



Cade (The Cutler Brothers Book #1)

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## Chapter 1

“Cutler, my office! Now!”

At the order, Cade looked up from his computer, his brow furrowing. Shit, he thought. He’d barely been at the job two weeks and he was already being called into the boss’ office. Figuring that he couldn’t have done anything this soon that would get him fired as a U.S. Marshal, Cade pushed back his chair and got to his feet. Extremely aware of the other Marshals looking quizzically at him, he crossed the room and walked into the Deputy Chief’s office.

Still wondering what he’d done that would have his boss bellowing across the office for him, Cade was tense as the older man closed the door and walked over to his desk.

“I’ve got your first assignment for you,” Pete Conner said, picking a folder up and tossing it down on the desk in front of Cade. A middle-aged man, he had graying hair and a stocky build that made him look like he could have played football. “A woman in the WitSec Program called in saying that she thinks her identity has been compromised, and I want you to go check it out,” he told Cade. “She’s probably making a fuss about nothing, so I think it’s a case you can handle on your own.”

The momentary high that Cade had felt at the mention of an assignment for the Witness Security Program, or WitSec as it was called, disappeared in a flash. He tried to control his disappointment. He had known coming into this that he was going to have to prove himself. How well he had done on the Marshals’ written exam or the physical fitness test didn’t mean a thing to these people. Neither did the wealth of experience he had brought with him from the Dallas Police Department. He was starting from the bottom rung again, and as the new guy, it wasn’t like they were going to give him the best assignments right off the bat. But just because he knew that didn’t mean he liked it. After all of the stories his father and older brother, who had both been Marshals for years, had told him, he had hoped things would be a little bit more exciting. All he’d done since he’d been hired was sit at a desk all day.

Cade frowned as he opened the folder and glanced down at the file. Might as well do this by the book regardless, he thought. “Why do you think she’s overreacting?” he asked, scanning the first page of the thick folder.

“Because she’s been moved almost half a dozen times in less than five years,” the other man replied. “None of her claims that someone had tracked her down could ever be verified, but she insisted, so we had to move her. As

you can guess, that's kind of earned her the reputation for being paranoid, and since this is the fourth call to our office in the six months she's been in our district, I'd have to agree." He sighed. "The others all turned out to be wild goose chases, so this one probably is, too. Just take her statement and tell her that we'll look into it. That should keep her satisfied for a little while."

Cade nodded. "I'll get right on it."

Though new to the Marshals Service, Cade could understand his supervisor's frustration with the woman. Regardless of what all the B-grade movies depicted, the Witness Security Program was very successful. No one in it had ever been harmed while under the protection of the Marshals, or even had their new identity discovered. The Program was a well-run operation, so it was highly unlikely that Riley Barnett, or Katherine Jones, as she was now called, was in any real danger. But he would check it out. At least it would get him out of the office, he thought.

Taking the file that his supervisor had given him back to his desk, Cade read through it quickly. Finding the name of the district attorney that had prosecuted the mobsters Riley Barnett had testified against, Cade gave the man a quick call to see if there was any reason to think that the woman was in danger. The DA had seemed surprised by the question, and stated that the organization Riley Barnett had testified against was completely defunct and that there was no one interested in going after her. Thanking the man, Cade hung up. Even more convinced that Conner was probably right about Riley Barnett overreacting, Cade wrote her address down on a piece of paper, and then headed over to her apartment.

Riley Barnett lived just north of Seattle, and since traffic leaving the city wasn't heavy at that time of day, it didn't take long for Cade to get to her apartment. Pulling into an empty parking space, he got out of the car and walked over to the building, taking in the surroundings as he did so. He did it more out of habit than because he thought there might be a threat, but nonetheless, he automatically found himself making mental notes of the area as he walked up the front steps and into the building. Certainly, nothing seemed out of place, he thought.

Riley's apartment was on the second floor, and as he made his way upstairs, Cade wished he had taken the time to read her file more thoroughly. Not that he needed to, he supposed. Pete Conner had been doing this a lot longer than he had, he reasoned, so if the other man thought Riley Barnett was being paranoid, then she probably was.

Taking out his badge as he came to a stop in front of her apartment, Cade reached out to ring the doorbell. A moment later, he heard a woman's soft voice.

"Who is it?"

Her tone was cautious, even a little nervous. But then Cade had expected no less.

"Cade Cutler, U.S. Marshals Service," he said.

As he spoke, Cade held his badge up to the peephole so that she would be able to see the silver star on it. He waited patiently, figuring that if she was as paranoid as the Deputy Chief seemed to think, it would take her awhile to open the door. When she finally opened it, however, it wasn't to let him in, but to peak out at him through the crack.

"Hand me your badge," she directed.

Cade's brow furrowed. He had to admit that he was a little taken aback at the question at first, but he should have realized she'd be a little suspicious.

Flipping his badge closed, Cade handed it over to her. He expected her to give his photo-ID a cursory glance, and then let him in, but instead, she closed the door in his face. He was just starting to wonder if she might be calling

the District Office to check him out when he heard the chain being slid from the lock. A moment later, the door opened.

The apartment was small and simply furnished, with few personal touches. Which made sense, Cade thought as he let his gaze roam over the living room and eat-in kitchen adjacent to it. She had just been moved a half a year ago and it might take awhile to get comfortable. Of course, it was likely that this place would never feel exactly homey. When witnesses were relocated, they left their old lives behind, so that meant no family photos or souvenirs from the past.

“I called you people yesterday. What took you so long to get here?”

Cade turned to find Riley Barnett holding out his badge, an annoyed look on her face. Despite the fact that she was glaring at him, Cade couldn't help but notice that she was extremely attractive. For some reason, he hadn't expected that. Tall and slender with curves in all the right places, she had long, blond hair and big, blue eyes, and what he decided were the most kissable lips he'd ever seen. Whoa, get a hold of yourself, dude, he chided harshly. Focus on the job, not what the witness looks like!

“Well?” she demanded impatiently when he didn't answer her question fast enough.

Cade reached out to take the badge from her outstretched hand, telling himself to stay cool. “I came as soon as I could, Ms. Barnett,” he said, slipping his badge inside his jacket pocket and taking out the small, spiral notebook he carried.

Riley folded her arms with a disdainful snort. “I suppose that's your way of saying I'm no longer a high priority,” she sneered.

Cade felt his ire rise at the derision in her tone, and he had to clench his jaw to bite back the sharp retort that immediately came to mind. This was his first assignment, he reminded himself. He wasn't going to blow it because he lost his temper.

“Well, I'm here now, Ms. Barnett,” he said calmly. “Why don't we sit down and you can tell me what the problem is.”

For a moment, Riley didn't move. Everything that had happened over the past five years was finally beginning to take its toll, and the fact that the Marshals no longer seemed to be taking her concerns seriously wasn't helping. She had been at this long enough to have developed an intuition about this kind of thing, and someone was definitely out to get her.

But yelling at this cute Marshal wasn't going to help her cause, she told herself. So, she might as well do as Cade Cutler had suggested and sit down. Realizing that the man was waiting for her to do just that, Riley gave him a nod and gestured toward the couch. At the movement, he edged around the coffee table and took a seat on the overstuffed couch.

Cade Cutler was different than the other Marshals she'd met, Riley thought as she sat down on the opposite end of the couch. For one thing, he was younger than the others, probably three or four years older than her own twenty-eight, she decided. And good looking, too. Actually, that was putting it mildly, she thought. Tall with broad shoulders and dark hair, he looked like he'd be better suited to modeling than law enforcement. In fact, the reason she'd taken so long to let him into her apartment after he'd handed over his badge was because she'd been staring at the photo on his ID. Even though the picture was barely bigger than a postage stamp, she'd been fascinated by his chiseled features and wide, sensuous mouth.

On the opposite end of the couch, Cade flipped open his spiral notebook and looked at her. When he'd first come inside, Riley had thought his eyes were dark, but up close, she could see that they were more gold than brown.

Wow, she thought. She'd never seen eyes quite that color.

"So," he said. "What makes you think that your identity has been compromised, Ms. Barnett?"

He spoke with a slight accent, a drawl, her mother would call it, and Riley wondered where he was originally from as she reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. "I've seen a black SUV parked outside my apartment building every night for the past week," she explained. "And then yesterday, I saw the same vehicle parked across the street from the bank where I work. That was when I knew I had to call you."

Cade waited for her to continue, but when she didn't he pointed out, "A lot of people have black SUV's, Ms. Barnett. Are you sure it was the same one?"

Though his tone in no way suggested that he didn't believe her, Riley still bristled. She was frustrated that no one in the Seattle office seemed to believe anything she said. Each time a Marshal had come out, they had displayed less and less concern.

"Of course, it's the same one," she said sharply.

Cade glanced up. "Did you get a look at who was inside?"

She shook her head. "The windows were tinted."

He scribbled something down on the notebook he was holding. "What about a license plate?"

Again, she shook her head. "I didn't see it," she told him.

"What about the make and model of the SUV?" he asked.

Her brow furrowed. She'd been too frightened to even think about looking at stuff like that. Besides, she wasn't very good with cars. She shook her head.

Cade closed his notebook and slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "We'll look into it, Ms. Barnett, and get back to you," he said, getting to his feet.

Riley did the same, her frown deepening. "How are you going to look into it? Will you be posting Marshals outside my apartment building then?" She really hoped so; she hadn't slept well the past couple of nights.

He inclined his head. "If we determine that you're in danger, then you'll be given protection," he told her. "But I don't think you have anything to be concerned about. As I said, a lot of people own black SUV's."

Riley stared at him in disbelief. Did she have to end up at the bottom of some river somewhere before they believed her? She opened her mouth to argue, but Cade Cutler was already walking toward the door.

Annoyed, she followed after him. "How will you know if there really is a threat from the SUV if there's no one here to see it?" she persisted.

In the small entryway, he turned to give her a placating smile. "Like I said, we'll look into it."

She folded her arms to glare at him. "You're not going to do a damn thing, are you?" she said sharply. "Now that you people have already gotten my testimony, you couldn't care less about what happens to me."

His jaw tightened. "I'll be in touch," he said, ignoring what she'd just said as he turned to leave. He was just reaching for the doorknob when the greeting cards on the table along the wall caught his eye.

Riley watched in confusion as he picked one up and read it, and then did the same to another and another. But

before she could ask what he was doing, he turned to fix her with a hard look.

“What the hell are these?” he demanded, holding up the cards.

Her brow furrowed. “Birthday cards,” she said, her tone implying that it should have been obvious to him.

“I can see that!” he growled. “But this one’s from your mother! And these,” he added, gesturing with the others, “are from the rest of your family!”

She shrugged. “Duh! Who do you think sends birthday cards?”

His eyes narrowing, Cade tossed the stack of birthday cards back onto the table and strode toward her. “How about, duh, you’re in the Witness Protection Program! Which means that you’re not supposed to tell anyone where you are. That includes your family! You’re so worried about your identity being compromised, and here you are broadcasting it to the world!”

Ignoring the implied insult, Riley lifted her chin to glare up at him. “My mother would never tell anyone where I am,” she told him coldly. “And neither would any of my sisters.”

His brows drew together. “Really? How reassuring,” he scoffed. “What about the people that might be snooping through your family’s mail to find out where you are? Have you thought about that?”

She frowned at the words, wondering if that could be true, but then told herself it was ridiculous. Nobody, not even Albert Donatti, the main mobster she had testified against, would bother with digging through the mail just to find her. Besides, even if he had, her family had addressed the envelopes to her new name.

Riley gave Cade another shrug. “That would be impossible because my mom and my sisters didn’t put my real name on the envelope,” she said. “I’m not stupid, you know!”

“That’s debatable,” he retorted. “So, how many relatives does your family have that live across the country?”

She gave him a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

He held up the card from her mother. “It doesn’t matter what the name on the envelope says,” he told her. “The card says Happy Birthday to My Daughter on the front. I think people will figure out that it’s you.”

Before she could say anything, he added, “I’m going to have to call my boss and let him know about this.”

“Good,” she muttered. “Because I want to talk to him, too. That way I can tell him that you don’t know what the hell you’re doing, and that he needs to send someone out here who does!”

At her words, Cade paused in the act of reaching into his pocket for his cell phone, his eyes narrowing. “Okay, that does it!” he growled.

Riley braced herself for another one of his snide comments, and was totally surprised when Cade grabbed her by the arm and marched her over to the couch instead.

“What are you...?” she began as he sat down, but the rest of what she’d been going to say came out in a rush of air as he gave her arm a quick tug that sent her tumbling headlong over his knee.

Riley was so stunned that she simply lay there draped over his lap as she tried to catch her breath. When she finally came to her senses a moment later, it was to push herself upright, but a strong hand on her back held her down. What the hell was he doing?

Outraged, she turned to glare over her shoulder at him, only to let out a startled gasp when she felt his hand come

down hard on her jean-clad bottom. On my God, the brute was spanking her!

