would let me. He wouldn't leave or resist. He thinks that's how it's supposed to go. He's scared of it, which is better than when I met him, but he still thinks that failing a test should result in... the mental images of his "punishments" flash and I just keep whispering the word "no" over and over.

Hustler Justin LXIV

When I see the envelope, addressed to me I feel sick. I stare at it for a long time. I have my mornings free now too. Vic's cooking or baking or something, Debbie's at work and I can't stop staring. Brian told me that if I failed, I'd go back to the tutor and then take it again. Peter said the same thing. I know I'll disappoint them. I leave the envelope on the table and go upstairs. I don't do it often but it's not hard when I'm alone to slip away. I let the white noise take over.

~~~755~~~

Peter calls me after Justin's session. "Justin's here, but I think he needs a ride home."

"What happened?"

He explains that Justin came in vacant and still won't talk about why. He's concerned he'll walk home in the same state. "I'm on my way."

Justin seems present when he gets in the car but once I open Debbie's door he starts to fade. "Justin... stay with me here."

I want to scream at Vic. He just nudged the kid, told him he had an appointment and didn't notice he was barely there? Justin's shaking. I put an arm around him.

~~~756~~~

Brian's arm around my waist makes it hard to disappear, besides, he hates when I do that. I try to head up to my room, so he can go back to work but he follows me. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

"The mail came."

He seems to understand. "Okay, so you'll take it again. We tried to squeeze four years of high-school into three months, and you had a lot of shit going on."

I nod but I feel like a loser. "What was your score?"

I tell him I didn't open it. He retrieves it and hands it to me.

~~~757~~~

He stares at the envelope like it's a death sentence but he needs to open it himself. I wait. He looks up, and then back at the envelope and then back at me. "If I..."

"Justin, open it."

He does unfolding the paper slowly. He looks confused.

"Well?"

He hands it to me. Holy shit. He scored in the 99th percentile. "Congratulations."

"They must have gotten it wrong."

I pull him up. "No. You got it right."

He gives me one of those full wattage smiles that are so rare these days. "Did I really??"

I nod. "You really did."

~~~758~~~

Brian takes me out and insists on buying me art supplies and clothes to celebrate. He seems so proud of me. Isaac wasn't this proud when I did things that were much harder. Brian's never really proud of me for those kinds of things. He stays for dinner and it turns out Vic was making the cake for me. "We never doubted you kiddo." Debbie hands me a big slice of cake and Brian eats the icing off my finger. He leaves early, preparing for client meetings that still needs work. I'm left alone to go upstairs and jerk off.

~~~759~~~

Ben has a few friends in the admissions department. I want to know how far a GED will really get him. The information isn't particularly encouraging, but it could be worse. He may still have to take the SATs unless he goes to Allegheny Community College. I wish I knew what he was ready for. I wish I knew what he wanted. Although we've talked about a lot of options, he still seems a little lost. I call Lindsay and it turns out all the time they spend together in the studio, is often in silence. Another fucking dead end.

