

Author



**Rebecca E. Grant**

*Love is Unstoppable*

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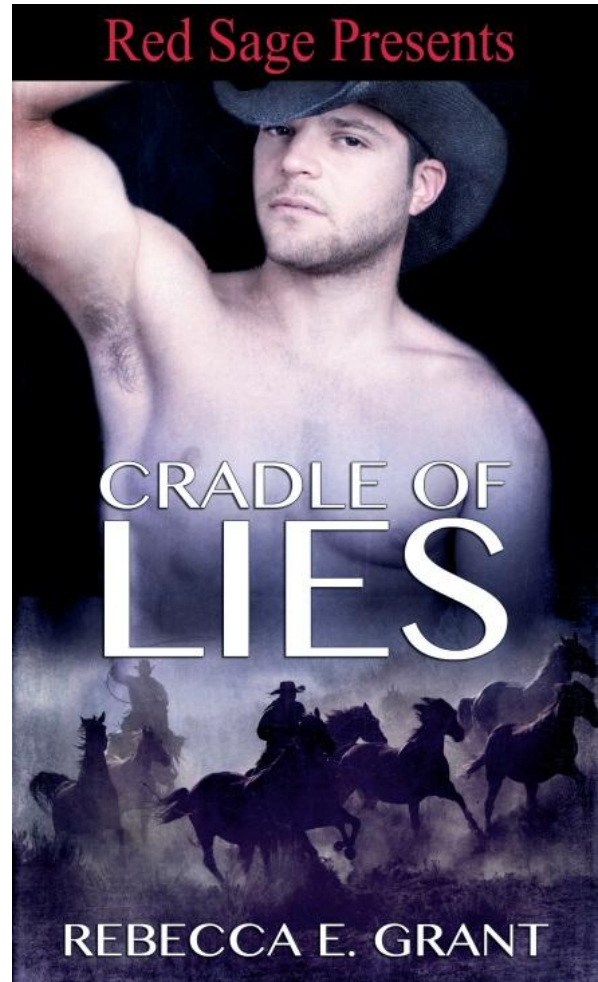
**Forced to spend the first sixteen years of his life witnessing some of the most epic murders ever committed, what kind of a life can Cord hope for?**

When Cord Archer first meets Mattie Rayne, her incandescent smile heats him like the summer sun, bleaching him clean. Nothing else matters except making her his. Before he can do that, his conscience compels him to explain why he entered an institution at age sixteen and spent five years learning to read, write and function in mainstream society.

Upon learning that Cord is the son of a notorious psychopathic serial-killer, Mattie realizes what a monumental effort it took for him to survive, much less make it all the way back from crazy. Knowing this only makes her love him more.

Just when it would seem Cord is finally about to know love, two phenomenally staggering events irrevocably change the course of his life. First, a sociopath becomes fixated on him. Next, his daddy escapes from prison with the sole intent of tracking him down.

**Now, anyone in Cord's life is at risk because the only thing deadlier than a psychopath is the random unpredictability of a sociopath. God help the man who has to contend with both.**



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**CRADLE OF LIES Excerpt follows**



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# *Cradle of Lies*

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By Rebecca E. Grant



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#### TO MY READERS:

When I first sat down to write this story, I intended it to be all about the glorious west. The immense Montana sky. The courageous, driving predilection the American cowboy has for the open-range. Yet, what came out was a gritty, teeth-clenching, dark story about a man who was so abused for the first sixteen years of his life, I almost stopped writing... until I realized this story epitomizes the unstoppable nature of love, and underscores our phenomenally remarkable ability as human beings to overcome any obstacle.

#### READER ALERT!

At eighteen, Mattie Rayne has no idea what it means to be sexually and sensually fulfilled... until she meets Cord Archer. While she's an innocent, her body responds to Cord with an ancient cellular wisdom. Now, no one but Cord can satisfy her.



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## *Introduction*

The only thing deadlier than a psychopath is the random unpredictability of a sociopath. God help the man who has to contend with both.

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### *Five Years Earlier, rural Southwestern Montana*

Cord's guts bled fear. He hoped to God the bolt in that old barn all would hold as Archer wrenched at the rusted shackles around his wrists like a savage. "If you go through with this, you better hope they pull the lever this time, boy," the older man snarled. "Last time you tried to turn me in, I got off on a technicality. You remember what happened after that? How I tracked you down?"

Panic spiraled as Archer's threats wedged themselves in Cord's ears. He struggled to loosen the rope around one of the girls' wrists. The girl cowered and kicked out, sending straw dust up his nostrils.