“Of all the...owwww!” she cried as his hand connected with her other cheek. “Let me go right now! You can’t do this!”

Cade only ignored her demand, instead smacking her ass again, even harder this time. “No, I’m not letting you go,” he ground out. “And I can do this. You are without a doubt the most irritating female that I’ve ever met, and I’m damn well going to do something about it!”

As he spoke, Cade punctuated every other word with a hard smack that had Riley squirming and protesting after each blow.

“I’ll...owwww!...have your...owwww!...badge...owwww!... for this, you jerk!” she yelled.

Riley had hoped that threat would be enough to make Cade stop, but to her dismay, he continued to spank her. Over and over, his hand came down on her upturned bottom, first one cheek, and then the other until they were stinging! And the more she squirmed, the tighter he held her. He was so strong that there was no way she could break out of his grasp.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

On and on it, went, and her bottom was really starting to sting from the relentless punishment. Despite the fact that her struggles had absolutely no effect on him, she refused to give up. Reaching back with one hand, she beat against his leg with her fist. It did any good, either of course, but it certainly made her feel better.

“It seems obvious to me that someone should have done this a long time ago,” Cade told her. “If they had, maybe you wouldn’t be such a brat right now.”

Even though he had been spanking her the whole time he was talking, he stopped lecturing her briefly so that he could focus on applying some really hard smacks right to the part of her bottom where her cheeks met the tops of her thighs. Ouch! She never knew that area was so sensitive! It stung like crazy even through her jeans.

“I can appreciate how difficult it is for you to be in the Witness Protection Program,” he continued. “But that doesn’t give you the right to be so obnoxious!”

Riley opened her mouth to spit out a retort, but only thing that came out was a yelp as his hand connected solidly with both cheeks at the same time. God, she hadn’t realized his hands were so big. That really stung!

And then, finally it was over and Riley was back on her feet. Torn between slapping Cade Cutler across that handsome face of his for what he’d just done, and rubbing the sting from her throbbing ass, she chose the latter. She was afraid that if she tried to smack him, she’d be right over his knee again anyway.

As she stood there rubbing her bottom, Riley thought that she should at least be telling Cade off, but for the first time in her life, she was speechless. The man had given her a spanking! What kind of brute had they sent to protect her?!

## Chapter 2

Well, he had probably just set the record for having the shortest career in the history of the U.S. Marshals, Cade thought bitterly. His family would be so proud. Then again, getting fired might be the least of his worries. After all, spanking a protectee was almost certainly on the shortlist of absolute dumbass things to do. Because of what he’d done, it was likely that he might never get another job in law enforcement of any kind ever again. It wouldn’t matter to his supervisors that the dang woman had completely deserved the spanking he’d given her. Cade seriously doubted they would understand.

Even if Riley Barnett had deserved it, he was still surprised with himself for letting her get to him like that. He'd never done anything like that to a woman before. The idea had never even occurred to him. Well, maybe that wasn't entirely true, he thought. Ever since he'd seen Sarah Engles, this cute girl he'd had a crush on when he was a kid, get paddled in school, he'd been fascinated with the thought of putting a girl over his knee. And Riley seemed to have an almost unnatural talent for pushing his buttons; she'd been doing it ever since he'd first walked into the apartment. Then she'd made that snide comment about him not knowing how to do his job. That had really hit a sore spot, and before he knew it, he'd found himself dragging her over his knee and spanking that tight, little bottom of hers. He had to admit that it had definitely been satisfying.

And there was a part of him that felt that the spanking had even been justified. To say that Cade had been shocked when he'd seen the birthday cards from Riley's family was putting it mildly. She had been in the program long enough to know what to do, and what not to do. That she'd actually been in contact with her mother and sisters had to be the dumbest thing he'd ever heard. He wouldn't have thought anyone could be that stupid.

And now, he had to tell the Deputy Chief about it. Shit. Reaching into his jacket pocket, Cade took out his cell phone and flipped it open. Punching in the number, he kept one eye on Riley as he waited for Pete Conner to answer.

Cade was actually a little surprised that the blonde was still standing where he'd left her. He would have thought she'd run off to the bedroom and slam the door in a snit. Instead, she just stood there rubbing her freshly-spanked bottom, a pout on her full lips. He could see her wince now and then as she explored his handiwork. Good. He hoped it still stung.

"Conner," a gruff voice said in his ear.

Cade dragged his attention away from Riley. "It's Cutler," he said. "I'm at Riley Barnett's apartment."

"Is there a problem?" his boss asked.

Cade glanced at Riley. "You could say that," he told the other man. "There's not much substance to her claims that someone's been watching her, but her identity has been compromised." Quickly, Cade told him about the birthday cards he'd found, and the fact that she had admitted to telling her family where she was.

On the other end of the line, Conner swore. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"I wish I were," Cade said grimly.

The other man sighed. "We're going to have to move her again," he said. "And she can't stay at her apartment until we do, which means that you'll have to take her to a safe house."

As his boss rattled off the address for the safe house the Marshals Service had in Puyallup, Washington, Cade automatically wedged the cell phone against his shoulder so that he could write it down on the spiral notebook that he'd taken from his jacket pocket.

"Sir," Cade said when the other man had finished. "You might want to have another Marshal meet us there so that he can stay with Ms. Barnett. She and I got off on the wrong foot. I don't think I'm the best fit to work with her."

There was silence on the other end for a moment, then, "Are you telling me that you can't handle a simple babysitting job, Cutler?"

Cade felt himself flush. "No, Sir," he said tightly.

"Good!" Conner barked. "Then do your job, or go find another one!"

Cade's gaze went to the blonde as he snapped his cell phone shut. From the smirk on her face, it was obvious she'd overheard his boss yelling at him. Great, he thought irritably. Not only was Conner pissed at him, but he was going to be stuck with Riley Barnett for who knew how long. Just great.

Despite the fact that her bottom was still stinging like crazy, Riley took a great amount of pleasure in seeing the Marshal get berated over the phone. It was obvious that had been what was happening; she had been able to hear the yelling all the way across the room.

On the other side of the room, Cade was slipping his cell phone back into his pocket. "I'm taking you to a safe house, so you'll need to pack a bag," he told her curtly. "And make it quick. We're leaving right away."

Riley blinked. If he thought she was going anywhere with him after the spanking he'd given her, then he was crazy! "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

He regarded her for a moment in silence, his jaw tight. "I'm sure you overheard the conversation on the phone. No one else is being assigned to your case, so that means you're stuck with me."

She lifted her chin. "Why do I need to move again?" she demanded petulantly. "You just told your boss that you don't think the SUV is anything to worry about."

His jaw tightened even more. "And I'm probably right," he said. "But I might be wrong, too. And by telling your family where you are, you've made the chances that there is someone after you a hell of a lot more likely. Regardless, the Witness Security Program is founded on one fundamental rule - never compromise your identity. Yours has been, Ms. Barnett. And since I have no intention of failing on this assignment, you're going to that safe house with me, one way or another." He lifted a brow. "Now, which is it going to be? Are you going to voluntarily pack a bag and come with me, or do I need to spank you until you change your mind?"

Riley gasped, blushing hotly as she remembered how easily Cade Cutler had put her over his knee and spanked her bottom a few minutes earlier. "You're a real jerk, you know that?" she said.

Turning on her heel, Riley stomped down the hall and into her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. She leaned back against it, seething.

Great, Riley thought miserably. Now, she was going to have to move again. And she really liked it there, too. Not only did she have a terrific job, but she had finally started to make some friends. She'd even had a date lined up for that weekend; the first in over a year. Dammit!

Not for the first time did she wonder what her life would be like if she hadn't stuck her nose in where it didn't belong all those years ago.

She had been working late one night at the Manhattan financial firm where she was a junior stockbroker when she had overheard a conversation between her boss and some other men. Normally, she wouldn't have paid much attention, but it had been really late for a business meeting. So without them noticing, she had crept closer to the office to listen to what they were saying. When she had realized they were talking about money laundering, she had immediately gone to the police. The next thing she knew, she was wearing a wire and planting bugs for the Feds.

At the time, the whole thing had seemed so exciting, like she was a spy, or something. Talking her way into upper-level meetings, skulking around in the middle of the night making copies of incriminating documents, and hacking into her boss' computer to find evidence had all seemed like so much fun. Especially being fresh out of college like she had been. But then the real world had intruded, and she found herself testifying against not only her boss, but a high-powered mob figure as well. Then it wasn't fun anymore. Her life had become hell at that point.

That had been five years ago. Since then, she had been moved from one city to another, one apartment to another, one job to another, one identity to another. And now, it was going to start all over again.

To make matters worse, Cade Cutler had spanked her! She could still feel every spot on her bottom where his hand had come down. It was a good thing she'd had on jeans instead of a skirt. As it was, she was probably going to have marks, maybe even bruises. She had never been so manhandled in her life! And to think she had actually thought he was cute!

Suddenly realizing that she'd been standing there for at least five minutes, Riley gave herself a mental shake. Half afraid that the Marshal would come in to check to see what was keeping her and make good on his threat to spank her again, she hurried across the bedroom to the closet and pulled out her overnight bag. Going over to her dresser, she pulled open her underwear drawer and, taking out a dozen pairs of bikini panties, put them in the bag. Closing that drawer, she opened the one next to it and picked out a lacy push-up bra before pushing it closed again. Opening the drawer below that one, she took out a pair of shorts and a cami-top, then went to the closet and grabbed several T-shirts and an extra pair of jeans, all of which she packed into the bag. Satisfied that she had enough clothes, she went into the adjoining bathroom to grab her toiletries, and added them to the bag as well.

Glancing at her reflection in the mirror above the sink, Riley was surprised to see that not only was her face flushed, but that her long, blond hair looked as if she'd just turned her head upside down and given it a good shake. Then again, she reminded herself, she had just spent a good ten minutes draped over Cade Cutler's lap getting spanked. Brute, she thought as she took the brush from her overnight bag and ran it through her hair. Dropping her hairbrush back into the bag a moment later, she zipped it closed, and then left the room.

Cade was just checking his watch when Riley walked into the living room, and he looked up at her entrance. "It took you long enough," he grumbled. "I was just about to come in and get you."

Riley gave him a glare. "You men are all alike," she said as she set the bag down on the floor and walked over to pick up her shoulder bag from the chair. "You think that all you need are a toothbrush and a change of underwear, and you're good to go."

If Cade weren't still annoyed, he probably would have found her assessment of the male half of the species amusing, but as it was, he only stood there waiting impatiently while Riley dug through her purse. She was probably deliberately being slow. God, she was irritating, he thought. And now, he was going to be stuck in some safe house with her. The thought was enough to make his jaw clench.

Over by the chair, Riley took her sunglasses from her purse and put them on before rummaging through her shoulder bag again. Coming up with her keys a moment later, she announced that she was ready to go.

Finally, Cade thought to himself as he bent to pick up her overnight bag. Opening the door, he held it open for her so that she could walk out ahead of him. Riley stood where she was for so long that he thought he was going to have to prompt her, but after giving her small apartment one more wistful look, she brushed past him and stepped into the hallway.

They made their way down the stairs in silence. Once outside, Cade led her over to his car, his gaze automatically checking to see if the black SUV that Riley had said she'd seen was anywhere around. She was looking for it too, he noticed. But it was nowhere in sight. Not that he had expected it to be.

Neither of them spoke on the drive down to Puyallup, which suited Cade just fine. The less interaction he and Riley Barnett had, the better.

As safe houses went, it wasn't bad, Riley thought as Cade pulled into the driveway of a small two-story house an

hour and a half later. It was in a crowded part of town with a couple of strip malls and stores just down the street. Not a bad place to be stuck. Not that she'd probably spend much time there anyway; the other times, she had been moved within a few days.

Walking up to the door with Cade several moments later, a thought abruptly occurred to Riley. They hadn't stopped for a key, and she wondered how they were going to get inside. She was about to ask Cade that same question when she noticed the keyless-entry pad beside the door.

Riley watched as the Marshal punched in the four-digit code, automatically making a mental note of the combination. Numbers had always come easy to her, which was one of the reasons she had enjoyed being a stockbroker so much. Well, at least that was one thing she could say about the Marshals. They always found her a job related to money and investing.

Walking into the entryway, Riley stood for a moment to survey her new surroundings. The house was a simple design, with a living room, an eat-in kitchen, and a small room down the hallway that was probably a bathroom taking up the downstairs, while a narrow staircase directly off the entryway led to the second floor. Toward the back of the house, she could see another door that led to the backyard.

Beside Riley, Cade set down her bag as he swept the house with his gaze. "I'm going to go check out the upstairs," he told her.

As he headed for the steps, Riley wandered into the kitchen. She had been too nervous that morning to eat much of anything for breakfast, and now that it was nearing late afternoon, she was starting to get hungry. Hopefully, the pantry was stocked.

But both the pantry and the cabinets were empty, much to her dismay. Her brow furrowing, she opened the fridge, but besides an old carton of baking soda, it, too, was empty. Great, she thought.