~~~760~~~

My hands are shaking when I clean myself up. I keep expecting someone to find out. I keep expecting retribution. Brian's promised me that it won't happen but I can't help it. I've watched the porn he gave me. Some of it's funny. Stuff that's labeled hardcore or BDSM is nothing compared to what I do. When I'm twenty-one I should get a job doing what I can do. I'm not sure anyone would want to see it once I'm that old, but someone should show what real pain and submission looks like. I'm not stupid enough to tell Brian.

~~~761~~~

It's two days later before I can get back to see Justin again. He doesn't seem upset. We're talking about SAT classes and the idiot's who tried to snatch a client away from me when he just blurts out. "I got a job."

"What?"

"I was on Liberty Avenue yesterday, killing time, looking around and I met a guy..."

I'm already hating this story.

“He told me that as long as I could prove I was 18 he could use me. So see, that picture ID was good for something other than filling up my wallet.”

“A job doing what?”

### ~~~762~~~

I thought he'd be happier than this. I know he'll worry, it's like, what he does, but now I can make my own money and he doesn't have to be responsible for me. He's staring at me, waiting for an answer.

“I'm going to be dancing and stuff.”

“Stuff. Where?”

“Meathook.”

“No.”

“Brian, it pays really well. The tips should be great and.”

“No.”

“But...”

“No.”

“I need to have some money of my own. Not just the cash you give me sometimes. Even Peter agrees.”

“Really, did you tell him you'd be doing 'stuff' at Meathook?”

“It's totally different.”

### ~~~763~~~

For most people, it isn't the same. Justin's not most people. He is not making a living selling his ass, or even just renting it out. He's not traveling in a world where pain and humiliation are the norm... he'll be too comfortable there. My imagination builds scenarios and I become surer that there is no way in hell this would be anything but an unmitigated disaster.

“You know, you're so quick to tell me to go for what I want and to get my needs met. And then even quicker to tell me no when it doesn't suit you!”

### ~~~764~~~

I stand up and so does he. He's trying to calm me down but I don't want to be calmed. I push him backwards and he falls. Oh shit.

“Brian. Are you okay?”

He looks surprised. I'm in trouble. What the fuck was I thinking? I put my hands behind my back and lower my eyes. He stands up, his hand's on my elbow before I can drop to my knees. He tilts my chin and I look at him. He's smiling.

Isaac used to smile like that before practice. He doesn't touch me again except to kiss my forehead.

~~~765~~~

He pushed back! Some little twink pushing me to the floor shouldn't elate me. It does. His reaction doesn't but I know how to deal with those now. When he looks up at me again he's surprised but not scared. "You're not mad?"

"Don't wander around pushing me all the time, but no, I'm not mad."

"So I can take the job."

Fuck, this part is harder. "I can't make you not work there, but I think it's the worst idea you've had in a long time. And that includes last week's foray into Indian food."

"I need a job."

~~~766~~~

He does that lip rolling thing. "The art department needs an intern."

"What?"

"KinnetiK, we have an art department. We need an intern. The pay is for shit, and you'd have to be studying for your SATs or in community college, but I think I might be able to convince Ted that you're the right candidate for the job."

"I'd make more money selling my ass than my art."

"But your ass isn't on the market."

"So I'll owe you more."

"You don't owe me anything."

"If I take the job?"

"You'll owe me the best work you can do."

~~~767~~~

He hesitates. "You really think I'm good enough?"

"I think I'll be lucky to have you while I can still afford you."

"I told you when we first met I'd cut you a discount."

He's not funny. "So you'll consider my offer?"

"Yeah, but, the Carnegie is looking for a curator, plus there's the Meathook job to consider."

I laugh. "Tell them all to fuck off."

He smiles up at me and I remember why I picked him up a hundred years ago... that smile holds a promise that he may finally be able to keep.

"Justin, I love you."

Hustler Justin LXV

I just stare at him. I don't even think I blink. He does. A lot. He seems surprised by what he just said. He tilts his head to the side, touching my face, as if considering it. He smiles and nods. "I love you."

I fall against him. It's... I don't know what to say. I don't think he says it a lot, except to Michael. He repeats it into my ear as he clings to me. "I love you."

I wrap my legs around his waist and he turns, falling back on the sofa, kissing me. "I love you."

~~~769~~~

I'm mumbling the words into his mouth. His hands are on my neck, pulling me closer, his knees on either side of my hips. His actions are frantic as if he can't get close enough to me. His intensity concerns me. I push him back. "Justin."

He's panting, sliding his hands under my shirt. "Justin. I didn't say it to get you to fuck me."

He looks at me like I'm an alien. "You didn't have to say it to get me to fuck you. You're the one who's been pushing me away, remember?" He goes back to kissing me.