"See that, boy? She's almost as afraid of you as she is of me. Know why? 'Cause she sees your old man in you. That's right, boy. She looks into your eyes, and there I am." Archer cocked his head. Why, right now you'd like to take her, wouldn't you? Sweet thing like her." Archer grinned. "There might be hope for you yet. Now you just come over here and let me outta these things, and we'll forget all about it. After all, it's natural for a boy to exercise a little independence."

Cord eyed the bolt and blinked hard. It would only hold so long.

Archer's face twisted as he rattled his chains. "I'm warnin' you, boy. You let me out now or I'll do to you what I do to them when I get free—'cause you know I'll get free. You know there ain't nuthin'—no bolt, no iron cuffs, no prison what can hold me." Archer's guttural threats flattened to a deadly purr, "Yeah, you know."

The girl whimpered, too afraid to cry out.

Archer pressed his advantage, his eyes gleaming. "You ain't thought this through, boy. I drove that bolt holding these here cuffs into this old wall. You think I don't know what it can take and what it can't?"

Cord gave up trying to untie the rope and reached for Archer's knife. The girl kicked harder. Cord cuffed her on the jaw just enough to stun her and muttered, "Sorry. If you don't hold still, I can't work



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the ropes. They shrink when he gets ‘em wet. Now hold still or I might cut you by accident.” He couldn’t stand to look into the girl’s eyes and see the fear and revulsion he’d seen so many times on so many girls’ faces.

Archer sniggered. “That’s right, boy—you settle her down just like I taught you. See how much like me you are?”

Cord whirled. “Maybe I’m like you and maybe I ain’t, old man. I guess I won’t know ‘til I put enough miles between us so I’ll never have to look at you again. But you’re dead wrong about one thing. I’ve thought about this every day of my life—ever since you snatched the first one and made me watch.”

Archer hissed, “So you got a plan.” He twisted viciously. Metal whined against wood, but the bolt held. “There ain’t enough miles to put between us that I won’t find you—just like last time. So you better hope they kill me. And then you better hope to sweet Jesus there ain’t such a thing as the afterlife, because if they get me, just like Lazarus rising from the dead, I won’t rest until I’ve come back for you.”

Cord sliced through the twelve-hundred pound rope. The girl sprang away before he could loosen her gag. He bent over the next girl. “You the one drives that green van with the phone in it?”

Wild eyes blinked back at him, slow to nod.

“When I get you free, you gotta call the cops, but you can’t leave. You gotta stick around and tell them about him.” Cord jerked his thumb toward Archer.

Archer jeered, “Dumbass needs a girl to work the car phone. Dumbass don’t know his numbers.”

Cord stared hard into the girl’s frightened eyes, fighting against the urge to shake her. “You hear me?”

The girl’s gaze slid toward Archer.

“Don’t listen to nuthin’ he says—don’t even look at him. Your van’s out back. You got to call the cops. You got to call them now. You hear?”

She nodded again, but skittered away from him the moment he sliced the gag from her mouth, and flattened herself against the barn wall.

Fighting back his desperation, Cord said, “Look, I know you’re scared, but I ain’t the one that hurt you.”



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She hugged the rough wall, ducking the weak shafts of sun that found their way through the rotted wood. Still, he could see her crying silent tears. He hoped to get them all out of there before the sun dropped behind the mountains and left them in a curtain of dark.

Cord ran both hands through his hair. “Okay, look. I’m gonna flip you the keys. You gotta make that call. I can’t save all those girls down there on my own, and sooner or later that old bolt’s gonna give.” He tossed her the keys. They thudded against the dirt floor. She made no move to pick them up.

“Look here, if you don’t make the call, no one’s ever gonna come and help any of them.” He pointed to the cellar below. “I’m gonna turn my back, see?” He revolved his body. “So I can’t see you. Just pick up the keys, go out that door there, and make the call. Hurry up now or we’re all done for.”

Cord turned his back. The sound of girls crying through gags rose from the dirt cellar below. Cord wanted to free them all, but he didn’t dare. If he did, they’d scatter like wind, and who knows what they’d tell the cops, if anything. No, the cops had to find the barn—had to find the girls in the barn. Most of all, they had to find Dan Archer, or Cord’s life wouldn’t be worth spit.

Archer purred, “Hear those lovely bleats? Makes my dick hard every time one of ‘em opens her mouth. Makes you hard too, doesn’t it, boy, ‘cause you’re just like me. Taught you everything I know. Quick learner like you caught on real fast. Know why?” Archer’s depraved grin split his face. “Yeah, you know why. Just remember, boy... they get me, they get you too. You done everything I done. You’ll burn right alongside me.” His dark eyes blinked a death threat.

Cord fought the urge to glance over at the girl but kept his gaze trained on Archer. A moment later, he heard the scrabble of her steps and the jingle of keys. He called after her, “Tell ‘em we’re at the old Blackwell ranch.” It would be a miracle if she didn’t just drive away.

