

A Slash & Burn Production

Ally Blue

Amanda Young

James Buchanan

KA Mitchell

Maia Strong

Marty Rayne

Maura Anderson

Tory Temple

Zoe Nichols



THE HUSTLER

A Slash & Burn Publication

The Hustler

THE HUSTLER Copyright © 2009 Slash & Burn Authors
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book may not be reproduced in whole or
in part
without permission.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or
dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. They are
productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

Cover art by Amanda Young

WARNING:

The following material contains graphic sexual content, explicit language,
hot manlove, and is meant for mature readers.

The Hustler

Chapter One

The scuffle of feet on pavement, several pairs by the sound of it, cut through the near darkness. A deep voice yelled, "Here pussy, pussy." A higher pitched laugh filled the air and someone whimpered.

Cole picked up his pace, hurrying toward his car.

"No," a third voice called out. "Leave me alone. I haven't done anything to you."

Cole turned toward the voices in time to see a petite blonde boy take a nose dive toward the sidewalk in front of the building. Two older boys, both brunettes, towered over him with gleeful looks on their faces.

One of the pair, the taller of the two, reared back his foot and kicked the fallen boy in the stomach. "Fucking homo. We'll teach you not to walk around shaking your skinny ass at people."

The other guy bounced on the balls of his feet, egging his friend on. "Yeah, buddy, do it. Kick his ass."

Cole's teeth clenched in response to what he was witnessing.

A second kick and the blonde's pitiful wail of, "Please stop. I wasn't doing anything. I swear," eroded his hesitation to get involved. He couldn't just stand there and let some poor kid get beat on. Reaching into his coat pocket, he felt around for his cell phone before remembering that he'd let the battery die and left it at home to charge. Of all the damn times to be without my phone.

Shit, now what?

He balled his fist around the sharp end of his keys, the tines poking thorough tightly compressed fingers of one hand. It wasn't much protection, but bully's were usually pussies who ran at the first sign of someone who fought back anyway. At least, that's what he was counting on.

"Hey," he screamed, taking off at a run toward the threesome. "Leave that kid alone."

The thug's foot stilled in midair. A nasty smile crossed his features as he saw Cole. "Mind your own business, jackass." He then preceded to gut-

The Hustler

kick the smaller boy again. The boy on the ground curled up into the fetal position and wrapped his arms around his midsection.

“Yeah, yeah,” the other one chimed in. “Get the hell out of here, dude.”

“Leave him alone, damn it.” Cole sprinted toward them. A potent mix of adrenaline and anger coursed through his veins, making him forget why he shouldn’t get involved. Even so, he wasn’t stupid. “I called the police. They’re on their way.”

The thug’s friend tugged on his shirt sleeve and said something Cole couldn’t make out. They looked at each other for a second and then the bigger of the two cleared his throat loudly and spit on the blonde boy. “This isn’t over, faggot. You’d best hightail it out of town unless you want us to find you and finish what we started, you hear?”

“Yeah,” the other boy added, spitting at the pavement next to the kid. “We don’t want your kind around here.”

The two boys darted toward a red convertible parked at the front of the lot. They hopped inside and roared out the parking lot, burning rubber just as he reached the sidewalk.

The kid began struggling to sit up as Cole approached and kneeled at his side. “Are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?”

He grimaced. “No. I can’t afford to go to the hospital right now.”

Cole reached out to touch him, his natural inclination to offer comfort, but thought better of it at the last moment. He dropped his hands to his sides. Just because he was a touchy feely person didn’t mean everyone else was. “The emergency room can’t turn you away whether you can pay or not. Besides, that’s what payment plans are for. Are you sure I shouldn’t call for some help? I lied about calling the cops—I don’t have my cell phone on me—but my store’s right over there.” He pointed toward the storefront a few doors down. “I can let myself back in and make a call for you.”

“No. Thanks for chasing those bozos off for me, but I’ll live.”

Cole’s heart went out to the kid. The blue shirt he wore molded to his slender frame, while his jeans hung off his narrow hips. Nothing about him screamed underfed or drug addicted, just a kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. He looked a little older than Cole had originally guessed—closer to twenty than fifteen—but he was still young. From this close, Cole could make out the clear blue of his eyes and the pale gold of

The Hustler

his skin. His clothes were designer label, though they were wrinkled and smeared with dirt. Cole didn't think the kid was a runaway, but anything was possible.

He stood and held out a hand to help the guy up. The kid took it Cole's hand and rose slowly to his feet, wincing all the while. Taller than he'd looked when compared to the two other boys, he towered over Cole's pitiful five foot six by almost half a foot, making him feel a little self-conscious. He didn't know anything about the guy, other than what he'd just seen. However, instinct screamed that he needn't worry.

Cole backed up and leaned against the brick wall, putting some space between them. "Is there someone I can call to come and get you?"

Color flooded the kid's cheeks before he glanced down at the ground. "No. I...um...I'm expecting someone to meet me here in a few minutes." He shuffled his feet, his embarrassment obvious. "Those two guys are probably long gone, if you need to take off. I'll be fine waiting here by myself."

Curious. Cole would bet a month's profits that the kid was lying. "I could hang out with you until your ride gets here."

"No! I mean, thanks, but you don't have to do that. You've already done enough." He lifted his gaze and stared out toward the nonexistent traffic on the highway. "I'm sure my friend will be here soon."

"It's cool. I don't mind keeping you company. It's not like I have anything more important to do."

"Well, uh, okay, but I don't know how long it's going to be."

"No problem." Cole held his hand out. "My name is Cole by the way."

The kid eyed Cole's hand suspiciously for a minute, as if he expected Cole to smack him with it, before finally taking it between his own and giving it a quick shake. "Hi Cole. My name's Matthew."

Cole smiled, trying to put the kid at ease. "So, if you don't mind my asking, what were you doing out here when those guys attacked you? I mean, all the stores closed hours ago."

Matthew fidgeted. "I don't know. I was just kind of hanging out when they snuck up on me. I sort of know them from school, but never really talked to them, you know. We didn't exactly run in the same circles at

The Hustler

Carrington and the last thing I expected was to run into them out here. I don't know why they'd want to whale on me."

Cole thought it probably had something to do with the slurs they'd tossed at the kid, but he kept his mouth shut. If Matthew didn't want to tell him he was gay, then was none of his business.

"Carrington, huh? What's it like to go to prep school? I was a public school brat myself."

Carrington wasn't the only private high school in the area, but it was the most prestigious. That he'd attended school there only thickened the mystery surrounding him. If he came from money, what was he doing hanging around in the middle-to-lower class section of town on a Friday night?

"It was okay. Boring, mostly. I was happy to graduate. It's not like I ever fit in there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." He shoved his hands in his pockets, his stance defensive. "The same reason most people don't, I guess. I'm not into sports or partying and kept pretty much to myself. I was too quiet, too artsy. No reasons that really matter."

Cole nodded. "High school is hell on everyone, I think. Some kind of torturous right of passage we all have to live through." Lord knew, his own hadn't been pleasant.

Matthew snorted. "Well, I'm just glad it's over."

A light mist of rain began to fall, making the asphalt parking lot shine under the lamplight. Cole pushed off the wall and stood up straight. The kid seemed likable enough, but he was hiding something. Cole would bet his right butt-cheek on it. "So, who's this friend that's coming to get you?"

"Oh, um..." He bit his lip.

Cole looked Matthew right in the eyes and gave him his best "cut the bullshit" look. "There isn't anyone coming, is there?"

Matthew's eyes went wide before skittering away. "Yeah there is," he mumbled, glaring at the wet ground. "It's just...my ex." The kid's words were slow, like he was thinking them up as he went. Probably was. "We

The Hustler

don't...we don't really get along." A wan smile flicked Matthew's firm mouth up. "Just a little nervous, ya know."

"Liar," Cole chided gently. Mathew bit his lip harder and watched the ground like it was going to open up and pull him under, possibly saving him from Cole's inquiries. Because he looked so miserable, Cole almost didn't want to push. Wasn't that important, really, to know why Matthew was there.

Except he did look miserable and Cole was involved now. At least a little bit. "C'mon, tell me the truth." He opened his arms and held his palms up, trying to give off not gonna hurt you signals. "I can't just leave you out here by yourself in the rain."

As if God was working with him, the mist went from light to mild. Water drops landed a little harder, with an audible splat. Matthew drew in a startled breath when a drop splattered on his nose. Cole shook his head. "Yeah, now I definitely can't leave you out here. If you won't tell me what's up, at least let me get you somewhere warm. No point in being stubborn and hypothermic." He jerked his thumb back the way he'd come. "My shop's just right there."

Clearly torn, Matthew shoved his hands in his rapidly dampening jean pockets. The move tightened the material across his crotch and Cole forced himself to give Matthew really good eye contact. He wasn't going to eyeball the kid. He wasn't, dammit. It didn't matter that Matthew was pretty - holy damn was he pretty - and it sure as hell didn't matter that Cole suddenly felt every day of the last celibate six months centering in his hips.

Sex with a stranger was not on his list of priorities. Then again, neither had been playing the hero.

Matthew finally sighed, blowing out a hard breath. "I'd appreciate that." His voice screamed reluctance. "If you're sure."