~~~770~~~

I grind down on his lap while my fingers run over his nipples. His hands are inside my pants, kneading my ass. I moan into him. I don't know what this means, and really, I don't care. I've wanted him for so long, it's almost worse having had him, knowing how good we are together and then being denied. He shifts his body, pressing up, and shifting under me. He's on his back, on the sofa in the middle of Debbie's living room. His hands leave my ass and I miss them. I lean over, his tongue plundering my mouth.

~~~771~~~

I don't think I've ever wanted anyone more than I want him right now. As his mouth opens to me, my pants open to him and I realize where we are. I push him back, both of us breathing heavily. "The loft. We should be..."

He's got a condom on me already and before I can finish the sentence his jeans are below his ass and he's riding me. What was I saying?

One foot is planted on the floor for leverage and he uses it to his advantage. I can only hang on while he fucks himself on me.

~~~772~~~

I'm not sure I've ever really wanted anyone before. I want him. Not for what he will or won't do if I'm good, but because it feels good. He hesitates and I remember what they've been telling me. Do what you want. I pull the condom from his pocket and he's inside me before he can finish his thought. He laughs and then his hands span my thighs while I take what I want and give him what I know he wants too. I move his hand to my cock and he strokes me while I fuck myself on him.

~~~773~~~

His eyes are closed and his body tenses as he comes in a warm gush onto my hand, and a little on my shirt. He keeps rocking on me. My cock hitting his prostate, his ass clenching around me, and when I come my back arches and he falls on top of me, his smile blissful, our clothes tangled around us. We doze off until we hear the door. We're both

dressed in record time. Emmett simply stares at the both of us and gets this big smile. “Good for you baby.” He kisses Justin’s cheek and turns to leave.

### ~~~774~~~

Brian’s rolling his lip into his mouth. Shit. Emmett leaves and I turn to him, waiting to see what he wants. Apparently he wants me. He pulls me close and kisses me. Not the top of my head, or my forehead, it’s like he’s trying to eat my face, but I completely understand because I can’t open up wide enough, I can’t get him deep enough inside me. He pulls me out the door. “The loft. Let’s go.”

I’m worried that he’s angry but when we park at the loft he kisses me again, and there’s no anger in it.

### ~~~775~~~

Emmett knows, which means all of Gay PA, or at least all of our family will know within minutes. We get to the loft and he looks worried. I kiss him again and all thoughts of Debbie’s reaction, Peter’s admonishments, my own fear are lost in the taste of him, the feel of his skin under my fingers. I pull away long enough to get us to the elevator and then he’s pushing me against the wall, his hands on neck, his tongue in my mouth. His teeth pulling at my bottom lip and his cock rubbing against my thigh.

### ~~~776~~~

I kiss his shoulder blades, his shirt pushed up under his arms, while he deactivates the alarm. He’s tugging at my clothes and we leave them where they lay as we fall into bed, tangled around each other. I’m hard and leaking, and so is he. His hands run up my torso, over my chest and then he’s lifting my legs onto his shoulders. I hook my knees over them. He’s rolled a condom on and presses his lubed cock into me and I’m so open and ready that we both sigh as I’m folded in half by his body.

### ~~~777~~~

His feet hit the wall behind us. I pull back a little, watching his face... pure bliss. Pressing into him, sliding as far out as I can until just the head of my cock is inside him. He whimpers and as I ram into him again he closes his eyes. “Justin, look at me.” He does, he’s here, and smiling, and that blue is just... as dark as I’ve ever seen it. “Brian.” It’s the first word he’s said since before we fucked. I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding as my orgasm courses through me.

### ~~~778~~~

I close my eyes but his voice calls me back. I’m glad it does. I don’t want to miss this. He comes, his face a cross between pleasure and pain. He doesn’t stop fucking me. He presses impossibly deeper inside me and I lose control of my body. I panic for a brief moment, but remember quickly this is Brian. I say his name, to remind me and then the white-hot flow of my orgasm courses through me. I’m floating and scared to crash. I’m crying. He slides my legs off his shoulders and holds me. Kissing my tears away.