The van door slammed. Archer jeered, “She’s long gone. You’ll never see that little rabbit again.”

Relief surged when the girl called out, “They want directions. What city are we near? Or Town? Are we still in Montana?”

Cord’s gaze slid to Archer, whose maniacal laugh almost made Cord piss his pants. “Sorry sister, he can’t help you. Quick as he sometimes is, Dumbass here lives in a hole. He’s got no idea where on God’s green earth he is. You can bet I seen to that.”

Cord brought the butt of Archer’s knife down hard against the back of Archer’s head. The older man slumped but didn’t fall. He kicked Archer’s feet out from under him, secured his hands and feet with duct tape and leaned over him. “Well now, which is it? Am I a dumbass or am I quick? Because it seems to me I can’t be both.”



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He sliced through the tape and slapped a piece across Archer's mouth, and then slapped another one for good measure. "Never mind. I guess I don't never need to hear any more shit from you."

## **Chapter One**

### *Five Years Later Eagle T near Cradle, MT*

Too late. Cord cursed silently. He shivered, but it had nothing to do with the cool June air. No time to hightail it out of there. He intentionally targeted Tanner's ranch, since it was probably the best chance he had of finding work. He ground his heel. Should have chosen one of Tanner's outer buildings, but this one gave him a better chance of getting his hands on some fast chow. Cord's stomach churned at the thought of food.

The blonde girl found him first. He figured her to be about his age, maybe a little older. He waited, clenching his fingers, certain she'd call for her old man, but her eyes narrowed, and her face turned sly as she crossed her arms. "Say, cowboy. You're taking an awful chance that my daddy'll find you."

He reached for his shirt and Stetson, but she snatched them out of his hands, set them on a hay bale and leaned forward to pull stray hay out of his hair. She smelled clean. Exotic. Rich. It mingled with the barn dust and hay. He scowled. She laughed and reached for his backpack. He caught her wrist, careful not to hurt her.

Her eyes widened. "Really? You care about that old thing? What've you got in there, anyway?" She tried to grab it with her other hand but only managed to tip it over. The contents spilled across the scarred, hay-strewn floorboards.

Cord pinned her against the wall, the flat of his arm at her throat. "Go ahead and call your daddy if you're going to," he snarled, "but leave what's mine to me."

Her gaze slid to the contents of his backpack. She looked disappointed. "There's nothing in there but a pair of tighty-whities, some old paperbacks, a black and white photo..."

His brain ticked off the inventory—a change of underwear, comb, toothbrush, a couple of fairly recent newspapers found in the trash, as many dog-eared paperbacks as would fit, and a black and white photo of his mother whose name he'd never known. The rest he'd had to leave behind, not that there'd ever been much.





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He dropped his arm and stepped back. She rubbed her throat, smirking. The familiar resentment claimed his body, gaining intensity until his brain overheated and his fingers itched. He wanted to wipe that smirk from her face, but he hadn't touched a woman—not that way—in five years. Not since— He forced himself to stop.

She changed tactics and sat down, patting the space next to her on the hay. “Why don't you give the tough-guy act a rest and come sit down here on this old hay bale with me?” She reached out and ran her hand over his arm. “You look hungry. When's the last time you ate?”

His stomach clenched. Next, he'd be vomiting.

She wrinkled her nose. “You might be dirty and in need of a shower, but you're sure a pretty thing. Strong. Maybe you heard about how partial I am to cowboys? That why you're hangin' around? Were you hopin' to meet me, sugar?” She leaned in and kissed the corner of his mouth, her lips as soft as her voice.

He jerked back. “Who the hell do you think you are? Didn't anyone ever teach you it's dangerous to toy with people?”

She tossed her head. “Why, sugar, I'm Riley Tanner, and this is my ranch.”

“This is your *daddy's* ranch,” Cord snarled.

Riley flipped her bangs and smiled up at him with appealing brown eyes. “For now, maybe. What would you say to a trade?”

Cord eyed her, suspicion mounting.

“Breakfast for—” She smoothed his hair out of his face, gripped the sides of his neck with both hands and kissed him. “Take your pants off, sugar.”

Cord dug his fingers into her shoulders and set her away from him. “What about your daddy? Thanks for the offer, but I don't think so.”

She leaned back against the hay bale on both elbows and jerked her head toward the door. “I heard you up here, so I sent Daddy off in the other direction. He'll be a few minutes yet.” Her gaze skated over him, sizing him up. “You look like you haven't had enough to eat in, well—maybe ever.” She chuckled. “Lean and more than a little on the mean side. You know,” she looked at him, her gaze slitting. “Dangerous. That's how I like my cowboys. Now take your pants off and let's see what the good Lord gave you.”