Hearing Cade's footsteps behind her, she turned to frown at him. "There's nothing to eat," she said as he walked into the kitchen.

He shrugged. "We'll get pizza delivered."

Riley looked at him in surprise. "Three times a day?"

He shrugged again. "Why not? What's wrong with pizza?"

"Nothing, but no one could eat pizza that much," she protested. Admittedly, she liked pizza a lot, but even she didn't want to eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "Besides, I have to eat more often than that, anyway. If I don't, then my blood sugar gets too low, and I get grumpy."

Cade lifted a brow at that, but before he could say anything, she continued.

"Can't we just run to the store and go shopping?" she asked.

His mouth tightened. "What part of witness protection don't you understand?"

She sighed. "Then how about you go to the grocery store?"

"And leave you alone?" he asked incredulously. "I don't think so."

Riley folded her arms. "They call it a safe house because it's safe, right? And you said yourself that I'm not in danger, so why can't I stay here while you run to the store?" she demanded. "It's not going to take you any more than thirty minutes, tops. I'll be fine."

When Cade made no reply, she took that to mean he was giving the whole thing some thought, so she added, “You won’t like me when I’m grumpy. Trust me.”

He shook his head with a sigh. “Okay, I’ll go to the store,” he agreed. “But only if you promise to stay put.”

She made a show of looking around. “Where would I go?” she said.

Cade gave her an annoyed look. “Just do it, okay?” he told her. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes.”

Riley followed him to the door, quickening her steps to keep up with his long strides. “Aren’t you going to ask me what I want?” she said.

He turned to face her. “I was just going to get some peanut butter and a loaf of bread.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but then changed her mind. Cade had agreed to go shopping for her; she supposed she should at least be gracious. And besides, she did like peanut butter. “Okay,” she said. “But make sure the peanut butter is the reduced-fat kind. And that the bread is one-hundred percent whole wheat.”

Cade’s mouth tightened, but he said nothing.

“Oh, and get some skim milk, too,” she added as he turned the doorknob. “And yogurt. Maybe a box of cereal, too. Anything that’s whole-grain.” She paused. “And some fruit and vegetables.”

He lifted a brow. “Anything else?” he asked dryly.

She thought a moment. “Chocolate,” she said, and then added, “Maybe you should write all that down.”

“I got it.” He opened the door. “Remember, stay put. And don’t open the door to anyone.”

After Cade had left, Riley considered unpacking, but then decided it would just be easier to live out of her suitcase. Wishing she’d remembered to bring a book or two with her, she went into the living room and grabbed the remote from the coffee table. Flopping down onto the couch, she turned on the television.

Surfing through the channels didn’t take her long since the house was only set up with basic cable. Darn it, she thought. She should have asked Cade to stop at the video store on the corner and get some movies while he was out. Then again, maybe it was a good idea that she hadn’t. He’d probably come back with a bunch of action movies that had lots of stuff blowing up and no real story. Still, watching a movie or two would have helped to pass the time.

Suddenly, an idea came to her. Why not go to the video store herself?

Because Cade told you to stay put, a little voice in her head reminded her.

He’d also told her that she wasn’t in any danger, Riley pointed out. And besides, it was only a short walk to the video store. She’d seen on in the strip mall down the street. Come to think of it, there was a bookstore, too. She could grab a couple of videos and some books, and still be back well before Cade. And if he didn’t like it, well, then that was tough. He might be able to drag her off and uproot her whole life all over again, but that didn’t mean she had to be bored the whole time they were at the safe house.

Her mind made up, Riley turned off the television, picked up her purse, and started for the door.

Cade was pretty sure it wasn’t procedure to leave Riley alone at the safe house while he went food shopping, but it had seemed easier than listening to her complain all night. Besides, as much as he hated to admit it, she had been right. They couldn’t eat pizza the whole time they were there. Besides, it hadn’t taken more than thirty minutes to run to the store and back. And in reality, she was right about something else, too. Even if procedure

dictated that they move her again, she wasn't really in any danger. So, this run to the grocery store wasn't that big of a deal.

Pulling into the driveway, Cade shut off the engine and grabbed the two grocery bags full of food from the back seat. As he neared the house, he shifted them to one arm so that he could use his free hand to punch in the entry code on the keypad beside the door.

Riley was standing in the living room when he walked in, and she turned at his entrance. His gaze immediately locked on the DVD's in her hand, and his eyes narrowed.

"Where the hell did you get those?" he demanded.

She set them down on the coffee table. "From the video store on the corner," she said.

Ignoring the scowl he gave her, Riley took one of the bags from him and walked into the kitchen to put it down on the counter.

Cade followed. "You went out to the video store after I told you to stay put?" He put the bag he was carrying down on the counter beside hers with a thud. "I didn't spank you hard enough before, did I?"

Riley whirled around, her face flushed with embarrassment at the mention of the spanking he'd given her. "I don't know what the big deal is!" she snapped. "You said that the SUV was nothing, so I'm not in any danger. Or were you wrong about that?"

Cade clenched his jaw. "I said that the SUV was probably nothing," he corrected. "But that doesn't mean I want you traipsing around all over town, completely disregarding everything I tell you."

She folded her arms to glare up at him. "I didn't go traipsing around all over town. I only went to the video store on the corner," she protested, and then, turning back to the bag of groceries, mumbled, "I won't do it again."

"Damn right you won't!"

Biting back a retort, Riley reached into the bag, only to let out a gasp of surprise as Cade's hand closed over her arm.

"What...?" she started to say, but the words trailed off as he marched her over to the kitchen table and the straight-backed chairs there. Her eyes went wide as she realized what he intended. "Oh, no you don't!" she told him.

Riley tried to hang back, but Cade had already sat down and was pulling her over his knee. She tried to resist, but it did no good. He was way too strong for her. That didn't stop her from flailing and kicking at him, but within moments, she was staring down at the linoleum floor, her bottom in the air and his hand on her back.

"Dammit!" she yelled, beating her fist against his muscular thigh. "Let me go!"

"Not until you and I come to an understanding!" Cade told her. "Because if you don't start doing what I tell you, then this cute, little ass of yours is going to be sore the entire time we're stuck here."

For some ridiculous reason, Riley felt herself blushing at his words, but before she could open her mouth to say something rude in return, he brought his hand down hard on her jean-clad bottom.

"Owwwww!" she yelped.

But the sound was lost as another resounding smack echoed throughout the kitchen. Having just gotten spanked a few hours earlier, her bottom was already beginning to sting, and Riley squirmed as he brought his hand down

over and over.

“Owwwww!” she protested. “You can...owwww!...stop now! I already...owwww!...told you I wouldn’t...owwww!...go to...owwww!...the stupid video store again!”

“Somehow, I don’t really believe your promises. So, this is to make sure you think twice before you go anywhere without my permission again!” he told her in between spans. “Going to that video store was foolhardy and dangerous. No one may be after you now, but if someone did manage to find you through those dumbass birthday cards, then they could track you by that damn video-rental card of yours. But you didn’t think of that, did you? Of course not! Because you’re too busy telling me I don’t know how to do my damn job!”

Between her protesting and the sound his hand made as it smacked down on her ass over and over, Riley barely heard half of what Cade said, but when he paused a moment later to ask her if she understood, she nodded her head emphatically.

“Yes, yes, yes!” she told him.

She thought that after that he was done, but then he continued to rain hard smacks down all over her bottom.

“Hey!” she protested. “I said I understood!”

“Good,” he said, bringing his hand down again. “Now that we have that part take care of, I want you to give me your solemn word that you won’t go anywhere without my permission?”

She nodded her head vigorously. Right then, her bottom was stinging so much that she thought she probably would have agreed to just about anything.

“I didn’t hear you,” Cade insisted, giving her a particular hard smack right on her sit-spot.

Riley blinked at both how hard the spank was, and at what he obviously expected her to say. He actually wanted her to say the words out loud? She’d thought that being put over his knee for a spanking was the ultimate in embarrassment, but this was even more humiliating!

When she continued to hesitate, he prompted her with another hard smack, this time to both her cheeks. “I don’t think I’m getting through to you,” he told her. “Maybe you can’t feel the full effect of the spanking through the jeans. Maybe I should pull them down.”

Her eyes went wide at that. “Noooooooo!” she cried, her face turning bright red. “Okay, okay! I promise that I won’t go anywhere without your permission! Are you satisfied now, you jerk?!”

Riley regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. Though she really did think Cade was a jerk, calling him one while in her present position probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do, and she held her breath as she waited for him to start spanking her again. But to her surprise, he took her arm and put her back on her feet. She immediately reached around with both hands to cup her throbbing asscheeks, only to gasp. If anything, they seemed to sting even more now that he had stopped spanking her. And that threat to pull down her jeans had been unbelievable! He really was a brute, she thought.

### Chapter 3

After the spanking Cade had just given her, Riley had been sure there would be marks on her bottom, but when she stormed off to the bathroom afterward, she was surprised to see that there weren’t any. Her bottom was really pink, though, she thought as she gazed at her rosy asscheeks in the mirror above the sink. And, she found out a moment later when she reached back with one hand to rub, it was tender to the touch, too.

She couldn't believe that Cade had spanked her again. And for something as stupid as going to the video store, too! Like someone was really going to track her down using her video-rental card! That wasn't even logical! Well, one thing was for sure, when she got settled in her new place, wherever that was, she was going to call his boss and tell the man that Cade Cutler was completely out of control! She'd pull out her cell phone and call his boss right then, but the knowledge that she was going to be stuck with this guy a little while longer made her realize that wouldn't be a very good idea. But she'd get him in the long run, she promised herself

Pleased at the idea of getting back at the Marshal for manhandling her, Riley allowed herself a small smile as she wiggled her jeans over her hips and buttoned them. She had never realized that denim was so rough until the material rubbed against her tender bottom. Ouch!

Though part of her would rather have spent the rest of the night in the bathroom rather than have to face Cade again, the other part of her refused to be intimidated by him. So, after checking her reflection in the mirror, she tucked her long, blond hair behind her ear and walked out of the room.

Cade was standing at the counter pouring milk into two large glasses when she walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, and he looked up at her entrance. He had taken off his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up to reveal nicely-muscled forearms. Oh yeah, she thought. He might be a jerk, but he was a good looking one. He should definitely be modeling instead of working in law enforcement.

"I made you something to eat," he said, glancing at the table.

Riley's gaze went to the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches on the table. For a moment, she considered telling him to take sandwich and shove it, but at the sight of food, her stomach began to growl loudly, and she wisely decided to give in to her hunger and eat instead. Murmuring a soft, "thank you," she pulled out a chair and sat down, wincing a little as her bottom touched the seat.

At least he had remembered to get whole-wheat bread, she thought as she slid the plate closer to her. And skim milk, too, she noticed as he opened the fridge to put the plastic container on the shelf.

Closing the door, Cade picked up the two glasses and walked over to the table. Setting one of them down in front of Riley, he pulled out the chair across from her and sat down.

They ate in silence, the hum of the refrigerator the only sound in the room.

"So," Cade said after several long minutes. "How did you get into the Witness Protection Program?"

Riley looked up in surprise, taken aback not so much by the question, but by the fact that the Marshal was actually bothering to talk to her. As she sipped her skim milk, she considered that maybe he was trying to make up for being such a jerk earlier. "I testified against a mobster," she answered.

Cade's mouth quirked. "I figured that much," he said. "I was referring to the particulars. I didn't really have time to read the whole file before I came over to your apartment."

She said nothing for a moment, not sure if she felt like having a conversation with the man that had given her not one, but two spankings that day. Then she decided, why not? It was either that or sit there in silence for the rest of the night. And it had been a long time since she'd been able to talk to anyone about it.

"I was a stockbroker at a Manhattan investment firm," she explained, setting down her glass and sitting back in her chair. "I was working late one night when I heard my boss talking to some men in his office. It wasn't odd for him to be in the office at that time of night, but it was kind of unusual for a client to have an appointment that late, so being a little curious, I wandered down the hall to hear what they were talking about." She let out a sigh. "I wish now that I hadn't."

Cade waited for her to continue, and when she didn't, he prompted her. "What did you hear?"

She chewed on her lower lip, remembering. "They were talking about laundering money," she said. "Apparently, my boss had been in bed with the mob for years."

"And they realized you were listening in on their conversation and came after you?" Cade surmised.

Riley shook her head. "Actually, they had no idea I had heard anything at all. They didn't even know I was there," she said. "Being the upstanding citizen that I am, I decided to go to the cops and tell them what I'd heard. It never occurred to me that I would have any further involvement. But the next day, the FBI showed up at my apartment wanting me to go undercover for them."

Cade was stunned by that. He'd been surprised enough when Riley had said she'd been a stockbroker, but hearing that she had gone undercover for the Feds was something he would never have thought someone like her would do. After how careless she'd been with keeping her identity a secret, he had to admit, he'd thought her a rather dim bulb. He supposed that he was going to have to reassess his opinion of her. At least in some ways.