### ~~~779~~~

His entire body is taken over by his orgasm and I’m not surprised to feel the tears. I hold him against my chest, running a soothing hand down his back. He holds me just as tightly and doesn’t try to stem the flow. I don’t think he’s sad, but I don’t think he’s ever let himself really feel this good before. We probably just broke all of Isaac’s stupid rules, well all but one, and if we didn’t... my goal is to have broken them all eventually. I kiss him softly. He looks up at me. “I love you too.”

## Hustler Justin LXVI

When I realize what I just said to him I panic. He strokes the hair off my face and smiles, it's a real one, the kind I haven't seen from him a lot lately. I'm so comfortable lying here next to him but I know he's busy. "Do you have to go to the office?"

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"No... I just..."

"Shhhh, Justin, relax."

I realize I was tensed for his anger. I guess he realizes it too. "You're safe with me."

I rest my head on his chest and wonder how he can be so sure.

### ~~~781~~~

If I start thinking about what we just did... what I just did to him, I'll have to consider an honorable ritual suicide so I try not to focus on how fucked up I am. I told him I loved him. I let that spin in my brain, and maybe it's the post sex endorphins, or the way his hair feels against my chest, or the way he fits in my arms but it still feels true.

I say it again, just to hear it, and he turns his head and blinds me with a smile. Fuck, I love Justin.

### ~~~782~~~

I have a thousand things I want to ask but he seems content to just lie here and play with my hair, repeating that he loves me. He's treating the words like a new pair of shoes, testing them out, seeing how they feel. I turn to him and smile, because he's kind of cute when he's confused. "It's okay if you don't. Lots of people say it and don't mean it."

"I don't."

My heart hurts a little but I nod. "I know."

He rolls his eyes. "I don't say it without meaning it. I do love you, Justin."

### ~~~783~~~

"You don't believe in love. You..."

"Justin" I cut him off before he replays my greatest hits. All of them, it turns out, are bullshit.

"Isaac loved me too."

The anger I feel at his name is increased tenfold. "No. He didn't. I thought you'd put that behind you."

"He did love me, in his own way."

"That's not love. It's hate."

"Brian, don't."

I sit up. "Listen to me, are you listening?"

He nods, looking down. "Justin, what Isaac did to you is unforgivable, and whatever happens with us... a relationship like that is not acceptable."

"Whatever happens?"

Fuck.

### ~~~784~~~

Whatever happens. We don't know what happens next. I've only done this once before and he doesn't want to do it like that.

"So you don't want me to fuck other people, even for money?"

He stares at me for a long time. "Do you want to fuck other people?"

"I only really want you. I've only ever really wanted you... well, in a long time."

"I think we've both sown our share of wild oats."

"You'd... you're not going to... you can if you want, you know." I'm not naïve. I didn't care before and I don't care now.

### ~~~785~~~

So why doesn't that make me happy? He's willing to do what he wants and let me do what I do.

Then I think of him, turning down offers and opportunities while I go off and... yeah, his image of love is already fucked up but...

And with all of that there's the truth that I've been running away from. The surgery changed me. The experience affected me. And I don't really want anyone else.

"For right now, we're... not fucking other people. If we want that to change, we'll talk about it."

"You don't have to, you can just..."

### ~~~786~~~

He gets so angry sometimes. He swears he's not angry with me, but it feels like he is.

"Justin, I wouldn't do that. I'm making a promise. I keep my promises."

"So do I."

"Good, I want another one."

"Okay, if I want to fuck someone..."

"Not about that." I know what he's talking about. He's holding my wrists and staring intensely. "Don't ever try to hurt yourself again. If you even think you want to, you find me, immediately."

He looks sad and serious. I don't think I realized before how much what I did hurt him. "I promise."