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Dan Archer's voice crawled through his brain like a centipede. *Unzip his pants, girl. You got nothing to be scared of if you do as I say. He can't hurt you with his hands and feet tied to the legs of the chair like that. Unzip him and pull his cock out and let's get this party going. Or you can kiss this here end of my pistol. Up to you.*

Cord's belly convulsed. He'd never gone this long without food. She had no idea the line she walked, forcing his hand like this. He closed his eyes to better concentrate on Dr. Warren's words. *Your father is a psychopath. You are not your father, Cord. The day you finally believe it, you'll be able to manage yourself through any situation. Until then, try clenching your fists in your pockets and breathe deep into your core until the fracas in your brain comes down a few decibels.*

He balled his fists and shoved them deep into his pockets.

Riley hooked a finger through one of his belt loops. "You're in trouble, aren't you, cowboy? And you don't want to tangle with my daddy. So that leaves you with limited options—" She smiled sideways. "Me—and I don't like being made to wait."

Fists still clamped closed in his pockets, Cord stepped between her legs. "You want 'em off, you take 'em off."

She chuckled and reached for his zipper, expertly peeling back his jeans. Her grin split wider over small teeth when she saw he wasn't wearing skivvies. She hesitated, glancing up at him.

He stared into her eyes without flinching.

She pushed his jeans over his ass until they hit the floor with a soft whoosh. Satisfied, she leaned back on both elbows again, her eyes like two slashes. "Now that's what I'm talking about, cowboy. You got quite a little something there to hang your hat on. Bet you know how to make a girl purr." She licked her lips. "Do me."

*You are not your father.*

Cord drawled, "That's your trade? Food for a fuck?"

She shrugged. "You came here looking for a handout. I'm giving you a chance to earn it." She spread her legs, waiting.



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He stepped closer, calling her bluff, and forced her legs wider with his knees until his privates hung inches from her face. “This what you wanted?” He slid his fingers around her nape and used his thumbs under her chin to force eye contact.

She laughed, enjoying the game, but he tightened his grip and applied just enough pressure to make her take him seriously. “Now that you’ve satisfied your curiosity, pull my pants up.”

She tried to free herself from his grip. “That’s not our deal, cowboy.”

“We don’t have a deal. Pull ‘em up.”

She reached for him instead. He slapped her hand away. The familiar sting of flesh against flesh pushed him almost beyond his limit.

She laughed. “That’s right, cowboy, make it hurt. The more it hurts, the better I like it.”

Cord released her. She fell back. He turned away, hitched his pants up and reached for his shirt, hoping she couldn’t see his body shake. A moment ago, he thought he’d do anything for a meal. But not this. Never again. “Your price is too high, Blondie.”

She blinked, surprised.

He picked up his Stetson and shouldered his backpack. “This game you’re playing, you think you’re in control—that you can force someone to do what you want just because they have less than you. But one of these days, it just might bring you more trouble than you can handle.”

Their gazes clashed. He turned.

“Oh, no you don’t, cowboy. The boys here do as I say.” She leaped to her feet and hollered, “Daddy! I found him, Daddy. He’s over here.”

Rapid footsteps. Cord figured two men, maybe three. Three men came around the corner. Legendary in this part of the country, Cord guessed the older man with his proprietary attitude was Tom Tanner. Cord squared his shoulders. Their eyes collided. The man’s eyebrows met in the middle, frowning. “What’s this?”

Riley faced her father. “Now don’t be angry at the poor thing. I found him sleeping up here. Looks like he’s awfully hungry, Daddy.”

Cord tried not to flinch under Tanner’s scrutiny.



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“What’s your name, son?”

“Cord.”

“You got a last name?”

Cord toed the floorboards. “Archer. Cord Archer.”

“I see.” Tanner folded his arms across his chest. The two men standing on either side of Tanner ground their heels into the hay-strewn floor. One sunk his hands into his pockets. The other flexed his fingers and cracked his knuckles.

Cord couldn’t tell if Tanner recognized the name or not.

“Well, son, this is my ranch. I’m Tom Tanner but I’m guessing you already knew that since people don’t normally wander into these parts without knowing where they’re going.” He scratched his cheek and rocked back and forth on his heels. “What I have to do now is decide whether to have my men throw you off my property, or figure out something else. To do that, I’m going to need a little more information. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one later this month.”

Tanner nodded. “Where you from?”

Cord shrugged. “Here and there, I guess.”

Tanner shifted from one leg to the other. His mouth tightened. “Well, now, does that mean here or there? Which is it, son?”

*Busted.* “I guess I’ve been all over these hills.” Cord couldn’t make himself look Tanner in the eyes.