Across the table from him, Riley ran her hand through her long hair, pushing it back from her face. "If I had known then that my whole life would get turned upside down and I would end up in the Witness Protection Program, I never would have done it," she said. "But at the time, it sounded exciting, so the FBI didn't have to work too hard to persuade me to wear a wire for them." Her lips curved into a small smile. "I was really naïve back then, and I got caught up in the whole spy thing, thinking I was saving the world." Her smile faded. "But after the FBI got all the evidence they needed, the real world came crashing down. When they showed up at my door with U.S. Marshals and told me about the Witness Protection Program, I finally realized what I had gotten myself into. I lost my job and my friends, and I haven't seen my family since then. Plus, I've been moved all over the place and forced to live under a different assumed identity every time. I think it's enough to make anyone wonder if it had been worth it."

Cade frowned. He had never really thought about what people in the Witness Protection Program gave up. He knew how close he was to his family, though. If someone told him that he could never talk to, or see them again, he might not go along with it any better than Riley had. That thought almost made him regret yelling at her earlier about being in contact with her family. He probably would have done the same thing.

For a moment, she looked so forlorn and alone sitting there that he had resist the urge to reach across the table and cover her hand with his. "What you did, going up against the mob, took a lot of courage," he told her quietly instead.

She regarded him in silence for a long moment, her blue eyes sad. "Maybe," she agreed. "But it was also stupid."

Cade felt like telling her that it hadn't been stupid. It had been brave and unselfish. But he didn't think she really wanted to hear something like that, particularly not when she was feeling so down, so instead, he said nothing.

Pushing her chair back, Riley picked up her half-full glass of milk and went into the living room, leaving Cade alone at the table. He sat there, watching as she picked up one of the movies, popped it into the DVD player, and then sat down on the couch, kicked off her shoes, and curled her legs under her.

With a sigh, Cade pushed back his chair and got to his feet. Picking up their empty plates, he rinsed them off, and then set them in the rack to dry before grabbing his glass of milk from the table and going into the living room.

The movies Riley had picked out were standard chick flicks, all sappy story and no action, and Cade was bored senseless by them. But since there was little else to entertain him, he sat on the couch and watched them with her. Sitting through two of them was almost more than he could take, however, and he was relieved when Riley finally announced that she was going to bed after the second one.

Grabbing the remote from the coffee table, Cade flipped through the channels disinterestedly. He should probably go to bed, too, he thought. Despite the fact that the house had two bedrooms, he had decided that he would sleep on the couch downstairs. He supposed it was silly really, since Riley wasn't in any danger, but it was standard procedure and he thought he should probably follow the book regardless of the threat.

Before he turned in for the night, Cade did a sweep of the house, checking all the doors and windows to make sure they were locked, as well as pushing aside the curtains to take a look outside. Except for the occasional car driving by, it was quiet.

Cade was just about to let the curtain on the living room window fall back into place when he noticed a dark SUV coming up the street. His eyes narrowed as it approached, but though the vehicle slowed a little as it passed the house, it didn't stop, and he felt himself relax as it drove off. A lot of people drove dark SUV's, he told himself.

The ground floor secure, Cade turned away from the window and headed upstairs to check on Riley before going to bed himself. The door to the bedroom on the right had been left slightly ajar, and he could see the soft glow of light through the opening.

Not wanting to wake Riley if she were asleep, Cade didn't knock on the door, but instead, quietly pushed it open just enough to poke his head in. If she were still up, no doubt she'd have a few choice words for him about barging in on her, he thought.

But to his surprise, Riley was sound asleep. It turned out that the light wasn't coming from the bedroom at all, but from one in the adjoining bathroom, which she had left on. That made sense, he thought. As scared and paranoid as she was, she probably always slept with a light on.

In the soft glow, Cade could see her slender form outlined beneath the covers. She was curled up in a ball with the blanket tucked up under her chin, and to his surprise, the image touched his heart. She looked so vulnerable, he thought. And at the same time, very sexy.

Abruptly, Cade was reminded of the spanking he'd given her earlier that evening. Though he had been really angry at how stupid she had been, he suddenly felt badly about putting her over his knee again. Then again, she had deserved it, he told himself. If someone really were after her, they would have had the perfect opportunity to grab her the moment she had stepped foot outside the safe house. Even so, she'd had a pretty hard time of it lately, he reminded himself, so maybe he should cut her a break.

And yet, even as he decided that spanking her again might have been a little overboard, there was a part of him that was secretly pleased Riley had given him a reason to do it. Standing there now, with her looking so sexy, he could admit that he had enjoyed spanking her. When he had put her over his knee the first time back at her apartment, Cade been too intent on what he was doing to pay much attention her ass. And though he'd been no less angry with Riley when he'd spanked her when he'd come back from the store, he had found himself taking the time to admire her curves while she'd been wiggling around on his lap. No doubt about it, her ass was amazing! Well-rounded enough to fill out her jeans nicely, but still firm enough to show that she definitely worked out. He could just imagine what she'd look like under those jeans.

Too bad she hadn't given him a reason to pull them down, he thought. Then again, it was probably just as well, because he would have had a really hard time concentrating on actually spanking her. He was getting hard just thinking about it.

Cade swore under his breath and backed out of the bedroom. Get a grip on yourself, man! You're a U.S. Marshal, not just some guy looking for a hot lay! It was his job to protect Riley Barnett, not bed her.

Annoyed with himself for even having those thoughts, Cade went back downstairs and checked the doors one more time. Emptying his pockets, he dumped everything including his cell phone onto the coffee table. Then he

slid his gun holster from his belt and set it down on the table as well.

Sitting down, he lie back on the couch and, pillowing his head on his arms, closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep. But thoughts of the beautiful Riley Barnett sleeping just upstairs kept him awake long into the night.

Cade was still asleep when his cell phone rang the next morning. Immediately reaching for it, he flipped it open and held it to his ear.

“Cutler,” he said.

“It’s Conner.” The man’s voice was gruff in his ear. “Everything going well?”

Cade couldn’t help but notice that the Deputy Chief didn’t actually wait for him to reply before continuing.

“Riley Barnett’s a low priority, so it’ll take us a little while to find a more permanent place to put her,” the other man said. “The bean counters really don’t like the idea of spending the money to move her again when there’s no definitive threat. I know that you could give a crap about that, but nevertheless, it means that you’ll be stuck with her for awhile longer.”

“How much longer?” Cade asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

Conner sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe a week or more. You have a problem with that?”

Cade’s jaw tightened, but he knew better than to voice his displeasure to the Deputy Chief. The man would only take that to mean that he couldn’t do the job. “No problem, Sir,” he told his boss.

Conner grunted, obviously expecting Cade to complain, and surprised when he hadn’t. “Good,” he said curtly. “I’ll be in touch.”

Cade flipped his phone closed with a sigh. A week or more at the safe house with Riley, he thought. God, that was going to feel like forever. He wondered how many chick flicks that would equate to.

A thought suddenly occurred to him then. He didn’t have any clothes with him. Hell, he didn’t even have a toothbrush. He was going to have to go back to his apartment, he realized. Which posed a problem of a different kind; he couldn’t leave Riley at the safe house while he went all the way back to Seattle. Who knew what kind of trouble she would get into if he did? Of course, if he had another Marshal backing him up on this like he was supposed to, it wouldn’t be a problem, he thought. But he didn’t. He was completely on his own, which meant that he’d have no choice but to take her with him. It wasn’t exactly procedure, but what else could he do?

## Chapter 4

Cade was in the kitchen when Riley came downstairs. Last night had been the first time she’d slept well in a long time, and as much as she didn’t want to attribute it to the Marshal’s presence, she knew he was the reason. He might have a nasty habit of spanking her, but she couldn’t deny that he made her feel safe.

He glanced at her as he poured coffee into mugs. “I talked to my supervisor this morning,” he told her. “It’s going to take a while to get you set up with a new identity, so until then, we’ll be staying here.”

Riley nodded, but said nothing as he handed her one of the mugs. Well, at least she’d get a few more days in the Pacific Northwest before they moved her off to wherever it was they decided to put her, she thought.

“The thing is,” Cade continued. “I don’t have anything with me other than what I’m wearing, so we’re going to have to take a run up to my apartment so I can get some things.”

She frowned at that. It was a bit unusual that the Marshals weren’t sending out anyone to relieve Cade. Maybe

there was a budget crunch or something at this time of year. Or maybe it just showed how low of a priority she really was to them, she thought bitterly. But she supposed she couldn't blame Cade; it wasn't his fault. She was sure it sure wasn't any picnic for him, either, and couldn't help but wonder who he had peeved off to get stuck on this assignment all by himself.

So, after a breakfast of whole-wheat toast and coffee, they drove up to Cade's apartment in Seattle. At least it was nice to get out, she thought. At first, Riley simply enjoyed the scenery, but as they neared the city, she found herself thinking out loud.

"Do you know where they're going to be relocating me?" she asked, turning her attention from the window to Cade. His hair was a little tousled from sleep, but even with bedhead, he still looked incredibly handsome for this early in the morning.

He gave her a sidelong glance. "Not yet," he said. "But in all honesty, I doubt they would tell me even if they knew."

She sighed and looked out the window again. "I hate having to move," she said. "I really liked living in Seattle."

Cade said nothing for a moment. "Where did you live before this?"

Riley turned away from the window to look at him again. "Indiana, first, and then Wisconsin for about a year," she said. "After that, I lived in Iowa for a little while, and then Utah. They were okay, but I really like the Pacific Northwest the best. I'll miss it."

Beside her, Cade nodded. "I know what you mean," he said as he took the exit that led into downtown Seattle. "When they assigned me to the Seattle office, I wasn't too thrilled with idea of moving here. I thought it was going to be gray and rainy all the time, but when I got here, I decided that the place was actually pretty great."

Her lip curved into a small smile. She hadn't been too keen about moving to a place where it was cold and rainy all the time, either, but then she'd been pleasantly surprised to learn that it didn't rain all year round, but was sunny and warm for the spring and summer months.

"You're not originally from around here then?" she said to the Marshal.

He shook his head. "I grew up in Dallas," he told her.

Her smile broadened. "I thought I detected a slight accent."

Cade chuckled. "That's not an accent," he told, giving her an offended look. "It's called a drawl."

Riley had to laugh. "My mistake," she said. "A drawl, then."

He glanced at her. "Speaking of accents, you don't sound like a typical New Yorker."

"That's because I grew up in Connecticut," she explained. "I moved to Manhattan after I graduated from college."

Turning onto a side street, Cade pulled up outside an apartment building. Though it looked like it had been built decades ago, inside it was well-kept, and Riley thought it very charming as he led the way up the stairs to the second floor. Cade's apartment had a breathtaking view of Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains beyond, and Riley found her gaze drawn to the window the moment she stepped inside.

"I'll just be a couple of minutes," Cade told her as he closed the door.

Riley nodded absently as he strode across the living room and disappeared down the hallway and into what she

assumed was his bedroom. As bachelor pads went, it was nice, she thought as she looked around. There were the requisite television, CD player, and various other electronic equipment, of course, but there were no piles of dirty clothes on the floor or dishes in the sink like she had would have expected to see.

Maybe that was because Cade didn't live alone, she thought. Maybe he shared the apartment with a girlfriend. That would make sense, considering how clean and put together the place was. For some strange reason, though, the notion of Cade having a girlfriend bothered Riley. Which made no sense. It wasn't like she was jealous or anything. Actually, she didn't even like him. That being the case, she pushed the errant thought aside. Besides, it made sense that the Marshal would have a girlfriend; he was too good looking not to. But as Riley let her gaze wander around the living room, she couldn't help but admit she was relieved to find that there weren't any obvious feminine touches anywhere. Maybe he didn't have a girlfriend.

Catching sight of the framed photos on one of the shelves on the built-in bookcase along the wall, Riley gave in to her curiosity and walked over to look at them. One was of a smiling, older couple standing in front of what looked like a horse corral. The man was wearing a cowboy hat and had his arm around the woman's shoulders while she leaned into him slightly. From the man's angular jaw and the woman's warm golden-brown eyes, it was easy to figure out that they were Cade's parents.

Riley turned her attention from that photo to the one beside it. This one was of Cade and another man that could only be his brother. Besides being tall and broad-shouldered like the Marshal, the man also had the same dark hair, chiseled features, and golden-brown eyes that Cade did. A girl would have a hard time resisting either of them, she thought.

A noise behind Riley interrupted her musings, and she turned to see Cade coming out of the bedroom, overnight bag in hand. Embarrassed to be caught looking at his personal things, Riley flushed and quickly set the picture frame back on the shelf.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to..."

But Cade only shrugged. "That's okay," he said.

Riley tucked her hair behind her ear. "Is this your brother?" she asked, glancing at the picture.