Curiosity nearly ate Cole's brain up. Could this guy anymore secretive and loner-ish? The night's plan of food, shower and sleep faded to the back of his mind. So maybe he was nosy but Cole didn't think he'd be able to let the mystery of Matthew go just yet.

"I'm sure." Cole was even more sure when the mist changed to real rain and there was an ominous rumble of thunder. "Come on, I'm freezing."

Matthew darted one more look around and then hunched his shoulders against the weather. "Yeah, all right. At least until the rain stops."

The Hustler

Glad to have made some progress, even a bit, Cole turned and headed back down the street with Matthew in tow. They reached his small art supply shop in no time. Cole fumbled with the keys and got the door open, hustling both of them in out of the rain.

He watched as Matthew's gaze traveled over the various paints, brushes, pencils, and canvases that lined the walls of the little store.

"Do you draw?" the boy asked. "Or paint, or something?"

Cole nodded. "Mostly I just sketch, but once in a while the urge to paint strikes me." He thought of all the hidden pages of the comic book he'd been working on for months.

"Oh. Cool." Matthew's voice was soft and Cole noticed that his shirt was overly damp and sticking to his thin shoulders.

"I have a dry shirt," Cole offered. "No dry pants, though. But at least you'd be warmer." He bent down behind the register and dug out an old, soft sweatshirt. "Want to put this on?"

Matthew nibbled his lower lip a bit before reaching out a hand to take the shirt. "Um, yeah. Thanks." He stepped back again and stripped his t-shirt off, letting it fall to the floor in a sad little heap.

Cole's eyes widened. Matthew had a thin red scar that ran from chest to waist. It was nearly white in some spots, so it couldn't have been a recent injury, but it was startling enough for Cole to blurt out, "Where'd that come from?"

He kicked himself a moment later for it, but the words were out there and Matthew was looking at him warily.

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me." Cole brushed his hands through his hair to push it back from his face. Water dripped on the light coat he still wore. He also noticed several spots on Matthew's stomach that were already starting to darken. He'll have some rough looking bruises by the morning.

Matthew's eyes lowered and he hurriedly pulled on the sweat shirt. He picked up the soaked shirt and took a couple of steps back from Cole. He didn't respond to the comments, instead asking, "Do you have a bathroom?"

Cole blinked. "Uh, yeah. In the back, down the short hallway on the left."

The Hustler

The corner of Matthew's lips twitched up into an almost smile. "Thanks."

Staring, Cole watched the young man disappear into the back. "Great going, big-mouth. You try to help out a fellow man in need, and end up making his night worse," he chastised himself.

The sound of the rain becoming harder drew his attention to the storefront window. It was raining cats and dogs. They'll be stuck here for some time if this kept up. Good thing he had no particular plans for the night. Though he was getting hungry.

Startled, Cole jumped when Matthew spoke. "Thank you again. I hope you don't mind that I hung up my shirt to dry some."

Cole turned and shook his head. "No, that's fine. I was just thinking that we may be here awhile."

Matthew looked so small in the oversized sweatshirt, arms crossed over his chest and still not quite meeting his eyes. Those nice eyes looked over Cole's shoulder and widened.

"What's that?"

"Huh?" Cole turned to see what had caught Matthew's gaze, and saw two glowing golden eyes hovering about six feet off the floor. "Oh! Balthazar." The big orange cat meowed loudly at the sound of his name and sat up from his crouch on the shelving unit. "How the hell did you get up there?" Cole reached out and hauled the feline off the shelf. He turned, cat in his arms, to face Matthew once more. "You're not allergic are you?"

Matthew shook his head, snorted what might have been a soft laugh. "No. You have a cat?"

"Yeah."

"In an art supply store?"

"Yeah." Cole set Balthazar on the floor and the cat immediately trotted over to Matthew and began to wind around and around Matthew's feet, purring loudly.

Matthew looked down at Balthazar, but contrary to Cole's expectations, didn't kneel to pet him. Why should I have any expectations? Cole wondered silently. He didn't know this kid from Adam. And yet, he'd let

The Hustler

him into his shop, after hours, no one around as a witness if the boy suddenly went apeshit and beat him to death with a tub of gesso.

Cole shook his head at himself. Wow. His imagination was really twisted tonight. Besides, if Matthew was dangerous, wouldn't Balthazar have picked up on it? Animals were much better at that stuff than humans.

"I've seen used book stores with cats, but never a place like this. I mean, aren't you afraid he's gonna, you know, break stuff?" Matthew asked, watching as the cat continued to weave around his ankles like some sort of moebius path.

"No. Listen." This was getting them no where, and frankly Cole was too hungry to care about cats and art supplies and latent homicidal tendencies and strange scars. ... Okay, maybe he was still wondering about the long scar down Matthew's otherwise lovely—if rapidly bruising—torso, but he wasn't rude enough to bring it up again. "Are you hungry? I was going to get dinner anyway. There's a good Chinese place a couple of blocks away. My treat."

Matthew's eyes widened and he suddenly looked hunted.

Shit. He hadn't meant for that to sound like he was asking the boy out. He needed to eat or he was just going to get stupider the hungrier he got. "Or we could order in," Cole amended quickly. A flash of lightning lit the darkened street and was soon followed by a low rumble of thunder. "Stupid to go out in this weather if you don't have to. It wouldn't be the first time the Dragon Palace has delivered here, although usually it's lunch. They do awesome mu shu pork and pot stickers." Cole was babbling and he made himself stop. "It'll give your shirt time to dry out," he concluded, and then added to himself, And maybe while we're eating I can figure out what you're hiding. Or hiding from.

The Hustler

Chapter Two

This guy Cole, Mr. Art Store with his freaky named cat, was much too good to be true. Matthew was still looking for the catch as he watched Cole fold his pancake neatly over his mu shu pork while they ate at the checkout counter of Cole's art supply store. Hiding a stare under blond bangs in need of a trim, Matthew had been studying Cole since they started eating.

Cole, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to look everywhere but at Matthew. But he'd caught those gazes earlier, the flare of heat and interest, and if the price of rescue was ending up in Cole's bed it wouldn't be too bad. Matthew had definitely done worse—would do worse—if he had to.

And it really wouldn't be too bad. Cole was kind of cute in a nerdy, cat-cuddling way. Auburn hair that had gotten curly in the rain and soft brown eyes, a turned up little nose, and even better, a solid broad chest tapering to lean hips. A little short, a little old, and definitely not the kind of guy Matthew would have expected to ride to his rescue.

Cole's tongue flicked out to lick the dark drops of plum sauce from his lips and Matthew felt a tug down deep in one place he hadn't been kicked, thank God. Okay, so maybe the price of rescue would be better than not bad. Cole wouldn't ask any more questions and tomorrow morning, Matthew would still be on his way out of town—away from his aunt and uncle—even if he had to do it without the money Tyler had promised him. Matthew wondered if those two assholes had been Tyler's farewell gift instead.

Cole's wide pink lips were twitching like he was about to start with his questions again, so Matthew decided to cut him off with one of his own. Around a mouthful of fried rice he asked, "How long have you had it?" He pointed around with his chopsticks.

The cat jumped up on Cole's shoulder and took a bit of pork from his fingers. "The store or Balthazar?"

"I meant the store."

"I've had them both four years. Balthazar came with the store."

The steady gold gaze from the cat was a little unnerving, as if Balthazar knew what Matthew had done. Almost done. He offered. I never asked for anything, Matthew told the cat as it slithered down Cole's arm and

The Hustler

stalked across the counter. But the gold gaze seemed more intent on willing the extraction of a piece of shrimp from Matthew's lo mein than the secrets from his head. He held out a piece and the cat took it gently, a quick rasp of tongue as the shrimp vanished into a purring throat.

"He likes you," Cole sounded surprised. "He usually takes a long time to warm up to people."

"I think he just likes the shrimp."

Cole shrugged. "He was pretty abused as a kitten. He usually sticks to me when someone's in the store."

Matthew got it. "You like coming to the rescue, huh?"

"Like it?" Cole's eyebrows met in the middle. "More like finding myself doing it." He scowled and shook his head. "Just one of those things."

Like he was just easing his weight, Matthew shifted a few inches nearer Cole. He fished a bit of pork off Cole's plate. "So how did the cat pay you for rescuing and feeding him?" That's how the world worked. People either took advantage of you or you took advantage of them.

"Pay me?" Food halfway to his mouth, Cole stopped and blinked.

"Yeah, you know," Matthew shrugged, "Cause everything has a price." He eased a sideways glance at Cole to see what his reaction would be. Even if the world worked that way, lots of people liked to pretend it didn't.

Slowly, Cole put his untouched Mu-Shu wrap down. "Doesn't have to." Turning to rest his hip against the counter, Cole added, "Sometimes people do things because it's just the right thing to do."

Yeah right. The world was about give and take even if Cole deluded himself. "I've never met anyone who just did the right thing."

"I did." Cole crossed his arm over his chest and glared. "How about that?"

That glare was smoking. "No, you want something." Still, Matthew could also see the hint of defiance and shame under it. "Everybody wants something."

"I don't want anything." Cole's denial rang hollow to Matthew's ears.

Matthew stepped in, right into Cole's personal space. "You want me." He smirked. "Gonna lie?" He pressed in, letting Cole feel his half hard dick

The Hustler

and so he could feel Cole's prick. "Tell me I'm wrong?" He dared Cole to contradict what his body was screaming loud and clear.