Tanner raised up on his toes and drummed his fingers against his thigh, still staring. “You have any ranch experience?”

Cord’s belly rumbled. He leaned against a support beam trying to look capable. His stomach rumbled again. A good thing he didn’t try to run when Tanner showed up. He’d be lucky if he didn’t fall on his ass. “Yes, sir, I do. Some. I’m good with horses.”

“How long’s it been since you had a meal?”



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Cord stiffened. His stomach threatened to hurl. “Too long, sir.”

Tanner nodded. “I can see that. Well, let’s not stand around here talking about it. Riley, get the boy something to eat. Breakfast is over. The hands have already eaten, but I’m confident you’ll find a way to convince Cook to fill the boy’s belly. After that, we’ll see about putting you to work. I could use another hand around here. If you’re willing to work hard, that is.”

Hunger and relief swirled. Cord didn’t trust himself to move away from the support beam.

Tanner pushed his hat low on his head and frowned. “Cook won’t serve you like that. Riley’ll show you where you can clean up.” He turned his drill-like gaze on Riley. “I’d appreciate it if you could find it in your heart to be helpful instead of pestering this poor boy to death.”

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Cord stepped out of the shower, hair dripping into his eyes. Riley held up a towel the size of Texas. He scowled, recognizing just how wrong his life was that he wanted food more than sex, and yanked the towel out of her hands. Riley was a looker, all right, but he’d learned at a tender age to recognize trouble when he saw it, and he figured she was a whole load of trouble. Even if he had been tempted, his need for food was all-consuming.

“Lord, cowboy. When did you last have a haircut?” She ran her fingers through the wet tangles.

He turned away, looking for his clothes. She gasped. He swore under his breath.

“What the hell happened to you?”

He shrugged. “Ran into a little trouble.”

Riley hopped off the sink and traced her fingers over the deep ruts on his back. “This is more than a little trouble. This is positively medieval. You sure pissed somebody off pretty good.”

When he didn’t respond, she said, “I knew it the minute you put your fingers around my neck. You like it rough, too. Seems we’ve got a few things in common, cowboy.”

He swatted her hand away. “You’ve got it wrong, but if you don’t stop hassling me, I won’t hesitate to show you why pain is not a game to me. As for having a few things in common, you’re delusional. My daddy doesn’t own the biggest ranch in southwestern Montana, and I don’t have a cook to feed me. Now, where the hell are my clothes?”



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“Nora took them.”

“Nora?”

“Our laundress. She burned them.” Riley’s eyes flirted up at him. “Oh, get over it, cowboy. She’s going through some of Daddy’s old clothes. Until then, you can wear this.” She tossed him a silky blue robe.

Cord stood his ground. “I’ll just take what’s mine.”

She rolled her eyes. “Spare me the proud cowboy act. If you’re hungry, put the robe on and follow me.” She sauntered out of the room without bothering to look back.

In the kitchen, he ran his hand across his eyes. Maybe he’d misunderstood. He’d thought Tanner said the ranch workers had already eaten, but the kitchen smelled of fresh bread and bacon. Food lined nearly every surface. A plate of sausages, a tureen of scrambled eggs, a basket of biscuits and sweet rolls. His stomach tightened.

Cook appeared carrying a small basket of herbs, took one look at Cord and yanked out a chair. Her generous, no-nonsense eyes darkened. “You better take a load off, son.”

Cord sank, aware of the colossal effort it took just to balance on the chair fighting the familiar fear that hunger would rob him of what little energy reserves he still had.

Without preamble, Cook slid her plump hand beneath his robe and felt his belly. She frowned, muttering darkly as she probed his stomach.

“You don’t touch a thing,” she ordered, closing up his robe. “You won’t be able to keep it down.”

Cord clenched his fists, looking at the food sitting there just waiting for him, aware that she knew what she was talking about. If he tried to eat, he’d puke it up.

She whisked the table clean, ladled something out of a large pot on the stove and set a steaming bowl down in front of him. “You start with this broth. I’m gonna sit here and watch you take it—make sure you eat it all. From the looks of things, it’ll be a day or two before you can have a real meal.” She shook her head. “What a young man your age is doin’ near-starved in this day and age, I’ll never know. It’s a crime, it is.”

But even the broth hit his stomach like a stone, tearing it to shreds.



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“Try to keep it down, son,” Cook clucked. “I saw more starving refugees than I care to remember when I was serving my country. You chuck it up and we’ll have to start all over again.” Her jowls waggled, and her eyes softened. “Your body needs to remove the mucus and toxins that’ve built up. When you finish that, juice is next. Got to get them bowels moving before they stop for good.”