Cade set his suitcase down on the floor and walked over to stand beside her. "Yeah," he said. "That was taken a couple of years ago out at my parents' ranch."

She nodded. "Does he live in Texas then?"

"Madoc?" Cade shook his head. "No. He's a U.S. Marshal out in Denver."

Riley looked at him in surprise. "Your brother's a Marshal, too?"

His mouth quirked. "Yeah," he said. "I'd guess you'd say I'm following in his footsteps, though I'd never admit that to him."

She smiled, her gaze going back to the photo again. "You two sound like you're close."

"I suppose you could say that," Cade replied. "We fought like crazy when we were younger, and we're still competitive as hell, but there's nothing we wouldn't do for each other."

Riley's thoughts automatically went to her own family, and she chewed on her lower lip. "My sisters and I are really close like that, too," she said softly. "Before I was in Witness Protection, I'd get together with at least one of them every weekend. Sometimes, they'd come to Manhattan and we'd go shopping or see a show, and then, sometimes, I'd go up to Connecticut to spend the weekend with one of them." She shook her head. "God, it seems

like a lifetime ago.”

Beside her, Cade furrowed his brow. Once again, he realized how hard being in the program had been for Riley. He suddenly had an almost irresistible urge to take her in his arms. Then, surprised that he had felt that strongly for her plight after what she had put him through, and unsure what to make of it, Cade cleared his throat. “We should get going,” he said.

Over the next several days, Cade and Riley fell into a routine of sorts. With little to keep them occupied, they spent the time either watching television or reading the books they had brought with them. By the afternoon of the second day, however, they had exhausted both forms of entertainment, so they had ended up talking instead.

Riley was a lot more open than he thought she would be, especially considering how they hadn’t gotten off to a great start with each other. Not only did she tell him about herself and her family, as well as the small town in Connecticut where she had grown up, but she also confessed to him about how nervous she’d been moving to Manhattan after she’d graduated from college, and how she had feared she wouldn’t be able to make it at the financial firm where she’d gotten hired.

And as Cade listened to her talk, he found himself reassessing his opinion of her again and again. Despite what he had first thought when he’d met her, Riley Barnett was actually a lot more likeable than he had ever expected her to be.

In turn, Cade found himself opening up to Riley about his own life. Not just about his childhood back in Texas, either, but about what it was like growing up in a family where becoming a Marshal was almost a forgone conclusion. He’d never even been able to talk to anyone about the doubts he’d had when he’d applied to the Marshals Service, but to his surprise, he found himself telling Riley about all the fears and reservations he’d had when it came to living up to his family’s expectations. He would have liked to have thought that the only reason he was talking this freely to Riley was because there was nothing else to do at the safe house except talk, but the truth was, he found her extremely easy to talk to.

And she wasn’t hard on the eyes, either, he had to admit. The other night, he’d gotten a glimpse of her in those little shorts and tank top she slept in. The sight had brought him to a full stop just outside her bedroom door. She’d been leaning over the bed, straightening the sheets when he’d walked by on his way to the shower. The position had pulled her skimpy shorts even tighter and given him a glimpse of her absolutely awe-inspiring asscheeks. He’d almost groaned out loud, and probably would have if he hadn’t thought she would hear. So, instead, he’d taken a cold shower, and then gone back downstairs where he spent half the night staring at the ceiling.

For her part, Riley was becoming just as enamored with Cade. She was amazed by how well they were getting along. She hadn’t spent this much time talking to a guy in five years. Even though she and Cade came from different backgrounds, they shared a lot of the same viewpoints and had a lot more in common than she would have thought possible. Not only was family very important to both of them, but they also had the same taste in things like movies and books. They were also both into physical fitness, particularly jogging.

Of course, talk of getting out and running reminded Riley even more of how she hated being cooped up in the safe house. But then something dawned on her. Cooped up in a safe house or not, it was the most fun she’d ever had with a man, and she had to admit that Cade really wasn’t such a bad guy. When he wasn’t spanking her, of course.

The thought of the spankings he given her made Riley blush, and she quickly focused her attention on the cards in her hand. Cade had found the deck in one of the drawers in the kitchen that morning and asked if she’d wanted to play a game or two. Riley didn’t play cards that often, unless one counted solitaire, of course, but she was up for something new, so she’d eagerly joined him at the kitchen table.

They started out with gin rummy, but after a few games, Cade suggested poker.

“I don’t know how to play,” Riley said.

He looked up from shuffling the cards, surprise in his golden-brown eyes. “You’ve never played poker?”

“I never learned,” she admitted with a shrug.

He shook his head. “Well, you can’t spend this much time with a man from Texas and not learn how to play poker,” he told her with a grin. “It would be considered a crime against my cowboy heritage.”

So, Cade spent the next several hours teaching her. Though Riley had to admit she was having a difficult time paying attention to most of what he was trying to teach her, especially when he came around to her side of the table to look at her cards. With the hard wall of his chest pressing against her back as he leaned over her, she couldn’t seem to focus on anything but how amazing he felt. How she managed to learn the first thing about playing poker under those circumstances, she couldn’t even begin to guess, but after a dozen or so hands, she had finally begun to get the hang of it.

“You know,” she said as she picked up one of the M&M’s they were using as chips for the game and popped it into her mouth. “These are great, but we have nothing in the way of real food to eat for dinner tonight.”

On the other side of the table, Cade stopped shuffling the cards to look up at her. “Really?”

She almost laughed. “Really,” she said. “We have been here for almost a week, you know.”

He shrugged. “We’ll just order pizza again.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t think I’d ever say this, but I’m sick of pizza,” she told him. “We had it three nights this week already. I’ve got to have something different. Besides, we’re out of milk, too.”

He sighed. “If I go to the store, will you promise to stay put this time?”

Riley felt her face color at the memory of what had happened the last time Cade had gone shopping, or more precisely, what had happened after he’d come back. “No more runs to the video store,” she said, and then added, “Promise.”

Cade’s eyes narrowed warningly. “You’d better not,” he told her.

Riley watched as he got to his feet, her gaze traveling down the length of his body and back up again. Since going by his apartment to pick up some clothes, Cade had traded in his business suit for jeans and a button-up shirt, and though she had to admit that while he looked extremely handsome in the suit, he looked even more gorgeous now. Especially the way those tight jeans showed off his great butt.

Blushing at the direction of her thoughts, Riley pushed back her chair and stood up, then followed Cade to the door. Once it closed behind him, she leaned against it and breathed out a sigh. God, what a hottie! She could really fall for a guy like him. Darn it, why did she have to move again just when she’d found someone she liked?

Though Cade didn’t think Riley would be foolish enough to leave the safe house again, he wasted no time getting what they needed at the grocery store. Even so, it was almost dark by the time he turned down the street where the safe house was located. As he neared the house, he saw a dark SUV just pulling away from the curb.

Cade’s gut clenched. Was it the same SUV that Riley claimed she’d seen outside her apartment building? The same one that he’d seen driving by the other night? He had no way to be sure.

Cade tightened his grip on the wheel, torn for a moment as to what he should do. Should he follow the SUV, or

check on Riley first? he wondered. His fear for the beautiful blonde outweighing his desire to check out the SUV, he pulled into the driveway and hurried up the front steps.

Seeing no signs of forced entry, Cade felt himself relax a little. But that didn't stop fear from continuing to grip him. The thought that even now Riley could be lying on the floor bleeding to death from some hit man's gunshot made Cade's hand tremble as he hurriedly punched in the code to unlock the door.

Hand resting on the weapon on his hip, Cade took a deep breath and threw open the door.

For a moment, Cade just stood there in disbelief. Whatever he had expected to find, it wasn't the scene that met his gaze. Riley was leaning against the back of the smaller of the two couches, talking on her cell phone. She looked startled to see him, as if she hadn't expected him back quite so soon, but at the glower he gave her, she hastily brought her conversation to a close.

"I have to go, Mom. I'll call you when I get settled in my new place," she said quickly, and then, without waiting for a reply, snapped her cell phone closed and dropped it back into her purse with a hasty nonchalance that suggested she would rather he not have seen her talking on the phone.

And with good reason, Cade thought as he slammed the door shut.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"I...uhm...I was just talking to my mom," Riley stammered.

Cade ground his jaw. The relief he had felt at finding Riley safe and unharmed when he'd walked in had been replaced by anger at seeing her on the cell phone. "That much I figured out," he growled. "What I meant was, what the hell were you doing talking to your mother after everything I told you?"

Riley shrugged. "Well, she called me," she explained. "And I couldn't just hang up on her. It would be rude. Besides, I had to tell her that I was moving again, and that we couldn't use the mail anymore because it was too dangerous."

"And calling her on the phone isn't?" he said incredulously, unable to believe how Riley could be so smart, and yet be so stupid at the same time. He shook his head. "You know, I could give you a fifteen minute lecture on how easy it is for someone to tap into a cell phone conversation, but I don't think it'd sink in. It seems that the only time I can get through to you is when I'm spanking you, so I'll take that approach instead."

At his words, Riley's eyes went wide, but before she could so much as take a step back, Cade closed the distance between them and grabbed her arm. Jerking her forward, he bent her over the back of the couch in one swift motion, and then held her there while he peppered her jean-clad bottom with quick, hard spansks.

She began protesting immediately, squirming and kicking to free herself. But Cade ignored it, instead wrapping his arm around her slender waist so that he could hold onto her more tightly as he continued to bring his hand down over and over on her wiggling bottom. Somewhere in the back of his mind he remembered telling himself that he should cut her a break, but seeing her talking on her cell phone had made him forget all about that. Once again, she needed to be reminded what the rules were, and why it was important that she follow them.

But the sight of that incredible ass of hers wiggling all over the place was almost enough to make him completely forget about spanking Riley altogether. A growing tightness in his jeans had him wanting to instead just yank down her jeans and thrust himself inside her. But he knew he couldn't do that. Not only would he never force himself on Riley like that, but the reality was that she needed this spanking. If she didn't learn to start doing what she was told and being more careful, she was going to get herself killed. That thought steeled his resolve.

"Owwwww!" she protested as his hand came down again. "That really...owwww!...hurts!"

“Good!” Cade growled. “Then maybe you’ll remember this the next time you want to go off and do something else foolish!”

She let out another high-pitched yelp. “You can’t...owwww!...expect me to just...owwww!...cut all ties with my...owwww!...family!” she told him. “I won’t...owwww!...do it!”

Cade’s jaw tightened. “You’d damn well better do it, Riley, because if you don’t, you’re going to wind up dead,” he said harshly. “Is that what you want?”

He could tell from the way Riley stiffened that he had finally gotten her attention, but that still didn’t stop him from delivering a hard smack to the sweet-spot right where her asscheeks met the tops of her thighs.

“Is it?” he demanded.

In the silence, there was a sound outside, like the crunching of gravel underfoot, and Cade jerked his head up to listen.

Unaware that he was no longer paying attention to her, Riley turned her head to glare at him over her shoulder. “Of course it’s not, you...”

But the words were muffled as Cade clamped his hand over her mouth. Infuriated that he wouldn’t let her finish calling him the nasty name he had coming to him, she began to struggle to free herself, but his hold on her only tightened.

“Quiet!” he hissed in her ear. “There’s someone outside!”

Riley immediately went still at his words, forgetting all about her stinging bottom as terror gripped her. Oh God, she thought. They had found her!

Taking his hand from her mouth, Cade pulled her upright and slid his gun from the holster at his side. “I’m going to go check it out,” he said softly. “Stay here.”

She caught his arm. “By myself?” she asked fearfully.

He gave her a hard look. “Just do as I tell you, and you’ll be fine.”

Riley opened her mouth to protest, but before she could get the words out, the door burst open and a man stepped in, a gun already thundering in his hand.

## Chapter 5

Cade moved faster than Riley could ever have thought possible. Grabbing her around the waist, he threw her to the floor behind the couch and covered her body with his. Above them, the couch exploded in a flurry of stuffing as bullets tore through it with alarming speed. Huddled there behind it, she knew the piece of furniture was providing very little protection, and that the only thing between her and certain death at that moment was Cade.

Riley barely had time to think about his unselfish act before Cade was up and returning fire with his own weapon. She didn’t know if he hit the assailant or not, but regardless, the would-be assassin stopped shooting, and she heard the sound of retreating footsteps.

From where she lay on the floor, Riley looked up at Cade. He still had his weapon pointed toward the door. “Is he gone?” she asked softly.

Cade looked down at her. “Stay here,” he ordered. “And stay down.”

Realizing that Cade meant to go after the gunman, Riley opened her mouth to protest, but the Marshal had already gotten to his feet and was racing toward the front door.

Her heart pounding, Riley knelt behind the couch, trembling. What if the gunman came back? she thought. Or what if there was a second man, and the first one was just meant to lure Cade away? Without Cade, she knew she wouldn't stand a chance against a hit man.

Cade's order to stay where she was echoed in Riley's mind, and she chewed on her lower lip, debating whether to disobey it or not. To heck with this, she thought. Ignoring the Marshal's command, she scrambled to her feet and ran out into the night after him.