Cole took a deep breath. "I didn't stop them from beating the shit out of you so I could get laid." He didn't, however, back away.

"So you don't want me?" Matthew leered.

"Didn't say that either." Another ragged breath shook Cole's frame before he finished, "But that's not why I stopped them."

Well, at least he's not a total liar...

Cole focused his attention on the remains of his dinner but his hunger had disappeared with Matthew's jaded words. The guy was awfully young to be so bitter and Cole hadn't even been able to deny his attraction to the younger man, even if had nothing to do with payment for services rendered.

Balthazar deigned to accept a few more tidbits of pork from him before he pranced over to Matthew to see if he could score any more shrimp.

"Traitor." Cole couldn't help but be amused by the cat's fickleness.

"See, even the cat is looking for something in return for being friendly." The younger man's voice held a hint of sadness. "I'll get my shirt, it should be mostly dry by now and I need to get going. I have to meet someone."

Cole glanced out the front window of the shop again. If anything, the rain had grown into a true squall. Sheets of rain and wind driving along in waves and pieces of tree branches tumbled by, tossed like twigs.

"I don't think either of us is going anywhere for a while. It's getting worse and worse out there and I'm not really all that thrilled with the idea of swimming to my car."

Matthew stopped on his way toward the restroom to stare out first one window, then the next one, as if hoping he'd see something better. "Damn. This sucks. I don't even have a car and I'm sure the guy I'm meeting won't bother coming out in this."

Cole busied himself cleaning up the counter and throwing away the take-out boxes. A quick wash and the checkout counter was back to its

The Hustler

normal tidy state. Not looking at Matthew took almost every ounce of willpower he possessed but no matter how much he was attracted to him, Cole was not going to let him think he'd intervened because he wanted to fuck the cute blonde.

Counter as clean as it would get, Cole pulled the sketch pad he kept under the register out and flipped to a fresh page. Frames of a new comic series flew from his fingers without thought or effort. Rapidly sketching out a rough storyboard, he nearly forgot the other man was in the shop with him. Only when Matthew stood in front of him again did Cole remember and look up. Exhaustion pinched the corners of his mouth and weariness rolled off him in waves.

“There’s a comfortable chair in the storeroom I use sometimes when I sketch. It’s good for a nap, too. Why don’t you rest for a while and we’ll see if the rain lets up. Usually squalls don’t last too long.”

The Hustler

Chapter Three

"I'm not tired." Matthew swallowed a yawn so it wouldn't give away his lie. The last thing he needed right now was to fall asleep. Until he put a few hundred miles between himself and his aunt and uncle, sleep was a luxury. After what he'd seen them do...

He shivered in spite of himself. He'd never much liked Aunt Coco and Uncle Donald, but they'd taken him in when his mom left. They'd given him a roof over his head, provided a sullen housekeeper to make sure he ate, slept and went to school, and left him pretty much to his own devices. Their only unbreakable rule was "stay out of sight when we have company," a rule he'd never broken until today.

God, if only I could've gotten that damn job. I'd've been able to rent an apartment and move out of their house weeks ago, and I never would've seen--

"Matthew?"

With a violent start, Matthew blinked and focused on Cole's concerned face. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Why? Why would you ask that?"

"You were a million miles away just now." Cole let out a deep sigh. Setting his sketch pad on the counter, he took both of Matthew's hands in his. "Look, I don't know what's going on with you. But it's pretty obvious that you're running from something."

Alarm bells clanged in Matthew's skull. He fought to keep his panic off his face. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah, you do." The corners of Cole's mouth tipped up in a wry smile. "I know it's none of my business who or what has you so scared. But no one knows you're here. You're safe, for now. Rest for a while. Then we'll figure out some way to get you out of here without being spotted. Okay?"

Warmth spread like a wave through Matthew's chest. He ignored it. No way was Cole doing this out of niceness. He wanted something, and Matthew knew damn well what that something was. Cole's palms were damp, his breath coming short and fast. Flushed cheeks and dilated

The Hustler

pupils? Oh yeah. As much as Cole had tried to deny it, he wanted Matthew. Badly. It was painfully obvious.

Not that getting fucked by Cole would be any sort of hardship. In fact, the more Matthew thought about it, the more he liked the idea.

Lacing his fingers through Cole's, Matthew stepped closer and tilted his head until he felt the rapid puff of Cole's breath against his lips. Cole trembled, but didn't move, and Matthew was glad.

"What are you doing?" Cole whispered.

Matthew smiled. "Giving you what you want." He closed the distance between them and sealed his mouth to Cole's.

Mathew's lips were firm and warm where they pressed against Cole's. His breath smelled of dinner and a hint of something richer. One closed-mouth caress became two and then three.

Cole was so surprised by the sudden move that he forgot to kiss the younger man back. By the time he recovered from shock, Mathew was already pulling away.

A hint of remorse for the lost moment skittered down Cole's spine and lodged in his balls. Who was he to turn down someone like Mathew? It wasn't like the opportunity to be with someone so damn pretty came along every day. Hell, he wouldn't have been celibate for the last six months if he had boys like Mathew throwing themselves at his feet. Or anyone, for that matter.

He opened his mouth to apologize, for what he wasn't quite sure, and was forced to swallow the words as Mathew dropped to his knees. "What, um—What are you doing, Mathew?"

Mathew's hands fumbled with Cole's pants, popping the button for its mooring. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm certainly not whistling Dixie down here."

"I, um—" Mathew fished Cole's dick out and stroked it, drying up Cole's words before they could fully form. It took considerable effort to say, "You don't have to..." The last thing he wanted was for Mathew to feel like he had to suck him off in a bid to repay him for doing something any decent human being would have done in his place. With that being said, he had

The Hustler

to admit he hoped Mathew didn't stop. It had been so long since he'd felt someone else's hands on his body.

"What?" Mathew gazed up at Cole through the sparse fringe of his bangs. "Would you rather fuck me?"

God, yes. Just the thought of forcing his cock up Mathew's ass was enough to make him want to come. However, he'd take anything Mathew was willing to share and be grateful for it. After all, beggars couldn't be choosers. "I'll do anything you want."

Rather than reply, Mathew bent forward and wrapped his sweet pink lips around the tip of Cole's cock. Moist heat engulfed him, prodded his slit and circled his cockhead before moving farther down his shaft.

Cole closed his eyes and then reopened them, at war with the desire to shut out the outside world and focus on the feel of hot, wet lips mouthing his crown and the overwhelming need to watch Adam swallow him. Things like this did not happen to people like him. He was the man who gave and gave until his lover's cried "You're smothering me" and ran out on him, time and again.

He'd come to grips with being alone. Made his peace with the fact that he was not anyone's idea of a wet dream and settled on being satisfied with his lot in life. However, that didn't mean he lacked the same needs as everyone else. He still longed for the hard, practiced touch of a man in the dark of the night. Quite frankly, being sucked off by someone like Mathew would fuel untold number of hand parties in the near future.

Cole threaded his fingers through Mathew's damp hair and held on, praying his knees would hold up through the younger man's onslaught while Mathew used his mouth, lips and tongue to melt away any reservations Cole may have possessed. There was no way he could dwell on right and wrong when Mathew's mouth was hot and wet upon him, a tight inferno of siphoning pleasure that no one in their right mind would have been able to resist.

"Matthew, holy f--" Cole's words ended in a hiss as Matthew's suction tightened around him the same time his hand gently began caressing his balls. Losing the battle, his eyes closed. The walls of his beloved store fell away and he felt as if he were floating in a thick haze of lust.

In the distance, Cole recognized the sound of a meow. Balthazar. A brush of fur on his arm. Damn cat, but he was too lost to really pay much attention. So close.

The Hustler

Matthew's tongue was magical as it drove Cole closer and closer to the edge. Then he felt the hot lips wrapped around his base and his tip pressed hard against the back of Matthew's throat. This was not the young man's first time giving a blow job.

Cole tried to tell Matthew how good it was feeling, but only grunts and moans rose from his throat to convey his thoughts.

One of Matthew's fingers slipped away from his balls, past his taint, and found the tight hole. One touch had Cole bucking his hips further into Matthew's mouth. The wonderfully talented mouth didn't stop sucking as the finger teased the opening before applying pressure to the area.

That was all it took. Cole cried out and felt a sensation of exploding as his cum shot into Matthew's throat.

It took a few moments for his head to clear. Only then did he hear the hiss of Balthazar, the curse from Matthew, and the sight of flashing lights from a police car outside the windows of the shop.

Still trying to remembering how to get the breath in and out of his lungs, Cole saw the flashing police lights reflected in Matthew's widening eyes.

In the space of a heartbeat, Cole knew the cops were here for the kid and that Matthew was about to bolt. Cole still didn't know why he believed in this kid. Why the hunted look in those eyes reached into his gut and made him want to help. Matthew opened his mouth, but Cole cut him off.

"Hide. I'll get rid of them."

"You don't know—"

"I don't care. But if you disappear, I swear to God I will put the cops on your ass myself."

The pounding at the door jolted Matthew into motion, he disappeared into the storeroom. Reminding himself not to let nervousness get him babbling again, Cole opened the door to the two uniformed officers.

"Can I help you, officers?"