He tried to thank her, to say something gracious, but his mouth wouldn’t work. He pitched out of the chair and fell into a sweet black bottomless hole.

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Cord awoke to strange noises. He kept his eyes closed, listening—something he’d learned to do as a young boy. When you don’t know where you were or exactly what the situation was, the best way to figure out whether you were safe was to act invisible and listen.

He jerked when something buzzed and gripped at his upper arm. He froze. The buzzing stopped, and he heard voices nearby. He listened intently, eyes still closed until he was sure they weren’t paying any attention to him. Probably in another room.

The bed jiggled, followed by an impatient sigh. He opened his eyes. Riley sat at the foot of the bed grazing through a magazine. She looked up and arched an eyebrow. “Finally. You’ve been out of it for two days. If I’d known you were going to be such a drama boy, I’d have left you in the hay where I found you.”

He tried to sit up, dismayed to find a tube taped to the inside of his wrist just as the thing around his upper arm started to grip him again. “I’m in a hospital?”

Riley’s eyebrow arched higher. “You have to ask?”

He clawed at the blasted thing gripping his arm. “If I’m so much trouble, why did you bother?”

Riley closed the magazine and winked. “I like trouble. Lots of it. Possibly, you’re just the kind of trouble I’ve been looking for. I guess we’ll see soon enough. They’re ready to kick you out of here. Lordy, cowboy, you must’ve eaten some pretty bad shit to make you that sick. What were you doing? Eating out of trash cans? You can’t work yet—not for a couple of days, anyway. I talked Daddy into letting you stay up at the house.”

Cord closed his eyes and pushed his fists into the hard mattress. *What would it cost him to be indebted to this woman?*



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She dropped the magazine. “What I can’t understand is why you’re in such tough shape. I’d have thought the worst of your troubles would be over by now. It’s been five years since your daddy went to prison for killing those girls.”

He gripped the mattress with both hands. She knew about him.

“Daddy recognized your name. Family’s a funny thing. Take mine, for instance. I don’t take much after my daddy. But word on the street is that you do—that you’re just as bad as your daddy.” She leaned in close. Her short hair smelled sweetly floral, and he could see down her shirt—just like she wanted him to. “Is that why you’re running? You are running, aren’t you? You sure as hell act like you are,” she purred. “You’re a real bad boy, aren’t you Cord Archer?”

*You’re a real bad boy. I wouldn’t have to do this to you if you weren’t such a bad boy.* Cord winced as the cat-o-nine dug into his flesh, fighting to remind himself that it was only a memory.

Riley twisted her short hair around her fingers. “Daddy did some checking. Let’s see. You were sixteen when your old man went to prison. They found you the next county over in pretty tough shape with the girls’ blood all over you. So, what went down? And why’d you run?”

He exhaled slow, fists cramping.

Riley moved closer. “Newspaper said you spent more than four years at that institution in that socialization and reentry program learning to read and write. There was some doctor who made you out to be a wonder boy.” She picked the magazine back up and rifled through the pages. “Here it is. ‘Doctor Warren said it’s rare for someone as emotionally isolated as this boy was to adapt socially and learn as quickly as he did.’” Riley stared hard at Cord. “You can see why, after reading this, I might find you unusual—possibly even interesting.”

Cord studied the woman perched on his bed. Petite, pretty enough, great abs, cold eyes. Not an ounce of softness anywhere. Only avid curiosity. He shrugged wondering what it would cost him if it turned out Riley had talked her daddy into helping him. “I guess you know it all.”

She twirled her short hair with her index finger. “Not quite. What I want to know is, what was it like being forced to watch your daddy rape women?”

*How did you feel watching your father commit acts of violence against those women? Did you know it was wrong? How old were you the first time he strapped you to the table and forced you to have sex with a woman? Did you know he kidnapped them? Did you know some of them were underage? Do you know what ‘underage’ means? If he forced you, as you said he did, why did you run?*





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*Love is Unstoppable*

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No matter how many times or how many different ways someone questioned him, they always came to the same conclusion—he must be a psycho just like his daddy. Cord swung his legs over the bed and ripped the needle out of his arm. He would have stalked out of the room but he didn't trust his legs yet.

“Oh, come on, cowboy. You're used to it by now. The doc says those scars on your back are from a lifetime of being restrained and beaten. Your daddy hogtie you like he did those women?” She chuckled. “You could write a book. ‘My Daddy Was a Kink.’”

Hot, lava-like anger coursed through Cord's body until a single thought calmed him. He could leave. He wasn't under arrest. This wasn't an institution. No one had any claim on him. His anger cooled until even his veins were like ice. The moment he felt strong enough, he'd leave. He captured her gaze in a formidable stare. Are you through playing your little game?”