It was raining when Cade ran outside, and in the dim light of the streetlamp, he could make out the figure of a man beside a dark SUV halfway down the block on the other side of the street. So much for Riley being paranoid, he thought bitterly.

Tightening his grip on the weapon in his hand, Cade raced down the street toward the man, only to slow his steps as he drew nearer. He watched in amazement as the man, who was clearly oblivious to Cade's presence, fumbled with his car keys. He had locked the doors? Cade thought in disbelief. What kind of idiot hit man was this guy?

Lifting his gun, Cade leveled it at the man. "Federal Marshal!" he yelled. "Freeze!"

Startled, the man jerked his head around to stare at Cade in surprise. The rain was really starting to come down now, and in the near darkness, Cade could make out a broad face with a long nose, and a pair of close-set eyes.

"Turn around and put your hands where I can see them!" Cade ordered.

The man didn't move. Probably weighing his options, Cade thought. His finger firmly on the trigger, Cade took a step closer to the man.

"Put your hands where I can see them!" he repeated. "Now!"

Letting out a heavy sigh, the man lifted his hands in the air and started to turn to face him. Then, without warning, he turned and bolted.

"Shit!" Cade muttered.

Deciding that it would be too dangerous to take a shot at the man with all the houses in the vicinity, Cade gave chase instead. Though the man took Cade down sidewalks and in between houses, it was obvious he wasn't in that good of shape because within minutes, he was already starting to slow down.

Cade was just about to pick up speed when he heard the sound of running footsteps behind him. Did the hit man have a partner? he wondered. Stopping in his tracks, he spun around, weapon at the ready, only to stare in disbelief when he saw Riley coming up behind him. Like him, she was soaked to the skin, her long hair wet, her T-shirt molding to the curves of her breasts. Damn, she looked good, he thought. Then he ground his jaw as he realized that she had deliberately disobeyed his order and followed him.

Throwing a quick look over his shoulder, Cade saw the fleeing assailant disappear around a corner in the distance. Swearing under his breath, he lowered his weapon to glower at Riley. "What are you hell are you doing?" he demanded angrily. "I told you to stay at the safe house!"

"I was afraid that the hit man might come back," she explained, and then looked around. "Did you get him?"

Cade clenched his jaw. "No!" he growled. "But I was just about to catch him. That was until you showed up. Now, I can't go after him."

She hugged herself with her arms and blinked up at him through the rain. "Why not?"

"Because I won't have you following behind me, and I won't leave you here in the middle of street, that's why!" he snapped, shoving his gun back into the holster on his belt. "I can't believe you came after me!"

"And I can't believe you let the guy get away!" she shot back. "I thought Marshals were supposed to be in good shape. Why couldn't you catch up to him? It didn't seem like he was running that fast to me."

Cade clenched his jaw at her insult. That was the thanks he got for risking his life to save hers? Could she possibly be any more irritating? God, he couldn't wait to hand her over to another Marshal. "If I didn't have to get you out of here, I'd put you over my knee and spank your ass right now for that, you ungrateful little brat!" he ground out.

Riley didn't even bother to look the least bit contrite as she glared up at him. "In case you haven't noticed, those spankings of yours don't have the effect you seem to think," she told him.

"That's just because I haven't spanked you hard enough yet!" he snapped.

Riley opened her mouth to retort, only to shut it again when he firmly took her arm and steered her back the way they had come. Staying at the safe house now was out of the question, he told himself, but they had to go back there long enough to grab his car. Cade's first instinct was to take Riley to the District Office in Seattle, but then he realized that there probably wouldn't be anyone there at this time of night. So, he needed to come up with another plan until he could talk to his boss. He could only imagine what Conner was going to have to say when he heard about what had happened.

To Cade's relief, the local police hadn't shown up at the safe house yet, which saved him a lot of hassle and explanation. But they would be there soon enough, and he wanted to be gone before they did.

As he led Riley up the street, he noticed that the black SUV that had been parked by the curb was gone. Damn. He had hoped to get the plate number.

"Where are we going?" Riley asked after they had gotten their stuff from the house and were safely in the car.

Cade gave her a sidelong glance. Neither of them had changed out of their wet clothes, and she was shivering. "A hotel," he told her, reaching over to turn on the heat.

"Why aren't we going to another safe house?" she demanded.

His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror to see if they were being followed. "That has to be arranged. It's not like we have a dozen empty houses in every town, you know," he said dryly. "And for all I know, they might just want to get you completely out of the area. But I'll leave that up to someone else. Until then, we'll just stay in a hotel."

Riley supposed that made sense. Hugging her arms around herself, she turned her head to stare out the window. The concept of her life being in danger had always been just that, a concept. But after getting shot at tonight, she realized just how real the danger was. If Cade hadn't been there to protect her, she had no doubt that she would be dead right now. And she hadn't even thanked him for what he'd done. Instead, she had berated him for not running after the guy fast enough to catch him. Even as she'd said the words, she'd known they were untrue. If she weren't an avid runner herself, she never would have been able to keep up with Cade back there. The real reason Cade hadn't caught the guy was because she had followed him.

Feeling more than a little ashamed at the memory of what she'd said to Cade, she turned her head slightly to look at him beneath her lashes. She really wanted to apologize, to tell him it had been fear and stress that had made her say those things, but for some reason, she couldn't seem to get the words out. And by the time she did get up the courage to say something, Cade was already pulling into the parking lot of a well-known hotel chain.

Promising herself that she would apologize to him when they got settled into a room, Riley tucked her still slightly wet hair behind an ear in an effort to make herself more presentable as she walked into the hotel lobby with Cade. The Marshal registered for a room quickly, asking for one that was neither near the elevator nor the stairwells. If the desk clerk seemed surprised by the request, he made no comment as he handed Cade two sets of keys.

Having grabbed their bags from the car before they had gone into the hotel, Cade and Riley went directly up to the room. Holding the door open for her, Cade switched on the light in the entryway, and then instructed her to wait there while he closed the drapes.

Hugging herself with her arms, Riley let her gaze wander over the room. With its institutional-style furniture, it looked like every other hotel room she'd ever been in, she thought. Her brow furrowed a little when she saw that there was only one bed, though. She wondered if she should point that out to Cade, but then decided against it. He probably wouldn't be in the mood.

Pulling the heavy drapes closed, Cade turned back to her. "Why don't you get out of those wet clothes and go take a shower?" he suggested.

She chewed on her lower lip. A shower did sound really good about now, she thought. She supposed that apology could wait until later. "Okay," she said, and then, added softly, "You'll stay here, right?"

He nodded. "I'll be right out here."

Relieved to hear that, Riley picked up her bag and walked into the bathroom. Closing the door, she leaned back against it for a long moment. Out in the other room, she could hear Cade talking to his boss on the phone, his deep voice strong and sure as he explained what had happened at the safe house.

Considering that she had just gone through a real live assassination attempt, Riley was surprised she wasn't feeling more terrified at the moment. But she was actually remarkably calm, she realized as she stripped off her sodden clothes. Maybe she was just in denial, she told herself. Or maybe it was because she knew she would be safe with Cade. She wondered what it was about him that made her feel that way. None of the other U.S. Marshals guarding her had ever made her feel quite so protected.

Remembering the feel of Cade's strong arms as he had wrapped them around her to shield her from the hit man's bullets back at the safe house, Riley let out a sigh and stepped into the tub.

In the bedroom, Cade flipped his cell phone closed with a sigh. Well, that had gone better than he had thought it would. He'd fully expected Conner to ream him a new one for letting the shooter get away, but to Cade's surprise, his boss had commended him on the way he'd handled the situation. Conner had even been impressed with Cade for having the forethought to take Riley to a hotel.

But Cade wasn't as impressed, not with the hotel plan, and certainly not with letting the shooter get away. It had been pure luck, not his skill as a Marshal that had kept Riley alive today, he thought bitterly. He never should have left her alone at the safe house to begin with. If he had gotten there just a few minutes later, or if one of those bullets had found their mark...

He swallowed hard. The thought of Riley getting shot, or worse, was too painful to bear thinking about.

As he stood there listening to the sounds of the Riley moving around in the bathroom, he suddenly realized that this assignment wasn't simply about just keeping a witness in the program safe anymore. He might as well admit it. Somewhere along the way, he had developed feelings for Riley Barnett. Feelings that were growing stronger by the minute. More than being unprofessional, though, which it definitely was, it was pointless, because nothing could ever come of it. Riley was going to be relocated soon, probably hundreds, even thousands of miles away.

When that happened, he would never see her again.

Cade shook his head. He didn't even understand how it had happened. He could see being physically attracted to Riley; she was beautiful and sexy, not to mention having a great body. But the things he was feeling went way beyond physical attraction, and definitely way beyond anything he'd ever felt for a woman before. But how could he fall for a woman who irritated him so much? And Riley could infuriate him like no other woman he'd ever known. So, how could this have happened? He didn't know the answer to that; he just knew it had.

The bathroom door opened then, interrupting his thoughts, and Cade looked up to see Riley coming into the bedroom. She had showered and changed into those skimpy shorts and curve-hugging tank top that had caused him more than one sleepless night since he'd first caught sight of her wearing them.

Cade cleared his throat and forced himself to tear his gaze away from her long, shapely legs. "I talked to my boss while you were in the shower," he told her. "He's going to arrange for another safe house, but until he has one set up, we're going to have to stay here."

Riley nodded. "Okay." She wet her lips in what he was sure was an unconscious gesture, and he almost groaned. "I...I wanted to thank you for what you did back at the safe house. You saved my life."

His jaw tightened. "I was just doing my job."

She looked away "I know," she said. "But I haven't exactly made that easy for you, and I'm sorry."

Damn right you haven't, Cade wanted to growl, but instead, he simply shrugged off her apology. "It's okay," he said gruffly. And then realizing how hard it had been for her to apologize at all, he added, "I know this whole thing hasn't been easy for you. Your life has been pretty hard the past five years. It's understandable if you get frustrated with it every now and then."

She gave him a small smile. "Thanks for understanding."

"No problem," he told her. He ran his hand through his hair. "Do you think you'll be okay out here while I take a quick shower?"

She nodded. "I'll be fine."

He bent to pick up his bag. "Don't go near the window," he warned. "And don't open the door to anyone."

"I won't," she assured him.

Maybe Riley was finally getting it, Cade thought as he walked into the bathroom. Of course, all it had taken was someone shooting at her. But at least now, she would do as he told her.

Not wanting to leave Riley alone any longer than necessary, Cade made the shower a quick one. Pulling on the extra pair of jeans he'd packed and a clean shirt, he slid his gun holster onto his belt, and then shoved his cell phone, keys and wallet all back into his pockets. Picking up his overnight bag, he opened the door and stepped into the bedroom, only to stop in his tracks when he realized that it was empty.

Fear gripped him. He couldn't have left Riley alone for more than five minutes, he thought. And in that time, he'd heard no screams and no scuffle, and yet Cade knew that the bastard must have taken her. But why would the man kidnap Riley? he wondered. Why not just shoot her and be done with it? Then again, did the man's reasons really matter? Cade had to find her!

Dropping his bag onto the floor with a thud, Cade crossed the room in two long strides and yanked open the door to see Riley standing in the hallway, the room key in her hand outstretched as if she'd just been about to stick it in

the slot.

Relief coursing through him, Cade grabbed Riley by the arm and pulled her into the room, letting the door slam close behind her. "Where the hell were you?" he demanded.

She looked up at him with those big blue eyes of hers. "I went to get some ice," she said softly.

His brows drew together as he noticed the plastic bucket in her hand. "Ice? You went to get ice?" he said incredulously. "After everything that happened tonight, you're still taking chances and foolishly risking your life!"

Her gaze dropped to the ice bucket for a moment. "I guess I wasn't thinking," she said.

Cade swore under his breath. How could he have thought she'd ever do as she was told? The woman had some pathological condition that prevented her from listening to anyone.

"That's your problem, Riley! You never think!" he growled. "You were almost killed back at that safe house tonight. If that bastard had followed us here, he could have grabbed you the moment you stepped foot outside the room, and there's not a damn thing I could have done. Hell, I probably wouldn't even have heard anything over the water running in the shower."

Riley chewed on her lower lip as she looked up at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'll be more careful next time."

Cade's jaw tightened. "I'm going to make sure that there isn't a next time!"

Taking the bucket of ice from Riley's hand, Cade slammed it down on the desk and marched her over to the bed. In one swift motion, he sat down on the edge of it and dragged her over his knee, then lifted his hand to bring it down on her upturned bottom in a flurry of quick, hard spansks. This time, he told himself, he wasn't going to stop until he was sure she wasn't going to ever do anything that foolish again.