"We're just checking around." The officer who spoke put his hand on his flashlight. At least it wasn't his gun. "We received a call about a disturbance in this area. This is the only place open."

The Hustler

“Actually I’m closed.”

“We saw your lights on. Is this your store?”

“I’m the owner. I was just doing some inventory after hours.” Cole waited for the cops to ask for ID, curling his tongue back in his mouth to remind himself not to let unneeded excuses come pouring out.

“Have you seen anyone around?”

“No.”

The officer who’d remained silent pulled out a paper and handed it to Cole. “Have you seen him anywhere?”

Cole braced himself for the sight of Matthew on a wanted poster, but it was just a copy of a photograph, and it wasn’t Matthew. The dark-haired boy looked to be about Matthew’s age. Glad to be able to answer truthfully, he said, “I’ve never seen him before.”

“We could take a look around the place, make sure no one broke in.”

“That won’t be necessary. I have an alarm system. And—and a guard dog.”

The officers looked surprised and one stepped over the threshold, looking into the store.

“He’s very well-trained. That’s why you didn’t hear him bark. I saw your lights and told him to be quiet.” Shut up, Cole.

The policemen exchanged a look. “We’ll check around back for you. Hang on to that picture and call 911 if you see him.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“Timothy Flyte is wanted for questioning regarding the recent home robberies in the area.”

“Damn.” Cole rubbed his temple, trying to erase the ache brewing just beneath his skin. “I remember hearing someone about that on the news, but I didn’t realize there were any suspects yet.”

“It’s a recent development, sir. Why don’t you sit tight while we have a look around and then we’ll escort you to your vehicle, if you’re about ready to call it a night? You can’t be too careful these days.”

The Hustler

Cole opened his mouth to say thank you before remembering his guest in the back. The cops might not have been looking for Mathew this time, but he got the notion that the younger man would not welcome attention from the boys in blue. “I appreciate the offer, but I still have quite a bit of work before I can head home.”

“As you wish, sir. We’re just going to have a look around the building now. You have a goodnight.”

“Thanks. Um, you, too.” Cole waited until the officers walked away before closing and locking the door behind him. He strode into the backroom, half expected Matthew to have vanished while he was out front talking to the police.

A quick glance around the dim interior confirmed his fears. “Well, shit the bed.”

“Lovely language.”

Cole spun toward the voice behind him. “Christ, Matthew. I thought you were gone.”

“I was in the bathroom.” Matthew shrugged. “What’d the pigs want?”

“They had a report of a disturbance in the area and wanted to know if I’d seen or heard anything.”

Matthew’s eyes narrowed. “That it?”

“No. They were looking for some guy named Timothy Flyte in connection with the local robberies.”

Matthew’s shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

Matthew looked so forlorn, it took all of Cole’s willpower not to pull the younger man into his arms and comfort him. However, in the short time he’d known Matthew, he’d come to realize the younger man didn’t welcome casual touches.

Cole hugged himself to keep his arms from reaching out. “So, um... What happens now? Do you have somewhere to go? Or...”

The Hustler

Chapter Four

Matthew drew himself up, tried to shake off—or at the very least bury—the sudden wave of disappointment at Cole's words. He'd secretly hoped the cops had been called on the assholes who'd jumped him. He should have known better. Why should anyone report a couple of thugs wailing on a faggot? It wasn't their business, wasn't their problem. It was also par for the course as far as Matthew was concerned. Nothing to give a shit about. So why did he?

The cat -- What the fuck was its name again? *Balthazar. Right.* -- wound around his ankles. Where had it come from? He hadn't seen or heard it approach. He eyed it with some suspicion as he answered Cole's unfinished question. "I can take care of myself." Matthew stepped carefully away from the purring feline, but Balthazar followed and began his weave again.

"Do we have to play the bullshit game again?" Cole asked.

"You think I can't?" countered Matthew defensively. He tried again to escape the cat's affection, and had as little success. The damned thing was as persistent as its human counterpart. He needed to get out of here. Away from the pair of them. But with the cops roaming the neighborhood and no chance of Tyler ever appearing, he was left with precious few options.

"I never said that. Listen," Cole went on. He took a breath, let it out in a controlled sigh. Matthew tensed, waiting. "If you need a place to stay tonight, you can crash with me. No strings attached," he added quickly.

Matthew gave a derisive snort. Yeah, right. And Cole claimed he didn't want to "play the bullshit game"? Bull. Shit. "There's always strings." But Matthew couldn't deny that he could use somewhere to stay for the night. Get his shit together. Figure out what the hell he was going to do next. He couldn't go back to his aunt and uncle's house, that was for damned sure.

He toned down his anger and turned up the seduction again. He'd have to pay for the privilege, no matter what Cole claimed. At least he'd have a mattress under him when he let Cole fuck him. That would be a plus. And maybe he could use the guy's shower before he finally stopped playing the goody-two-shoes Samaritan and kicked Matthew out. "You liked your payment before. I could make your offer worth your while." He took a step forward... and promptly tripped over the cat.

The Hustler

Matthew landed hard against Cole. Against his warm, solid, strong body. Cole caught him, hands just at the bottom of Matthew's ribs. Cole, who'd done nothing but try to help him—even at the risk of his own safety. If Matthew didn't know a hell of a lot better, he'd almost believe in the fairy tale of decent human behavior again. Decent guy or not, Matthew wanted him. Not just as a way of paying for a bed and shower, but wanted him. Cole. An unexpected need Matthew wasn't going to think too much about.

Cole's warm brown eyes were wide with surprise at what must have seemed like Matthew flinging himself at the other man. Matthew grabbed Cole's head and pulled him into a kiss, tongue sliding along Cole's soft bottom lip. And just then Matthew remembered the way Cole had resisted his other attempt at a kiss. Releasing Cole's head, Matthew tried to step away, but Cole still held him.

"Sorry." Some guys just didn't kiss. "It was an accident."

"Don't tell me," Cole said, wide lips twitching in a smile. "You tripped and fell on my lips."

Matthew was good at this. He could turn it around, make sure that Cole never knew it was anything more than gratitude, never saw how much Matthew wanted it. "I've got a better—"

Cole cut him off with a kiss. A slow, long kiss. The kind where you knew you were the total focus of the mouth on yours, even if the owner of the mouth showed no signs of giving into the heat that was flooding from your chest to your dick. Just a deep steady thrust of tongue until all Matthew could think about was how that focus was going to show when it was Cole's cock thrusting into his ass, that deliberate stroke driving him out of his mind.

By the time Cole's tongue had moved to lick under Matthew's jaw, Matthew was already reaching into his pocket for the condom and lube he always carried. When Cole's hand moved to the button of Matthew's jeans, he slapped them both into Cole's hand.

Cole lifted his head and looked down at his palm. Matthew's neck was cold from where Cole had been licking.

"You think this is what I want from you?" Cole asked.

Matthew rubbed Cole's dick through his jeans, measuring the thick shaft with cupped fingers. And it was thick. That heavy cock had stretched the

The Hustler

hell out of Matthew's jaw, and he wasn't exactly out of practice. "Fuck yeah, you want it."

"Matthew—"

Matthew shut the door. No way was he getting distracted from getting fucked by that dick because of another surprise appearance of glowing cat eyes. He dropped his jeans and briefs to the floor and turned around, bracing himself against a shelf in the storage room. "Trust me. You're going to love it."

He waited, ass tipped up invitingly. He wanted this fuck, but there was still a part of him stupidly wishing Cole would prove him wrong. That at least Cole would take Matthew home and—well, not make love because that was too delusional—but at least take him home and fuck him as sweet and thoroughly as Cole had kissed him.

But Matthew was never wrong.

Cole ran one hand over the curve of Matthew's ass, then trailed a finger along his crack. Matthew arched into the touch even as his gut tightened. Cole's finger returned, slick and cool, circling and rubbing. No burn, just a sweet stretch and that so-good sense of being filled. Cole fucked him with that one finger, and just when Matthew would have begged, Cole slipped another one inside, the motion so smooth Matthew's muscle gave in with just a quick flare of pleasure-pain.

Cole might be a nerd, a nerd with a cat and a tidy little art supply store and a Good-Samaritan complex, but he was a nerd who knew his way around. His fingers zeroed in and rubbed across Matthew's prostate, prodding and pushing until he felt the pressure build straight through his dick.

The only other contact Cole had with Matthew was a hand on his shoulder to keep him steady against the steady fuck and rub of his fingers, and Matthew tried to remind himself that he wasn't looking for anything else. Didn't care if Cole wrapped him in strong arms and held him when their bodies moved together. Cole knew what he was doing and they were both going to get a good time out of it. That was all Matthew wanted.

"Is this what you want from me, Matthew?"

The knot in Matthew's gut twisted tighter. He'd never felt more shame. Not even when his dad kicked him out and he had to start hustling to

The Hustler

live. Not the first time he hit his knees in some filthy alley. Not even when they called him a good little whore.

He swallowed the shame and spit out a lie. "Yes."

Cole slid his slick fingers out slowly, Matthew's ass clamped on him, tight and warm. His jeans shrank a little more and he swallowed the groan, trying to breathe against the lust. It burned his throat, coiled in his balls and made it damn near impossible to concentrate on anything other than the ass in front of him. On any different person, that would have been fucking paradise.