Her amused laughter hung in the room like a bad omen. “For the moment. I brought you some clothes. They're in the bag. Get dressed. I'm sending a barber over. Don't let him shave you too close. I prefer a dirty look, but I don't want all that hair falling in my face, so just sit there and let him make you pretty. The doc will be by later to sign your release, and I'll be back around dinner to take you home. Oh, and this is for you,” she said, holding up a magazine. “It's a back issue, but you might find something interesting to read.”

She tossed him the magazine on her way out of the room. He didn't even try to catch it. It landed on the bed. The glossy pages fell open to a photo of a bound woman with her mouth on Cord's cock, although the finer details of his anatomy had been clouded out. The headline screamed ***Victim or Predator?***

Cord threw the magazine across the room, stripped out of his hospital gown and reached for the bag of clothes. They were new with price tags still intact. Riley hadn't brought briefs, and the jeans were too tight. He hopped around trying to pull them over his ass without catching his dick in the zipper.

A young woman entered carrying an armload of bedding. She stopped short and turned red.

Cord hobbled over to the bed still trying to yank his jeans into place, and swung the privacy curtain around him. “Something I can do for you?”

She stuttered, “I should have knocked, I'm sorry. They said you'd checked out.” She backed out of the room, but her hip caught the bed table. It spun around. She side-stepped to avoid it, but her legs tangled with the porta-potty. She lost her balance and sat down hard, her eyes and mouth perfect circles of surprise, still clutching the linens.



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Cord couldn't contain his laughter, but he sobered when she sat, frozen on the porta-potty, not moving. Still holding the curtain across his privates, he worried that she might be hurt, when she did the most extraordinary thing.

She tipped her head back. Her mouth broke into an effortlessly wide smile, revealing a dimple in her left cheek, and laughed. Her nostrils flared, and her eyes filled with light. He'd never seen a girl prettier than this one. He checked himself. Not pretty. Dr. Warren would have never let him get away with a word that one-dimensional. *Appealing. Winsome. Beguiling, even.* She stole the breath right out of him.

"Good thing the lid was down," she gasped, still laughing.

The sound filled him with hope.

She pointed to her name tag. "I'm Mattie. You must be the boy the Tanners found."

Cord stiffened at her use of the word "boy" but she didn't seem to notice.

"You sure must have impressed Tom Tanner. He doesn't take in just anybody. Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you were a charity case—I know you're going to work for him—personally I don't think there's any shame in being a charity case—we have to look out for each other, don't we?" She flushed. "I'm sorry. I'm making a mess of this."

Cord adjusted the curtain. Mattie's eyes followed, resting briefly on the part of his body he hadn't had time to stuff into his jeans. Her face flushed even redder.

*Pure innocence. Unpretentious. Immaculate. Inculpable.* He averted his eyes to keep from corrupting her.

"Well, I should let you get back to that one-legged dance you were doing." Her smile washed over him like the summer sun, bleaching him clean as she stood up to leave.

"Wait, what did you come in here for?"

She hugged the linens. "They said the room needed to be made up for the next patient. Housekeeping's way behind, and I help them out sometimes, but I must have gotten the room number wrong. I'll just go and check on it. Anyway, glad to have met you."

She turned to leave. He liked the way she filled her jeans. He sputtered, "But you didn't."



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She pivoted. “Didn’t what?”

He grinned, blinking hair out of his eyes. “Meet me. Not officially, that is.” He stepped as far forward as the curtain would let him and reached for her hand. He had to touch her.

Warm, strong fingers slid into his. He couldn’t make his fingers let go. “Name’s Cord.”

This time she gave him a two-dimple grin. “I know your name, silly. Everyone in this hospital knows your name.” She tossed her hair. He watched the sleek, dark waves shimmer into place. He checked himself again. *Not dark. Cimmerian. Castaneous.* He grinned and settled on *sable*. “But I don’t know yours. Your last name, that is.”

She stared at him, her serious face almost as pretty as when she laughed. “Are you flirting with me?”

He couldn’t stop grinning. “Maybe a little. That okay?”

She frowned. “I don’t think I understand the point of flirting. Either you like someone or you don’t.” She shrugged. “But if you *want* to flirt with me, I guess I can’t stop you.”

“I just shouldn’t expect you to flirt back?”

Her gaze traveled his face, his neck, his shoulders. His skin tingled everywhere she looked. “I’m going away for the summer. By the time I come back, you won’t even remember my name, a boy like you. If you’re even still around.”

She might as well have slapped him. “A boy like me? What do you mean, a boy like me?”

Mattie’s full mouth tightened. “You wandered onto Tanner’s ranch because you’re looking for something.”

“How does that make me any different from anyone else?”