Riley bit her lip to stifle her cries; they were in a hotel after all, and she didn't want anyone to hear. The smacks stung fiercely through the thin material of her shorts, though, and part of her wanted to protest each and every stinging spank he gave her. But the other part of her knew she deserved this spanking. She couldn't believe she had been so stupid leaving the room like that. Cade was right. She didn't think. She just did whatever she felt like doing without any thought to the consequences. This wasn't about just some silly set of rules anymore. Someone had really tried to kill her tonight, and she had just foolishly risked her life for a bucket of ice. Truth be told, she had been risking her life ever since she'd come into the Witness Protection Program. And her carelessness had finally caught up with her. A spanking was the least that she deserved, she thought bitterly. So, she submitted willingly to Cade's firm hand, hoping that this time, it would have an effect.

But as Cade's hand continued to come down over and over on her poor, defenseless ass, she couldn't help but start to squirm and kick. She might deserve it, but yikes, did it sting! It didn't help that her shorts seemed to be riding up even higher with each spank to give him easy access to her bare cheeks.

"Owwwww!" Riley finally squealed, unable to keep silent any longer when his hand came down on the tender area of her sit-spots for what must be the umpteenth time. "Cade, please..."

But it seemed Cade was determined to make sure she learned her lesson this time because he only spanked her that much harder, and Riley pressed her face into the soft bedding to muffle her squeals of protest. Her ass felt like it was on fire!

Just then, Cade stopped spanking her, and she breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that he was done. But to her shock, Riley felt him grab the waistband of her shorts. With one quick yank, he pulled them all the way down to the middle of her thighs! Oh my God, she thought. She wasn't wearing any panties!

Her face flaming scarlet, she craned her neck to look at him over her shoulder. “Wh-what are you doing?” she squealed.

Cade lifted a brow. “You said it yourself,” he told her. “These spankings don’t seem to be having the desired effect. So, I’m going to make sure this one does.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but his hand was already coming down on her bare bottom. She inhaled sharply at how much more the spanks stung now than they had before. She wouldn’t have believed that the shorts could have provided that much protection, but apparently, they had.

What made it even worse, though, was the knowledge that she was completely exposed to Cade now. Riley tried to clench her cheeks tightly together, hoping to hide her pussy from his view, but that only made the spanks sting that much more, and she quickly gave up on the idea. To heck with it, she decided. He probably wasn’t even paying attention to her more feminine attributes, anyway. Clearly, she thought as his hand found her tender spots, he was only interested in spanking her.

Even so, he couldn’t help but see her pussy, she thought. The idea alone was enough to start a rebellious tingle between her legs. It wasn’t her fault, really. She hadn’t been with a guy in a long time, and regardless of the fact that Cade was in the process of spanking her right now, he was still utterly gorgeous.

Oh God, how could she even be thinking things like that? He was spanking her!

So what? she told herself. She shouldn’t be complaining. This was the first time she’d been even half-naked with a guy in a long while. If a spanking was what it took, then maybe she should volunteer for one more often.

She suddenly realized the spanking wasn’t stinging nearly as much as it had when Cade had first started. That wasn’t a surprise, she thought. She was barely paying attention to anything other than her pussy, which was getting wetter by the second!

Riley wondered if Cade could tell she was becoming excited. She hoped so. Because if not, she was going to have to do something extreme. That thought brought her up short. Was she saying that she wanted to have sex with Cade? When had that happened?

Before she could puzzle that out, the spanking was over and Riley was back on her feet. She didn’t bother to pull up her shorts, but just stood there, panting for breath and cupping her flaming cheeks with her hands. Lifting her gaze, she looked up at Cade from beneath lowered lashes. Her breath caught at the look of anguish on his handsome face. He wasn’t mad at her, she realized; he was worried about her.

He pulled her close. “You scared the hell out of me when I walked out of the bathroom and found you gone,” he said hoarsely. “Don’t ever do that to me again, Riley.”

Riley gazed up at him. This wasn’t just a U.S. Marshal talking, she thought. This was a man who was concerned about someone he cared for. She knew that in her heart, without a doubt, and that made her want him even more. She leaned closer to him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “It won’t ever happen again.”

But Cade didn’t seem to have heard her. Instead, he was gazing intently at her lips. Knowing the effect it would have on him, she slowly wet her lips with her tongue. He must have been as close to the edge as she was because that little bit was all it took.

With a groan, Cade slid his hand into her long hair and lowered his head to cover her mouth with his. Riley didn’t resist, but instead pulled him even closer, and as he molded her against him, she could feel the heat from his body. It had been so long since she’d been with a man, and she reveled in the sensation.

The kiss went on and on until Riley didn't think she could breathe. Only then, did Cade lift his mouth from hers to trail hot kisses down her neck. His nibbling made her shiver and, clutching him to her even more tightly, she tossed her head back with a sigh. God, that felt so good!

Still heady from his kisses, she was barely even aware that Cade had stopped nibbling on her neck to urgently slide his hands underneath the hem of her tank top. Desperately wanting to feel his hands on her naked body, Riley lifted her arms over her head so that he could take off her top. Suddenly realizing that her shorts were still banded down around her thighs, she wiggled her hips to push them the rest of the way down.

Cade's eyes turned to molten gold as he studied her, and Riley felt herself blush as he took in her rounded breasts and slender waist before it dropped to the gentle curve of her hips and long, shapely legs.

Standing there completely naked while he was still fully clothed made Riley feel utterly wanton and terribly shy at the same time, and she would have reached for the buttons on his shirt, but he caught her hands in his and pulled her close to kiss her again. This time, his hands gently cupped her breasts for one long delicious moment before sliding down her back to cup her red-hot cheeks. Riley gasped against his mouth as he squeezed her freshly-spanked bottom. She hadn't realized how tender it still was! And yet the firm pressure of his fingers had her pussy clenching with excitement, and she moaned as she realized how wet she was getting. Deciding that the foreplay had gone on long enough, she slid her hands up the front of his shirt and began to savagely pull at the buttons.

With a soft chuckle, Cade released her to lend his assistance, and within moments, his clothes had joined hers on the floor. Now it was her turn to study him, and Riley let her hungry gaze rove over his naked body. God, he was so gorgeous! From his broad shoulders and muscular chest to his tight abs and long, powerful legs, he was perfect, she thought. And to top it all off, his extremely hard cock was just waiting for her attention! She would have knelt down in front of him and taken him in her mouth right then, but he didn't give her the chance. Instead, he took her hands and nudged her backward until she was up against the edge of the bed.

More than ready to have him inside her, Riley lay back on the bed, but Cade surprised her by leaning down to slowly kiss his way up the inside of her legs. Perhaps a little more foreplay would be okay, she thought as he alternated from one leg to the other.

But Cade seemed determined to take his time, and within moments, Riley was impatient again. Sliding her fingers into his hair, she tried to urge him up to her pussy, but he refused to play the game her way. Instead, he stopped at mid-thigh to tease and nibble at the skin there. While what he was doing felt incredibly wonderful, it was also incredibly frustrating, and she heard herself groan in exasperation. Only then did he begin to kiss his way up her legs again.

But even once Cade reached the junction of her thighs, he continued to tease her. He slowly trailed his tongue along either side of her pussy lips, dipping inside occasionally, but never allowing himself to come too close to her throbbing clit.

Riley groaned again in even deeper frustration. At the sound, Cade lifted his head to look at her with amusement.

"Something wrong?" he asked softly.

"Stop teasing me, Cade," she begged. "Please."

His mouth quirked, he lowered his head to immediately focus his attention directly on her plump clit.

Sliding his hands up her legs, he cupped her still-stinging ass in a tight grip that made her gasp. The combination of sensations was so intense that it was almost too much, but at the same time, it felt so amazing that she didn't want him to ever stop. Lacing her fingers into his hair to hold him in place, she slowly began to rotate her hips in

time with his licking.

It didn't take long for her orgasm to build, and within moment, she was crying out as wave after wave of pleasure rushed over her. Somehow, Cade seemed to know exactly how she liked it, and his light, feathery licks let her ride out the orgasm for an unbelievably long time. Only then did he stop and climb into bed with her.

Riley had planned to return the oral favor, but Cade didn't give her the chance, instead slipping between her legs to slide his hard cock up and down the opening of her pussy. Realizing that he meant to tease her again, she wrapped her legs around his hips to immediately draw him inside of her.

"No more teasing," she growled, hooking her hand behind his head and dragging him down for another searing kiss.

Cade didn't argue, but kissed her passionately as he thrust himself deeply inside her.

Time lost all meaning for Riley then as he continued to move in and out of her. As excited as he obviously was, she was amazed at his stamina. Her orgasm seemed to have no beginning or end, but was just one, long, glorious burst of pleasure.

Riley didn't think it was possible for it to get any better until she heard Cade groan with his own release. Knowing that she had the ability to make him come so hard made her own orgasm that much more powerful, and she clamped her legs more tightly around him as he pushed his hard cock deep inside her and held himself there. The pleasure that rippled through her as she came again was so intense that it almost brought her to tears. That had never happened to her before, and she could only wonder what it was about this man that had brought on such powerful emotions.

## Chapter 6

The next morning, Riley awoke to find herself curled up against Cade's side, her head pillowed on his muscular chest, her arms thrown over him possessively. With a sigh, she cuddled closer to him. It had been so long since she'd been with a man, especially one so strong and protective, and she had missed it more than she'd realized.

As she lay there, her lips curved into a smile. Last night had been amazing, she thought. No man had ever made love to her so passionately and completely as Cade had. That first frenzied lovemaking session had been followed by several more, each slower and more tender than the one before it. Oh yes, she thought again, it had definitely been amazing.

And, she suddenly realized with a sickening lurch, it had also been a really big mistake. While she could admit that the sex was the best she'd ever had, sleeping with Cade had definitely been a stupid thing to do. But she hadn't been able to stop herself. She had wanted Cade, plain and simple, and so she hadn't bothered to think about what it would mean.

She wasn't the type to sleep with a man on a whim. Usually, it took her weeks of dating a guy before she even considered it, and that was only after she really fell for him. When she did fall for a guy, though, she fell hard. And after making love with Cade last night, she had fallen for the sexy Marshal with a really big thud! She would have to keep her distance from him at the next safe house, she told herself, or else risk losing her heart to the man altogether.

As if on cue, Cade's cell phone rang. He seemed to be sleeping so deeply that for a moment, Riley wondered if he would even hear it, but when he immediately reached out to grab it, she realized that he must already have been awake.

Though she had been expecting the Marshals Service to call, Riley couldn't help but let out a sigh as she listened

to Cade talk to the caller about transferring her to another safe house. From what she could hear, it sounded like they wanted to move her right away. She had hoped she and Cade would be able to stay at the hotel a little while longer.

Assuring the caller that they would be there, wherever “there” was, Cade flipped his phone closed and set it down on the bedside table. Knowing she couldn’t pretend to be asleep any longer, Riley held the sheet to her breasts with one hand and used the other to push herself into a sitting position.

Tucking her hair behind an ear, Riley tried to ignore the way her pulse leaped at the sight of Cade’s tousled hair and dark stubble. She hadn’t known it was possible for anyone to look that gorgeous the first thing in the morning. “Do they have another safe house ready?” she asked.

Cade nodded. “My boss wants us to meet him at the Seattle office.”

Riley said nothing. She wondered if Cade was as uncomfortable as she was after the night of unbridled passion they’d spent together. She wished she could think of something to say to make the situation less awkward, but nothing would come to mind. So instead, she just sat there, clutching the sheet to her breasts. The same sheet that was riding low on his hips to reveal his well-muscled chest and tight, sexy abs, she noticed. Oh God! If she didn’t get out of bed soon, she was going end up jumping him!

Riley was still trying to figure out how to make a graceful exit from the bed when Cade cleared his throat. “I told him we’d be there as soon as we could.”

Her face colored. “I’d better go get dressed then.”

Realizing she’d have to leave the sheet where it was or else leave Cade completely naked, Riley avoided his gaze as she blushinglly slid out of bed. Naked, she scooped her clothes up from the floor, and then, grabbing her bag as quickly as she could, she padded into the bathroom.

Cade watched Riley go, his body responding to the sight of her nakedness with an eagerness that made him groan. He’d like nothing better than to drag her back into bed with him and spend the day making love to her. She was just that amazing.

Last night had been incredible. Riley was not only more beautiful than he had imagined, but more passionate than he could have dreamed. He could make love to her a thousand times, and still never get enough, he thought. And waking up with her in his arms that morning had felt good. Too good, he told himself.

As enjoyable as the sex had been, there was a part of Cade that regretted taking her to bed last night. He’d known all along that Riley was the kind of woman he could fall for, the kind of woman he could see himself spending the rest of his life with. He’d also known that nothing could ever come of their relationship, not when she could be leaving at any time. But he had allowed himself to get close to her anyway.

Sleeping with her had been stupid not just because the relationship couldn’t go anywhere, but because having sex with a witness was just downright unprofessional. He was supposed to be protecting her, not sleeping with her. If this ever got out, his career in the Marshals would be over.

Swearing under his breath, he got out of bed and collected his clothes from the floor.