Hell, it was paradise now. But it was paradise with a heavy price attached to it. His ego was clashing hard with his boner. Matthew radiated desire but there was also a dose of expectation and not the good kind. It was in the way Matthew waited so patiently, feet spread. It was in his even breathing.

It was in the condom in Cole's hand and the lube on his fingers. His fingers curled around the foil packet and he realized that as much as he wanted it, as much as his dick was *oh hell yeah...*he couldn't do it. He didn't want to fit into whatever neat little box Matthew had put him in, and half the world, in. He didn't want to do the expected.

Even if the expected looked so nice spread out for him.

"Cole?" Matthew peeked over his shoulder, those pretty eyes turned blue-black with need.

The urge to be unpredictable, different, and important -*damn* - drove him suddenly. "Spread your legs a little more." It was agony to watch him do it, to watch those long bare legs open as far as the jeans would allow. Prick pleading with him, Cole unzipped and worked a hand in, eyes slipping shut as he gave his dick a good, hard stroke

It was all he was gonna get. "Get a little lower? Short guy here."

Matthew escaped his jeans and underwear, ditched his shoes and braced against a lower shelf. The blue-eyed look of impatience tied with want that Matthew threw at him almost made him smile. Then Matthew's gaze dipped south and Cole's dick twitched in his jeans, swelling under the attention.

The smile that followed the look - the lazy curl of lips that was all sex, all need - nearly broke Cole's resolve. Before he could give in, Cole dropped

The Hustler

to the floor. Above him, Matthew was nothing but long blond hair, a dip of strong back and that round, fuckable ass.

Make that round, fuckable, and edible.

Quickly, before Matthew could do more than jump, Cole pulled Matthew's ass cheeks apart and swept his tongue in, following the indent of crack. Matthew's groan shook through them both. Mouth buried in, Cole let his eyes shut as he worked his tongue into Matthew's hole, the hot, intimate taste making him shudder. The goal was to go fast and hard because God knew he wasn't going to last long but the memory...the memory had to.

Cole flicked his tongue over that flexing ring of muscle and worked his still-slick hand around to grab Matthew's dick, squeezing as tight as he dared. Matthew trembled for him, hips rocking back and forth in short bursts, fucking his fist, fucking his face. If there were words, they were lost to grunts as Cole pushed Matthew toward the edge at a ruthless pace.

And Matthew fought him even as he fucked. He could feel in the way Matthew's thighs tensed, trying to hold back before the inevitable snap of his hips. He could feel it in the hand that had grabbed onto Cole's wrist, trying to hold him still. But Cole broke that fragile grasp, refusing to be contained. Mouth slipping free, he bit down on Matthew's ass, hard enough to bruise, as he twisted his fist.

Matthew broke with a cry that filled the room before dying out on what could have been a sob. The smell of hot come wrapped them in the scent of sex. Cole fell back on his ass as Matthew turned to face him. Cole's dick was about to break through his jeans and his knees hurt but the shattered look on Matthew's face made the oncoming jerk off worth it.

Matthew swallowed a few times before choking out, "Why didn't you...?"

Cole climbed to his feet slowly. One wrong move and he was gonna break something. "To show you that you don't know shit about what I want."

Cole went into the tiny bathroom and locked the door. Just telling his dick to calm down wasn't working. He hung onto the sink and took care of himself in a business like fashion ignoring the tentative knocks on the door.

Why did he give a shit about what some random kid thought? What the hell had he been thinking to turn down what had been offered?

The Hustler

His orgasm blotted everything out for a brief, blissful moment, and then his ringing ears picked up Matthew's voice.

"Look. Thanks and all that. But...the rain stopped and I think it's better if I just take off."

Not even bothering to zip up, Cole yanked open the door. "You're not going anywhere--except to my house. To sleep. That's all. We clear?"

Matthew gaped at him before nodding. His cocksure, streetwise veneer had cracked, revealing a touch of vulnerability.

Cole was too tired to go digging, even if he might get an honest answer this time.

Matthew respected the shift in Cole's moods, and they pulled on their still damp shirts in silence. Cole shut off all the lights and set the alarms, pulled down the gate. After opening the back door, he looked at Matthew in the streetlight.

"So everything has a price, right?"

Matthew shrugged.

"Here's mine. You can sleep at my place and take off tomorrow if that's what you really want. No charge. But if you want breakfast, you want to do something besides sleep? Then I want some answers."

Matthew started to say something but Cole held up his hand.

"Right now I don't want to hear anything but the sound of my own snores." Cole jerked his chin at his car. "It's that Dodge, there under the light. " He started for the car without looking back to see if Matthew was following.

The Hustler

Chapter Five

Matthew stood rooted to the spot, an uncomfortable mixture of gratitude and guilt roiling in his gut. Ever since Cole had rescued him, he'd tried to tell himself he didn't care what Cole thought of him. So why the fuck did it take Cole getting pissed off at him for him to realize he *did* care after all?

Cole reached the Dodge, stopped and shot Matthew an impatient look. "You coming, or what?"

Shit. Matthew swallowed. "Yeah, I'm coming."

He crossed to the car on legs that shook all of a sudden. Cole was already buckled behind the wheel and had the car going by the time Matthew slid into the passenger seat.

They rode in silence for what felt like ages. Several times, Matthew started to speak, then thought better of it. The brooding anger coming from Cole in palpable waves defeated him. Besides, what was there to say? Cole had made it pretty clear where Matthew stood with him.

The really confusing part was, Matthew *liked* it. He liked that Cole had refused to fuck him, and he liked even more that Cole had laid down the law and told him that if he wanted anything more than a place to crash for the night, he was going to have to give up some of his closely-held secrets.

The relief Matthew felt at the thought of telling Cole his secrets surprised him.

When they pulled up in front of a small house sheltered by huge oak trees, Matthew laid a hand on Cole's arm. "Okay."

Cole looked at him. "Okay what?"

Matthew took a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay, you'll get your answers."

"Good." Cole smiled, and the sight of it made Matthew's stomach flutter. "In the morning. Come on."

Matthew climbed out of the car and followed Cole up the short walkway to the cottage he evidently called home. A yawn nearly split Matthew's skull in half. After the attack, the scare with the cops and the mind-

The Hustler

blowing orgasm he'd just had, followed by his decision to tell Cole the truth -- or selected parts of it -- he was exhausted.

He'd decide exactly how much to tell Cole after he'd slept for about twelve hours.

He woke up to the smell of coffee. Cole cracked an eye open and immediately snapped it shut again when light stabbed him in the retina. Okay, opening his eyes, not an option. But who the hell was making coffee in his house? Cole wracked his brain, wondering if loneliness had finally sent him running into an anonymous fuck or something when a face formed behind his eyelids.

Blond hair. Blue eyes. Round, tight ass. Oh yeah, he remembered now. Turning his head away from the sunlight, Cole opened his eyes again and climbed out of bed. His foot caught in something and he found his rumpled clothes on the floor. Cole had a second to realize that he was feeling the sun's warmth directly on his skin when his bedroom door, already cracked, nudged all the way open.

"Hey Cole, are you aw...oh." Cole snapped his head up at the sound of Matthew's voice and found the younger man's gaze a good deal south of Cole's face. Lean fingers held Cole's favorite mug in a sudden death grip.

A million thoughts shot through Cole's head accompanied by a million actions. Everything from pulling his clothes on to pulling Matthew on his bed and getting him just as naked as he was...but that couldn't happen. He wanted it, shit, his dick was awake and there was no way to hide it. But with the memory of Matthew came the other memories. So Cole, faking a nonchalance he wasn't even close to really having, walked up to Matthew and gently pried his hot coffee mug from Matthew's fingers.

Wide blue eyes, glazed with hard fought interest, met his. "Cole..." Need wrapped around his name, wrapped around his dick.

Cole took a swallow of coffee and barely felt the burn. "I need a shower." He sipped a little more cautiously this time if only to keep his mouth occupied. Otherwise, he was going to kiss the life out of the pouty mouth right across from him. "And then I think it's time for those answers."

The Hustler

Chapter Six

Matthew watched Cole walk away. Holy shit! He couldn't look away, his gaze glued to the ripple of muscle as every graceful step took him away. And that ass. Its smooth round, fullness called to be caressed and worshiped. Not to mention the hard cock the other side of his body sported.

When the bathroom door shut, Matthew realized his mouth hung open and he'd stopped breathing. Shaking away the stunned response, Cole's words sunk in.

Answers.

He had two options and he knew he had to choose one quickly. He could take off now. There was a bus stop not quite a mile away. He'd made note of passing it last night. This choice had him moving on with his life, wherever it may lead him, despite the screwed up happenings the past couple of days. Living a lonely and often dangerous life hustling for money or whatever he could get, because going back to his aunt and uncle was completely out of the question. Of course, taking that route also had him never seeing Cole again or exploring these outlandish emotions the man brought forth.

His other choice was to stay and answer whatever questions Cole asked. Not a pleasant thought, which made leaving very tempting. So what was holding him here?

The kiss.

Matthew knew it but wasn't quite ready to fully admit it just yet. Remembering how it felt to have Cole's tongue devouring his mouth with the promise of much more was more than Matthew's poor deprived mind could accept. He still shook with the need for more when he thought of how unselfish Cole had been to him in the store, giving him pleasure, yet not taking any for himself. Were there really men that noble in the world? Or was Cole one of a kind?