~~~787~~~

I believe him and something inside me relaxes. I pull him down with me, his head on my shoulder, his fingers circling my nipple and then tracing my abs. "I really would understand Brian. I mean there's things that you don't think you can do with me."

"I think you just proved how very flexible you are." Yeah, I'm being purposely obtuse.

"You know what I mean."

"Is that something you want?"

He shrugs. "I don't mind."

Doesn't mind... he didn't mind when he was getting the shit beat out of him. "That's not what I asked. Answer the question."

~~~788~~~

I feel horrible denying him something that he might want. "I guess it could be..."

"Justin, stop saying what you think I want to hear. Have you ever enjoyed it?"

"No."

He kisses the top of my head. "We're not doing anything you don't want to."

"Good. I don't want to take the SATs."

He laughs. "I didn't mean like that."

"Brian, I'm tired of studying. I just want to..." and then I stop because I realize that there are actually a lot of options open to me, and I don't know what the fuck I want. Dammit, tears again.

~~~789~~~

It's going to take a while. It's a good thing we've got a lifetime to figure this shit out. He's crying... the whole world is open to him. He's got some tough decisions ahead. "Shhhh, you don't have to figure any of it out today."

"But I should know by now."

"No one at eighteen knows what they want to be when they grow up."

"Not even you?"

"I wanted to be fabulous."

"You are." He rolls on top of me. I move my legs until his hips are between my thighs. "You're not so bad yourself."

That smile again.

~~~790~~~

I feel a chill run down my spine and am wracked with a wave of terror. I guess he sees it in my eyes. His hands are on either side of my face. His legs hooked over my calves. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You're okay."

I shake my head. The enormity of what I've done is starting to sink in. I broke every single rule Isaac had. I've become the slut he was trying to keep me from being. Brian's arms wrap around the small of my back. "You're not doing anything wrong."

I shrug "you don't understand."

"Explain it to me."

~~~791~~~

I can't believe what he's telling me. His head pressed against my chest so he doesn't have to look at me..., which is probably good, because if he sees my anger, he'll be more upset.

"When we fooled around I liked it, a lot. Too much. Isaac used to laugh about what a slut I was. He was right. He taught me how to please him, and how to control my own impulses. He made sure I didn't end up..."

"Enjoying yourself?"

"See, you don't get it. Do you know what happens to people who only care about getting off?"

~~~792~~~

He gives a derisive snort and I guess it is kind of funny to be asking him that. I mean how many times have I been told, by him, and his friends, that Brian's primary goal is to get his needs met.

"Justin, there's nothing wrong with enjoying sex. You're supposed to."

"But I can't be normal Brian. I mean when Isaac was... when we first... I mean it hurt but then... I just wanted to feel like that all the time."

I remember telling Isaac that, and his immediate reaction. It was the first time he ever spanked me.

~~~793~~~

"Did you get off, when he spanked you?" The image of what Isaac did is becoming more clear. Justin nods. "That's when we started practicing... you know, how to keep it in check, because if I liked it too much... I'd just..."

He stops and I'm really interested in hearing the next part. "You'd what?"

"He never really went into detail but I knew he didn't want that for me. He lo..."

"No he didn't." I can't hear him say it again. Isaac and his fucking vague threats leaving Justin's imagination to come up with something worse than any reality.

~~~794~~

I try to remember what Isaac said would happen but it was so long ago, and I knew Isaac wouldn't lie to me...

"Brian, what does happen if...?"

He smiles. "You have a lot of really hot sex."

"I mean the dangerous parts."

"Well, if you're stupid and not safe you'll get sick, but nothing that could have happened to you would have been as bad as what did."

"You don't mean that." He can't mean that... that would mean...

"Justin, being raped, beaten, damaged, emotionally scarred, which of these did Isaac prevent you from experiencing?"

"He didn't love me."

~~~795~~

It's like a brand new revelation every time he says it. I wonder how long until it sinks in permanently.