Mattie paused, considered his words and said, “You’ve got a restlessness about you. I’m betting you’ll have moved on before I’m back.”

“To another town or another girl?” he teased, but her gaze held him captive. He tried not to get lost in her eyes. Blue with gold flecks, like the lapis pendant his daddy stole years ago and then tried to give to one of those girls to make her quiet. He shut the thought down hard.



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She collected her armload of bedding. “Cradle’s so small, you can’t even find it on most maps. No one stays around long—not even the folks who were born here. What could it possibly have to offer you? Good-bye, Cord. I hope someday you find what you’re looking for.”

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Cord towed dry, tucked the towel around his waist, and sauntered into the closet large enough to house an entire family, boasting an inventory that still left him dizzy. Levis, shirts, shoes, boots, belts, leather jackets, suede jackets, work gloves, riding gloves, all of which were his to wear at his discretion. He stretched out on the bed, contemplating the inequities of life.

A month ago, he’d been fired from yet another job and sent packing. Jobs weren’t easy to find. His name alone often kept him from getting even menial work. Yet for the last three days, he’d been a guest at the fanciest spread in southwestern Montana.

He counted on his fingers the many amenities he’d enjoyed so far. Private bath with Jacuzzi, more cable channels than he could count including the pricey ones, meals delivered on a tray daily accompanied by a cloth napkin and a small floral arrangement. All that, and his window overlooked the Gallatin River. For a fleeting moment, he almost understood how people could kill each other over property. Money. Things.

Cord locked his fingers behind his head and stretched his legs, trying to figure it all out. Tom Tanner treated him as if his daddy had been some kind of hero rather than a psychopath serving multiple life sentences without parole at the Montana State Prison. Apparently, he didn’t know psychopathology was genetic.

Surprised to find he’d dozed off, Cord jerked awake when a key turned in the lock. Riley waltzed into the room and snatched his towel. “Hey cowboy, it’s time to start earning your keep.” Her eyes narrowed, “For the record, I have ways of making people regret it when they don’t do what I say. You’re new here, so I’m prepared to give you a little leeway. But the next time I tell you to get a haircut, expect you to do it.” She plopped down on the bed next to him.

“You are relentless,” he muttered, rolling onto his stomach. “I locked that door for a reason.”

Riley ran her hand over his bare ass. “I’m curious, cowboy. Why’d you stop being a rent-a-boy?”

Cord stiffened.

“I’m right, aren’t I? Pretty boy like you, well-muscled even if you are underweight. Bet you hustled plenty of action. Why’d you stop?”



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He waited, clenching his hands.

“All your experience with ropes and pulleys. You’d never have to miss a meal.”

Riley reached under the bed and brought out a length of rope. “You get religion or something? I ask because I’ve got plans, and I need to know you haven’t lost your stomach for it.”

Cord sat up and ran both hands through the sides of his hair. “How old are you?”

Pleasure burned in Riley’s eyes as she devoured his body. “Twenty-three. Why do you ask, sugar?”

“Because you have an unhealthy, childish curiosity about me that’s guaranteed to get you hurt if you don’t back off.”

Riley got off the bed. He let out a slow sigh of relief followed by a groan when he heard the lock click from the inside. He opened his eyes. She walked toward him, rolling her shoulders. Her dress slid low. “You’d like to hurt me right now, wouldn’t you?”

Cord clenched his teeth.

“But you won’t. You aren’t about to do anything that’ll wreck your chances of working here.” Her dress slid lower. ““What do you think of my tattoo, cowboy?” Her dress dropped. An arrow shot down her belly, pointing to the shorn slit between her legs. “Maybe I have your attention now?”

She shimmied. Her breasts were too small to jiggle but sexy just the same.

Cord narrowed his eyes in derision. “You might want to stop embarrassing yourself. My taste runs toward sophisticated, worldly women who understand the merits of a slow screw. You are none of those things. Are we done here?”

Riley raised her leg and rested manicured toes on the edge of the bed. “Why don’t you show me what you mean by a slow screw?” She kneaded his thigh with her fingers. A knowing smile played her lips when she saw his hard-on.

Cord swung his legs over the side of the bed, grabbed her foot, twisted it and bent her over his lap. He tightened his hold and forced her arms behind her back. “If I wanted to, I could make you piss yourself with one word.”



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He hauled her off his lap and bounced her onto the bed. Her neck snapped as her head sank into the pillows. “Get this. Whatever you have in that crazy, screwed-up mind of yours is never going to include me.” He swatted her hard on her ass with his open hand. “Find. Someone. Else.”

He strode out of the room, realized he needed pants, cupped his hands around his privates and trotted down the hall toward the laundry. He sure as hell wasn’t going back into his room while *she* was there.

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