Apparently, Matthew took too long to make his decision when the bathroom door opened and Cole stepped out, towel wrapped around his waist and drops of water falling from his hair to slide down that gloriously muscled chest. His fingers flexed as he held back the urge to reach out and trail the water's path as it traveled down over lickable abs.

The Hustler

"Still here I see." Cole's lips twitched as if he was trying to suppress a smile.

Matthew swallowed hard, stalling for time, trying to clear the unexpected knot from his vocal chords. When he did, the result wasn't anything he'd expected to say. "How does a guy who runs an art supply store get such ripped abs?"

Cole laughed and Matthew could feel his cheeks flushing. What the fuck? He didn't blush! He'd given that up at the age of eight when getting caught kissing his best friend—his male best friend—behind the swing set on the school playground hadn't brought even a hint of embarrassment. Fortunately, the teaching assistant who'd caught them had shrugged it off as innocent curiosity and never told his aunt and uncle. A rare stroke of luck in Matthew's life.

"I don't know if you've heard," Cole said, his laughter calmed to a small chuckle, "but they have these places called gyms. Anyone can join. It's amazing."

Matthew tried to pass off his blunder with his old blustering front. Even to his own ears, it fell flat. A lame imitation of his street-savvy persona. "Didn't take you for a gym kind of guy."

This time Cole's mirth was nowhere evident. "You've made a lot of mistaken assumptions about me." He headed back towards his bedroom, and Matthew was sorry to think he'd be covering up those muscles with clothing. Although he was willing to bet Cole would look just as hot in jeans and a tight, white t-shirt. Sure it was cliché, but there was a reason the image endured.

"You want some more coffee?" Matthew asked before Cole disappeared behind his door.

Cole shot him a quirk of a smile that Matthew couldn't read. Damn it! What was it about Cole that sent to shit all his well-honed skills at reading people?

"My mug's on the bathroom counter. Thanks."

Wondering exactly when he'd been domesticated -- and why he liked it so fucking much -- Matthew retrieved the mug and returned with it to the kitchen. He refilled it, poured himself a coffee, and sat at the table to drink it. The kitchen was like something out of one of those home magazines his aunt always had scattered on the coffee table. The sunshine pouring through the window in the little dining nook turned

The Hustler

the creamy walls a cheerful yellow and reflected brightly off the stainless steel appliances. The wall over the sink and behind the range were inlaid with painted tiles. The trim around the top of the walls was painted dark blue. It was a bachelor's kitchen, all right, but a clean and cozy one. Matthew imagined what it would be like to watch Cole cooking. Matthew would lean a shoulder against the fridge and Cole would be at the stove, stirring pots of pasta sauce or something, and they'd talk about their days like people did on TV shows. A smile curved the corner of his mouth, and then his lips turned down just as suddenly. Domestic bliss was not Matthew's strong suit. And once he'd given up those answers Cole had asked for, there wasn't much chance Cole would let him finish his coffee, let alone stay for dinner.

"You find some breakfast?"

Cole's voice in the doorway snapped Matthew from his thoughts. The t-shirt he wore was blue, not white, but the jeans were as tight as Matthew had hoped. He hid his interest behind his coffee mug. "Didn't look."

"No? If it were me, I'd've been snooping all through the cupboards. I'm starving." Cole picked up his coffee and with his free hand opened a cabinet. "Cereal okay? Or there's bread if you want toast."

Matthew's guts twisted. The friendly chatter, the host and guest routine they were playing... It was all a sham and he was disgusted with both himself and Cole for perpetuating it. "Quit it."

"Quit what?"

"I'm not stupid. You're jerking me around. You want answers? I'll tell you. But don't act like we're all buddy-buddy and shit."

Cole turned to him and leaned one hip against the counter, his quest for food abandoned. His expression was cool. "You're still all about mistaken assumptions. But okay. Talk."

"What do you want to hear? That I've been selling my ass on the streets since I was sixteen?"

The Hustler

Chapter Seven

Cole knew Matthew was trying to provoke him, probably into tossing him out and validating Matthew's twisted view of humanity. Cole had steeled himself for hearing something like that, but the rush of anger—not at Matthew—but at whoever had forced him to that was still surprising. In as mild a tone as he could manage, Cole said, "You could start with tonight. Do you know why those kids came after you?"

Matthew shook his head, but Cole just waited. Finally Matthew shrugged. "I thought Tyler might have sent them."

"Who's Tyler?"

"I thought he was my boyfriend." Matthew gave a hollow laugh. "You'd think I'd have learned something. Turns out I was just his whore. He said he'd give me money if I just disappeared and didn't tell anyone. He was supposed to meet me."

"This Tyler have a last name?"

Matthew fixed Cole with a steady gaze as if daring him to doubt what he was going to say. "Bronson."

"Holy shit." Cole thought he'd been ready for anything. Bronson. You couldn't live in this town and not know that name. Hell of a family to cross. Money, yeah. But Tyler's uncle was a U.S Senator and his father—Oh shit.

"I'm guessing that you mean the Tyler Bronson whose dad is the head of PureLife Ministries. The one with the conversion camps for gays."

"Bingo." But Matthew's voice was shaky and he couldn't hold the smile.

Cole's mind raced ahead and made a few assumptions of his own. "Is it possible your *boyfriend* hired those thugs to whale on you?"

"Anything's possible. He said he wanted me gone." Matthew lowered his head, his hands toying with the coffee cup. "Maybe he just decided paying me off was too much trouble."

"I'm sorry I asked." The kid had been through hell; yet here Cole was trying to make Matthew feel even worse. It wasn't as if he wanted to point out the obvious, but he couldn't help Matthew if he was too busy walking around on eggshells.

The Hustler

“It’s all right. You didn’t bring up anything I hadn’t already thought myself.” Matthew shrugged, still gazing into the cup. “At least now you can see why I need to leave town.”

“Not necessarily.”

Matthew finally looked up, his gaze optimistic but wary. “What do you mean?”

Cole took a sip of his coffee. Although his mind spun with the implications of what he was about to suggest, he couldn’t think of a better idea. “You could stay here. With me.”

“No.” Matthew’s eyes widened. He set his cup down with a solid thump that sloshed black liquid over the rim. “I don’t want to get you involved. Tyler will only send someone else after me.”

Ignoring the mess, Cole slipped out of his chair and knelt in front of Matthew. He gripped Matthew thighs and stared up at the young man, praying he would pay attention to reason. “Listen to me, the Bronson’s might own half the town, but they don’t own everyone in it. You don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want. If you want to stay, I can give you a job and a place to stay. You won’t need to turn tricks anymore.”

Matthew shook his head. “Why would you do that? You don’t even know me.”

“I’d like to.” Cole leaned up and pressed a soft kiss over Matthew’s slack lips. “I know you probably won’t believe me when I say, but I like you. I want to help.”

“You don’t have to tell me pretty lies, Cole. I know I’m a fuck up. More importantly, I’m not too proud to take you up on your offer. However, let’s keep the bullshit to a minimum. I’m not stupid enough to believe you’d keep me around for my sparkling wit. I’ll bend over for you right here, right now. You don’t have to pretend you see me as anything more than a whore.”

Matthew’s comment made Cole’s blood boil – and not the good, desire-type of boil. Cole was pissed. The guy was a stubborn, jello for brains fool. Could he not see that the world had some good people? That just because he’d run across some pricks...okay, a lot of pricks if he was involved with the Bronsons’...but not everyone is in the same mind set.

Cole moved in on Matthew until his back was against the nearest wall. It

The Hustler

didn't matter that Matthew was a half foot taller than he. Cole knew he had more brawn and could take him easily. He stared up into Matthew's blue eyes, not missing the flicker of fear.

Good. Real fear just might do him good. But then, the purpose of this wasn't to instill fear. He just wanted Matthew's complete attention so he'd see the anger and hear the seriousness of his words.

"Cut the bullshit, Matthew. If I was just after a piece of ass, I'd have taken it, quite often the way you offer yourself, and then sent you packing, just like Bronson. I don't know your situation because every time I try, you clam up or get defensive. Yeah, I'm curious as hell as to why a gorgeous guy like you needs to sell yourself on the street, but you need to get a grip."

Cole slammed his hands on the wall next to Matthew's head, making him jump. "All I've wanted to do was help you. I'm not asking for sex or a live in pleasure slave. If you see yourself as a whore, that's fine. I don't."

Some of the anger cooled and he broke eye contact to hang his head and let out a long breath. "I see a lost and confused soul who distrusts everyone." He pushed off the wall and turned away. "The offer stands. It's up to you. My studio has a couch with a fold-out bed. You can stay in there until you decide your next step."

Cole left the kitchen without looking back.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit! Matthew's heart raced in that sickening way that told you you were about five breaths away from falling over. He dragged in a deep breath and felt himself calm enough to pull his wits together. That had been...intense. Cole had surprised him yet again in yet another way. Was he for real? Matthew'd never thought of himself as an optimist, but he couldn't deny the tiny spark of hope that warmed his belly.