"You really love me?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've tried to avoid this my whole life."

"What if you hadn't picked me up?"

"You'd have died and I'd still be a free man."

"Is that what...?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"But now you're not free."

"I guess not."

"I'm sorry..."

"Shut the fuck up."

He looks like he wants to say something. I kiss him instead. I'm oddly content and I don't feel like questioning it right now.

~~~796~~~

I could lose myself in this kiss. I think he's trying to make that happen. I hold on, struggling for the control that I've been trained to use. Clients have tried before, hoping to break me, but it rarely happened, the consequences were too severe. Brian's hands are on my ass, his tongue is in my mouth and here in his bed, I don't know if I'll be able to hold on.

"Let go." He whispers it to me between kisses.

I shake my head, but he slides a wet finger into my ass, fucking me quickly. "Let go, Justin."

~~~797~~~

When he finally lets go his entire body seems to spasm around my finger. He pushes back onto my hand and comes within seconds. I kiss him again before he can apologize and roll us over. He's on his back, staring up at me with dilated eyes and a peaceful smile. "Good boy."

I run my hands over his body. His skin is soft and pale against the dark blue sheets. He's so fucking beautiful. When he's hard again I straddle his lap, rolling on a condom. His eyes widen as I lower myself onto his cock. "Brian, No. Stop."

~~~798~~~

He stops all movement. I squeeze my eyes closed.

"Justin..." I open them. "What's wrong?"

"This is, I shouldn't... you shouldn't... I mean, you don't have to..."

He moves, and I've never felt anything like it. "Feel good?"

I nod. He weaves his fingers through mine and bites his lip as he rides me. It's so wrong, and it feels so good. He wants this and I want this and he'd tell me that's the perfect combination. I press up into him, and he smiles, reaching for his own cock. My hand meets his and together, we get him off.

~~~799~~~

I feel empty and sore. It's been a while since I've done that. I forgot how much it could hurt and how good it feels. His smile is gone again. He's worried.

I kiss the side of his mouth and tap his temple. "What fresh hell are you considering now?"

"Is that what... do you usually like..."

I laugh. "Justin, you're a bottom if I ever met one, and no, I'm not usually, but today's a special occasion."

He pouts. "I only get to fuck you on special occasions?"

"The days you get to fuck me will be special occasions."

~~~800~~~

Three days later he's tossing a packet onto the coffee table. "Fill those out."

"What are they?"

"Your employment forms, so you can get paid."

"But... I thought..."

"You're taking the SATs next week."

"Lindsay says my portfolio won't be ready for fall admissions."

"So you'll start in the spring."

"If I get in."

"You'll get in."

"Why? Did you bribe someone?"

He kisses the side of my face. "I believe in you."

I look away. It's pathetic how much I cry.

"Allergies?"

I nod and keep typing.

"Pizza?"

"Chinese."

He makes the call while I finish the last chapter.

## **Hustler Justin Epilogue**

His name booms over the loudspeaker. "Justin Taylor", the entire row, Debbie, Emmett, Michael, Ben, Mel, Lindz, Gus, and yes, me, stand up and cheer him. His smile makes the May sunshine seem dim in comparison as he picks up his diploma and crosses the stage.

We all go back to Debbie's, although he's lived with me for the last two years. I find him in his old room, staring at the parchment. "Weird."

I wrap my arms around him. "I knew you could do it."

He tilts his head so I can kiss his neck. "I wasn't so sure."

~~~ ~~~

I really wasn't always sure, but he has a way of pushing that reminds you how strong you can be. When my book was published, when it made the non-fiction bestseller list, when I wanted to hide myself and my past but no longer could... he was there. When my senior project won not only accolades but also a spot in a prestigious gallery, he took it as my due.

I turn around in his arms. "Who would have thought I could make more selling my art than my ass?"

He smiles. He never doubted it.

"I love you, Brian"

~Fin~