Ruthlessly, he tried to smother it. No one was that nice. There were no knights in shining armor. Everyone had ulterior motives. He just had to figure out what Cole's were. If wasn't easy sex, it was something else. Maybe Cole wanted something kinkier than what Matthew had offered so far. Or maybe he didn't want it to be so easy; maybe he wanted Matthew to make him work for it. He could handle that. He'd turned some pretty twisted tricks in his life. He could do this, figure out what Cole wanted and give it to him. Unless... Unless Cole really didn't want anything from Matthew.

The Hustler

Damn it, there was that hope thing again.

Did he really dare to take that chance? Matthew hands trembled at the possibility. He clutched them into fists. He took a shaky breath and released them, reaching out for his coffee simply for something to do, something to focus on besides his confusion. The mug had gone cold. He set it back down and was glad to see that at least his trembling had stopped. On the outside. Inside, he was a mess. He wanted to believe Cole's offer was honest. Wanted to believe there really were no strings. He almost had himself convinced when an image of Tyler suddenly flashed in his mind's eye. Matthew had thought that relationship had been honest and look where that trust had gotten him.

How could it have been honest when they'd had to sneak around and lie to Tyler's folks?

Huh. First hope and now logic. You'd think he'd been watching daytime TV. Oprah would have a field day with his fucked up life. And yet...

Even through the bitter taste of his cynicism, there was that sweet hint of hope. Matthew still didn't believe in fairy tale heroes, but Cole had saved his ass twice already--once from the guys who attacked him, once from the cops who'd shown up at the door of the art shop--and he'd repeatedly refused compensation. Maybe, just maybe, it was safe to hope this time. At least a little bit.

He rose from the table and went to find Cole.

The Hustler

Chapter Eight

Cole stood in front of the window in his bedroom. Matthew knew Cole had to have heard him, but he didn't turn around. Not even when Matthew spoke.

"You're right."

Cole still didn't move. "I'm always happy to hear that. What about?"

"I—" *I'm scared.* Matthew tried again. "Look, it's hard to know who to trust, okay? Things are pretty fucked up right now. I'm sorry that I pissed you off. You really have been a nice guy."

"I didn't ask you to apologize. Or for a compliment."

"I know." Matthew really had blown it this time. The one person who actually gave a damn—at least for a few hours, anyway—and Matthew had made the guy so mad he wouldn't even look at him. He took a breath and let it out, hands fists in his jean pockets. Should he just go? Back out into the rain with no money and bruised ribs and—

Cole turned to look at him. The guy really was cute. A little short, but still strong. Matthew's palms itched to feel Cole's biceps shift under his grip. He wanted....they didn't even have to fuck. It would be nice just to have someone like Cole next to him, someone warm, someone who gave a shit if Matthew was there in the morning.

He couldn't figure out how to ask for it, though, couldn't see how they could end up like he wanted, wrapped around each other in that big bed if they didn't get there fucking. And he wasn't going to offer that again until he was sure Cole would take him up on it.

"So does the fact that you're still standing there mean you're staying?" Cole came toward him.

"Yeah. If that's still all right."

Cole smiled, stepping closer. Matthew took his hands out of his pockets. Maybe this could go the way he was hoping. *Cole would grab his wrist and pull him onto the bed and...*

Cole moved past him, opening the closet and pulling out a blanket. "I'm going to take a nap before I go in and open the store. The studio is upstairs, first door. Look all you want but don't touch." The sparkle in

The Hustler

Cole's eyes seemed to tell Matthew he knew just how much Matthew wanted to touch.

The cottage wasn't that big, but even if it was as big as Matthew's aunt and uncle's house, Matthew thought they'd still have heard the banging on the door.

Matthew froze. He doubted Cole had many people trying to beat down his door at six-thirty in the morning.

"Open the goddamned door, Matt. You think I couldn't find you?"

Cole looked at Matthew. The boy had gone dead white. "Matthew? Who's trying to knock down my door?"

Matthew swallowed. "Tyler."

"Your boyfried? The one who stood you up?" Cole tried to keep the anger out of his voice, but he wasn't sure how well he did.

Matthew chewed his lower lip. "Um. Well. Not just my boyfriend."

Something cold and unpleasant curled in the pit of Cole's stomach. Ignoring the continued noise from downstairs, he crossed his arms and eyed Matthew with as much calm as he could. "What else is he, Matthew?"

The boy closed his eyes. "He's my pimp."

Well. You wanted the truth. Cole nodded. Before he could say anything, Matthew spoke again.

"It all started out really good, you know? He was nice to me. I thought he was for real." Matthew let out a bitter laugh. "Then he found out I'd hustled and... done other things for my aunt and uncle. He was in debt up to his eyeballs for drugs, and he threatened to turn me in to the cops if I didn't turn tricks for him and give him the money."

"And tonight? Why were you meeting him tonight?" Cole marveled to hear his voice sounding so calm, when he wanted nothing more than to storm down the stairs and punch Tyler's face in.

Matthew sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "He's out of debt now. He was supposed to give me my cut of the money. I told him I'd leave

The Hustler

town and never tell anyone what he'd done if he'd just leave me alone and let me start over."

"And you believed him?"

The glare Cole got could've killed at fifty paces. "What fucking choice did I have?"

"Point." A particularly vicious bang rattled Cole's front door, followed by another demand for Matthew to get his skinny ass downstairs pronto. Cole growled. "Okay. I'm going to deal with this asshole. You can stay up here if you want."

"No way. He's my problem. I'm coming with you."

Cole studied Matthew's face. He was still pale, but his jaw had a determined set to it, and his eyes burned.

Smiling, Cole took Matthew's hand. "Come on."

They descended the stairs together. Cole threw the front door open. A tall young man with short black hair, brown eyes and olive skin stood on the other side, scowling. His gaze zeroed in on Matthew. "There you are, goddammit. C'mere." He lunged for Matthew.

Cole blocked him with a hand to his chest. He shoved the man backward. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Tyler gaped at him. "Getting my boy back, not that it's any of your business, old man. Get out of my way."

Shaking his head, Cole blocked another lunge. "Tyler, is it? You're trespassing on my property. Get out, before I call the cops."

Tyler's cheeks went bright red. "Fine. Matt, come on."

Matthew drew himself up tall. "No."

"What the fuck you mean, 'no'?" Striking like a snake, Tyler grabbed Matthew's wrist and yanked him forward. "Get over here."

The sight of Matthew stumbling forward, his slender wrist clamped in Tyler's cruel grip, made Cole see red. Before he could think too hard about what he was doing, he grabbed Tyler's wrist and twisted until Tyler let go of Matthew with a pained cry. Pushing Matthew behind him, Cole faced Tyler with a scowl. "I told you to get the fuck out of here. Now go

The Hustler

away, and if I catch you bothering Matthew again I'll have you arrested."

Tyler laughed. "Oh, that's something, Matt. Found yourself a sugar daddy, did you?"

Matthew winced. Furious, Cole stalked toward Tyler, forcing him backward down the steps. "Don't you fucking dare call me that, asshole. I'll have you know that Matthew is working for me as an assistant at my shop." *He is? Yes, he is. If he wants to.* "Now. Go. Away."

Snorting, Tyler turned and swaggered off. "Fine. Little bitch isn't even worth it."

Cole waited until he'd climbed into his car and sped off, then walked back to the house.

Matthew stood stock still in the open door, staring at Cole with wide eyes and a blank expression.

Cole swallowed. He hoped he hadn't just gotten himself into deep trouble.

"Oh my God." Matthew backed into the wall nearest the door. A hysterical burst of laughter spilling from his trembling lips as he slid down the wall.

Cole crouched in front of Matthew and rested his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Hey, it's going to be all right. I meant what I said; you're welcome to stay here with me and work at the store. You don't need Tyler."

Matthew blinked up at Cole, a tiny frown between his wide, blue eyes. "I know that. And I appreciate the offer. I do. I just... Jesus, that was anticlimactic. I always half believed Tyler would rather kill me than let me go, no matter what he said to the contrary, and then all it took to get him to back off was you twisting his arm." Matthew shook his head. "Fuck, I'm an idiot."

"You're not an idiot." Cole inched closer and wrapped his arms around Matthew, trying to absorb some of the stress shaking his slim frame. "You were just a guy trapped in a bad situation, but it's over now."

"Thank fuck for that." Matthew's arms snaked around Cole's waist, holding on. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you for everything you've done, but..."

The Hustler

Tension surged through Cole. He released Matthew and eased out of the younger man's embrace, ignoring the hurt and confused expression on Matthew's face. Before they could move forward, whether it was as friends or lover, they needed to get a few things straight, starting with Matthew's need to keep offering his ass to Cole. "You don't owe me anything. You don't have to keep trying to whore yourself out in order to repay me for something anyone with a single shred of morality would have happily done for free. I'm not like the other men you've been hanging around."

Matthew snorted. "Spare me the holier than thou routine. I wasn't trying to get you to fuck me again." He climbed to his feet, looking down at Cole.

Cole followed suite, although he kept his distance. "I'm sorry. I just assumed—"

"You assumed I would be foolish enough to offer you something you clearly have no interest in. I know I'm used goods. That doesn't mean you have to get off on rejecting me, time and again. I'm not too proud to take you up on your offer of a job and a place to stay, at least while I'm getting back on my feet, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I make another pass at you."

Cole and Matthew stared each other down. Matthew's face was a masterwork of mixed emotions--anger at Cole, hurt at yet another rejection, fear of possible retaliation from Tyler--or worse, from Tyler's scary-conservative parents. And now Cole had treated him no better than a hustler who was still pimping himself out for his rat bastard of an ex. *Way to go, dipshit*, Cole thought in self-disgust. Matthew had a penchant for mistaken assumptions, and a chip on his shoulder the size of Denali, but that didn't mean this particular misunderstanding was his fault.

Cole sighed. "Fine. So you're not the only one here who can leap to the wrong conclusions. I fucked up and I'm sorry. In fact..." Cole's mouth went suddenly dry. A good thing since it was about to run ahead of his brain. Did he really want to let that happen? ... Fuck it. "Fact is, I find you sexy as hell. You've got a mouth that I would give my left nut have on me again." Matthew gaped at him in obvious shock at the sudden change in tone, but Cole didn't stop. He was in it now and damned if he wasn't going to finish it. "Okay, maybe not that, but damn! If circumstances were different, I'd do you in a heartbeat. I'm not holier than thou or any one else. Far from it. I'm just a guy. A single, lonely guy who could use your help at my store and if, over time, that grows into something more, well, let's just say I wouldn't slam the door on the

The Hustler

possibility. You can be a total asshole when you want to be, but so can I. Obviously, since that was a pretty crappy thing to say. But maybe we can start over. Sort of. Back things up. I don't mean forget all the stuff that's happened, but maybe...set it aside?" He let out a growl of frustration. Fuck! He was a painter, not a poet! How the hell did people have these conversations without it turning into complete gibberish?

To his astonishment, Matthew smiled at him. Not a sly or seductive smile. Not an ironic smile. Not a bitter smile that implied its own opposite. A genuine, amused smile.

Cole returned it uncertainly. "What?"

Matthew shook his head and chuckled. "You're a total fucking dork. You know that, right?"

"Oh yeah." Cole nodded. "Never a doubt of that."

"You're like something out of a dumb fairy tale. The White Knight and His Weird Cat, Mathesar."

"Balthazar."

Matthew snorted a laugh and rolled his eyes at the correction. "Right. Balthazar."

All the fire and fight seemed to have drained out of him. Fortunately, it seemed to Cole that so had the fear. "Listen. If Tyler comes back, I can handle him. *We* can handle him. Together."

"And if his folks come after you and your store?" Clearly Matthew was still playing a defensive game. Problems like Tyler might go away physically, but the mental and emotional damage was done. It would take time for Matthew to get past the destructive relationship.

That was okay. Cole could wait. "I don't think it'll come to that. But if it does," he went on before Matthew could protest, "we'll handle that, too. So. What do you say? You've got a job and a place to stay for as long as you need to get back on your feet. All you have to do is say yes."

The silence stretched out until Cole thought he'd go crazy, but he managed to maintain his composure and his sanity until at long last Matthew spoke.

"Hi. I'm Matthew." He put out his hand, which Cole shook before his brain could register what was going on. "I hear you've got a job opening

The Hustler

at your art supply store, and maybe a room for rent."

"Wha-?" Then it clicked. Cole's own words echoed in his head. *Start over. Back things up.* He smiled. "I'm Cole. Do you know anything about art supplies, Matthew?"

Matthew shook his head once. "Not a thing."

Cole grinned. "You're hired."

The Hustler

About the Authors

What's better than one hot man? Two. Come and chat with the authors M/M romance. You never know what kind of goodies we may have in store for you.

<http://www.slash-and-burn.blogspot.com/>

Ally Blue

<http://www.allyblue.com/>

Married nearly twenty years, two entirely fabulous children, one entirely fabulous (in a manly way) husband. Been an RN for the last eighteen years. I am originally from the Alabama Gulf Coast, but have lived in the lovely Western North Carolina mountains for over twenty years now, and I love it.

Like so many other female slash writers, I started out by writing fan fiction. Not telling who it involved, as it was real people rather than fictional characters (bad, bad Ally...). I quickly graduated to original character fiction, and discovered that I liked that even better. It's the hot boy-on-boy action that flips my switch, though, so that's what I still write, for the most part.

My first short story was published in the ezine Forbidden Fruit (go to the links page and check it out!). I have since become a regular contributor to Forbidden Fruit, and have also had short stories published in the erotic ezine Ruthie's Club, as well as a story in the Torquere Press ezine Fresh Off The Vine. My books are available through Loose Id and Samhain Publishing. Check out the "books" link in the menu above for cover art, blurbs, excerpts and purchase info on all my currently available and Coming Soon works.

Amanda Young

<http://www.amandayoung.org/>

The Hustler

Amanda Young is a multi-published, erotic romance author. Since she tends to write whatever strikes her whimsy, all of her novels fall into various subgenres. Among her many available titles you'll find contemporary and paranormal settings, gay and straight themes alike. You never know what merry adventure her evil muse will devise next.

James Buchanan

<http://www.james-buchanan.com/>

Hola, I'm James Buchanan, a multipublished author of, primarily, homoerotic romance & fiction. Life wise, I grew up in a small Texas town, hours away from any other small Texas town and about as far west as you could go and still be considered in Texas. A stint at the University, where I ostensibly majored in English, garnered me a degree useful for being someone's secretary. The absolute lack of employment opportunities sent me to Southern California. After a stint in County Mental Health (administration not client) I ran screaming into the field of Law. So far I have been practicing for more than a decade and someday I might even get it right.

Currently I volunteer as the Obelisk Awards Coordinator, List Dom and MySpace WebMaster for the Erotic Authors Association. I also edit the newsletter for the ManLoveRomance Author Co-op. My novella *Twice the Cowboy* won both the Preditors & Editors Best Romance Novella of 2006 and the Golden Rose 2007 award for Best Novella.

KA Mitchell

www.kamitchell.com

K.A. Mitchell discovered the magic of writing at an early age when she learned that a carefully crayoned note of apology sent to the kitchen in a toy truck would earn her a reprieve from banishment to her room. Her career as a spin control artist was cut short when her family moved to a two-story house, and her trucks would not roll safely down the stairs. Around the same time, she decided that Chip and Ken made a much cuter couple than Ken and Barbie and was perplexed when invitations to play Barbie dropped off. An unnamed number of years later, she's happy to find other readers and writers who like to play in her world.

The Hustler

Maia Strong

<http://www.maiastrong.com>

Writing, acting, bellydancing, and teaching people to talk in funny voices. Who knew you could make a living doing stuff like that? I didn't, and in fact I can't. Those are the things I do to feed my soul rather than my stomach.

I've always written, but I never expected to write romance. I have documented evidence of a seafaring play I wrote in the second grade. Something involving a giant duck, if memory serves; I'm too scared to dig it out of the binder and find out for sure. Since that rather inauspicious beginning, I've turned my hand to fantasy, science fiction, action adventure (with dinosaurs, oo!), and now "red hot" romance--with fantasy in it because that is my first genre love. It's inescapable when the first time you read *The Lord of the Rings* is in the fourth grade. (I read Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy the next year, but I didn't get it. I have yet to try reading it again lo these many years later.)

Marty Rayne

<http://www.martyrayne.com/>

Books have been my first love since I can remember. I grew up getting lost in new and exciting worlds. The characters becoming my friends or enemies, even if for the duration of the books. Writing came next off and on through the years, but I never really took it seriously or thought of making it a career until a few years ago as I got sucked into the world of the internet. With the encouragement and help of a wonderful friend, I finally ventured into the field of writing.

I am a licensed massage therapist and have recently completed my study with the LongRidge Writing School. I'm also a wife to a wonderful and supporting husband (my very own knight in shining armor), a mother of four boys (the youngest a set of twins), and a grandmother.

I live in Florida and love spending time taking long walks on the beach with my husband and learning Karate with my children.

Maura Anderson

The Hustler

<http://www.realmsoftheraven.com/>

Maura Anderson is the author of both heterosexual and gay romances and loves to create worlds that draw her readers into the lives of her characters. A lifelong reader, she only began to write fiction in 2007 but has ideas that may keep her busy for years to come. In addition to writing, she's also an editor for several epublishers. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, young son, a herd of cats and a parrot and loves to talk to readers and authors alike. Heck, she just loves to talk.

Tory Temple

<http://www.torytemple.com/>

Tory lives and works in southern California, where she spends a lot of time around firemen. She visits the beach frequently and wears flip flops even in the winter. Tory likes television, salted pistachios in the shell, and chenille socks. She dislikes cauliflower, not being able to find the right shoes in the morning, and not having enough free time. She shares her space with numerous pets, including but not limited to cats, dogs, and tortoises.

Zoe Nichols

<http://www.zoe-nichols.com/>

Zoe Nichols is a writer of manlove and homoerotica. That's the current life. Background wise? At some point in time, she realized that she liked writing. That's when she discovered romance and the almighty happily-ever-after ending. Then she discovered alternative lifestyles and the much more entertaining happy-for-now ending.

Zoe now writes gay and lesbian erotic fiction, and those boys and girls are happy as can be when she gives them what they want. She graduated high school, dodged college, moved out to Vegas, discovered that rent, bills and tourists do *not* mix and moved back to California. Now, Zoe is reconsidering the call of higher education while she writes happily for hours on end and pretends that the Day Job doesn't exist (at least until pay day).