When Riley walked out of the bathroom half an hour later, it was to find Cade already dressed and waiting for her. He had ditched the jeans and button-up shirt she’d gotten used to seeing him wear in favor of a suit and tie, she noticed, but he still looked just as gorgeous.

“Ready to go?” he asked, and Riley nodded.

They drove up to Seattle in silence, Cade obviously as preoccupied with his thoughts as she was with hers. Was he regretting last night as much as she was? she wondered.

Once inside the building where the U.S. Marshals had their offices, Cade led her directly to the one belonging to his superior. At their entrance, the man got to his feet and came around his desk to join the two other men that were standing in front of it.

"I'm Deputy Chief Conner," he said, extending his hand to Riley. "And these are Deputies Thompson and Morris."

Riley reached out to shake his hand, and then did the same with the other two Marshals when they offered their hands as well.

Deputy Chief Conner glanced at Cade. "No problems on the way, I take it?" he asked.

Cade shook his head. "No, Sir."

The older man nodded. "Good." He turned his attention back to Riley. "You'll be staying at a safe house just south of Olympia with Deputies Thompson and Morris for a couple of days until we get you relocated, Ms. Barnett. With any luck, we'll have you on your way within the week."

Riley's brow furrowed at the mention of the other two Marshals. Did that mean Cade wouldn't be going with her to the safe house? She glanced at Cade to see him looking just as puzzled by Deputy Chief Conner's words.

"I thought I would be staying at the safe house with Ms. Barnett," he said to the older man.

Deputy Chief Conner shook his head. "I want you working on finding out who the shooter was," he said. "Deputies Thompson and Morris will take care of her until we can get her relocated."

Riley felt her heart sank at that. She might have thought sleeping with him was foolish, but nevertheless, she had hoped to be able to spend a couple of more days with Cade before she had to move. But maybe it was better this way, she told herself. If she were with Cade, she had no doubt she would end up sleeping with him again, and that would only result in more heartache. It was easier to make a clean break of things, she thought. But as her gaze strayed to the handsome Marshal, she realized it wasn't going to be easy at all.

"Ms. Barnett," Deputy Thompson said from behind her. "If you're ready, we can go."

She glanced over her shoulder at the men, before turning back to Cade again. At the hotel that morning, she hadn't been able to think of anything to say Cade, and now there was so much she wanted to say to him. Like how much she appreciated him saving her life. And how comforting it was to be in his arms, even if it had been only for a little while. But she couldn't tell him any of those things, not with his boss and the other two Marshals looking on.

Cade gave her a nod. "Take care of yourself," he told her.

Riley felt a slight pang of disappointment that he hadn't said something more personal, but she realized that he couldn't very well say anything in front of his coworkers either. She offered him a small smile. "You, too," she said softly.

Realizing that the other two Marshals were waiting for her, Riley swallowed hard and turned away. Surprised to feel tears welling in her eyes, she quickly made her way to the door before anyone could see. But unable to resist one more look at Cade, she paused and glanced back at him over her shoulder to find him studying her with those remarkable gold eyes of his. For a moment the urge to run back into the office and throw herself into his arms was almost too much to resist, and she had to force herself to turn away.

Cade watched her go, his gaze following Riley until she disappeared around a cubicle and out of sight. He had hoped that she would look back at him once more before she left, but she hadn't. Well, what had he expected? He was just another in a long string of Marshals what had been responsible for keeping her alive.

"Do you think you got a good enough look at the shooter to sit down with a sketch artist?" Conner asked.

The words jerked him from his thoughts and Cade gave himself a mental shake as he turned to look at the other man. "I should be able to, yeah," he said.

"Good," Conner said. "While you do that, I'm going to talk to the DA that prosecuted Donatti and see if he can shed some light on this whole thing. There must be a reason if Donatti put out a contract on Riley Barnett at this point."

Taking that as his cue to leave, Cade headed for the door. Regardless of the fact that he'd told Conner he would be able to work with a sketch artist, he wasn't sure how much good it would do. Not because he hadn't seen the hit man well enough, but because he was too distracted with thoughts of Riley.

Cade had really been taken aback when Conner had announced that Thompson and Morris were going to be taking Riley to the safe house. He had just naturally assumed he would stay with her until she was relocated. But maybe it was better that he didn't. The more time he spent with her, the harder it was going to be on him when she left. Besides, Conner was right. It was more important to track down the hit man that had tried to kill her.

With that in mind, Cade spent the rest of the day focusing his attention on doing just that. He was just frowning at the drawing the sketch artist had made when Conner walked over to his desk. The older man studied the drawing for a moment.

"So, that's our shooter, huh?" the other man said when he'd taken a look at it.

"Yeah," Cade said. "This guy's face is really familiar for some reason."

He hadn't realized it when he'd first seen the man the other night, but after thinking about it, Cade was sure he had seen the hit man somewhere before.

Conner regarded the sketch thoughtfully. "Take a look through the NCIC database," he told Cade. "If we're lucky, maybe the guy has a record. Start with known mob enforcers."

Looking through the online National Crime Information Center database would be a whole hell of a lot easier than thumbing through old mug books. Of course, everything depended on the guy having a record and being in the database. If he didn't, things would be much more difficult, Cade thought.

"What did the DA have to say?" he asked Conner.

Conner shook his head. "He wasn't in the office," he said. "I'm waiting for him to call me back."

Cade knew that with the time difference between the east and west coast it could be awhile before the man returned Conner's call. Hopefully, Cade would have a solid lead on the hit man by then.

As it turned out, though, Cade had no luck finding the guy through the NCIC database. He came up with a lot of known hit men, mob enforcers, and just general bad guys with organized crime connections, but none of them resembled the shooter from the other night. Thinking that he was using too narrow of a scope, he broadened it, but again, his search yielded nothing but hours of wasted time.

"Anything?" Conner asked when he came up to Cade's desk later that evening.

Cade sat back in his chair with a sigh. "Not a thing."

The other man frowned. "I just got off the phone with the Manhattan DA. Turns out that Albert Donatti has been more interested in making deals than in taking out witnesses," he said. "He's in the WitSec Program himself now."

Cade's brow furrowed. "He flipped on someone else?" he asked rhetorically. "If that's the case, then it doesn't make sense that he'd go out and hire a hit man."

"No, it doesn't," Conner said, and then sighed. "Maybe we're just looking at this the wrong way. Look, go home and get some rest. We'll look at it a different angle first thing in the morning."

Cade went, but only reluctantly. He would much rather have stayed and looked through the criminal databases some more, but as exhausted as he was, he'd probably only miss something if he did.

Despite being wiped out, however, Cade couldn't sleep at all that night. Finally tired of tossing and turning, he got out of bed a little after midnight and wandered into the living room to watch television. But despite having plenty of channels to choose from, none of them could hold his interest, and before long, his thoughts turned back to Riley.

After spending a week in the safe house with her, his apartment seemed so quiet and empty. He had never thought of himself as the overly talkative type, but it turned out that he had really enjoyed the time he and Riley had spent together talking. And he couldn't help but remember what it had felt like to spend the night with her in his arms. It might have been foolish, but it had felt good.

He found himself wondering what Riley was doing at that moment. Had she gotten settled in at the safe house? Was she asleep, or was she making the other Marshals sit through whatever chick-flicks she'd talked them into renting for her? That thought made Cade smile. But then almost immediately, it turned into a frown as he was reminded again of how much he missed her. Did she miss him as much?

Cade let out a derisive snort at that. He would like to have thought that the sex they'd had the night before had meant something to Riley, but her actions that morning had made it clear that it had been nothing more than a one-night stand to her. He wished it could mean so little to him.

Turning off the television a couple of hours later, Cade threw himself back into bed and tried hard to push thoughts of Riley from his mind. He did fall asleep, but only because he was exhausted. And even then, he slept fitfully, and often awoke swearing he could feel Riley there with him, sleeping curled up at his side.

Cade woke up around five the next morning feeling even more exhausted than he had the night before. He wanted to sleep more, but decided that it would be a waste of time to try. So instead, he took a shower and got dressed, then left for work. At the office, he'd at least have something to distract him from thinking about Riley.

He logged back into the NCIC database the moment he got into the office, but even though he tried to focus, it did no good. He couldn't stop thinking about Riley. Or worrying about her. Thompson and Morris were more than competent, so Cade knew that logically there was no reason to be concerned for Riley's safety. But he also knew that he would feel a hell of a lot better if he checked on her. So, around mid-morning, he gave up on the database search and decided to get a status report on Riley. Cade didn't have either man's cell phone number, however, but rather than ask Conner, he went down to get it from the Support Division.

Maxine, the woman who managed most of the administrative functions for the Seattle office, wasn't at her desk, however. Not knowing when she'd be back, Cade was about to leave a note for her when he noticed the photograph on her desk. He stared at the picture, unable to believe what he was seeing. In it, a smiling Maxine was standing in front of a panoramic view of the Grand Canyon, and beside her, was the dark-haired man that had

tried to kill Riley at the safe house the other night.

“Son of a bitch,” Cade muttered.

Grabbing the photograph off the desk, Cade leaned over the cubicle to show it to Maxine’s coworker. “Do you know who this guy with Maxine is?”

The woman smiled. “Sure,” she said. “That’s Maxine’s husband, Tony.”

Photograph in hand, Cade swore under his breath as he quickly weaved his way through the maze of cubicles. All this time he had been thinking that it was some mob hit man that was after Riley. No wonder he hadn’t been able to get a match through the NCIC database.

Back upstairs, Cade made a quick stop at his desk to grab the composite drawing before heading to Conner’s office. Not bothering to knock, he walked right in. Ignoring the other man’s scowl, he held up the photo in one hand, and the sketch in the other.

“I finally have a name to go with the face,” he said. “Tony Caruthers, who just happens to be married to Maxine from the Support Division.”

Conner’s brow furrowed as he glanced from the photo to the sketch, and then back again. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Cade assured him.

The other man swore. “Is Maxine Caruthers in today?”

Cade nodded. “But she’s not at her desk.”

“Let’s find her then,” Conner said. “I want to talk to her.”

It took nearly half an hour to find Maxine in the huge office building, but when they did, it was to take her directly to an interrogation room. It didn’t take much prompting to get the woman to talk, and within minutes, she broke down and admitted everything. It seemed that her husband wasn’t a hit man for the mob by trade, but just some guy that thought he could get rich quick by killing federal witnesses. The fact that Maxine had the addresses and personal records on all of the witnesses had made the decision easy.

“Did Albert Donatti order the hit?” Cade asked curtly.

Maxine shook her head. “No,” she sobbed. “Tony thought he should do the job first, and then go to Donatti and ask for the money.” She sniffed. “I told Tony it was a stupid idea, but he was sure we could make a bundle, and that no one would ever know. I didn’t want to do it!”

But she went along with it anyway, Cade thought bitterly. “Why Riley Barnett, then?”

The woman shrugged. “Tony thought she would be an easy target, a good way to get his feet wet, I guess,” she said. “He thought it would be safer to start with a woman instead of a man.”

“Where is your husband now, Maxine?” Conner asked.

She didn’t answer, but only fiddled nervously with the tissue in her hand, and Cade ground his jaw.

“You’re already an accessory to attempted murder, Maxine,” he told the woman. “Tell us where your husband is and the district attorney will probably take that into account.”

Maxine said nothing for a moment, but Cade could tell she was considering his words. “I don’t know for sure, but

I gave him the address for the safe house down in Olympia this morning,” she said finally. “He’s probably on his way there.”

Cade felt his gut clench. Riley, he thought. He could hear Conner talking to someone on his cell phone, ordering the local PD to the safe house, but Cade didn’t wait around to see what else the man said. Instead, he got the address for the safe house from Maxine and was out the door before Conner could stop him.

## Chapter 7

Riley never ate ice cream right out of the container, but that afternoon she found herself sitting at the kitchen table with a pint of chocolate chip mint, half listening to the two Marshals talk about the baseball game they were watching on television in the living room and feeling altogether miserable.

It had only been a day since she’d seen Cade, but Riley missed him so much that her heart ached. How was it possible to develop such strong feelings for a man she barely knew? she wondered. She’d only slept with him one time. And they hadn’t even exactly hit it off in the beginning. But as she sat there eating the ice cream, she wondered if she and Cade would have ended up dating if they had met under different circumstances. Then again, she thought, it was highly unlikely that they ever would have met at all if she hadn’t been in the Witness Protection Program.

As painful as it was to think about, Riley let herself imagine what could have been. If she weren’t moving to parts unknown, would things have gotten serious between her and Cade? Would they even have gotten married? She liked the idea that they might have.

Tears abruptly stung her eyes. What was the use of daydreaming about something that wasn’t going to ever happen? All it did was make her feel more wretched.

Angrily wiping away the tear that trickled down her cheek, Riley jabbed her spoon into the ice cream again, only to freeze when she heard a loud thud coming from the front of the house. It sounded like it had come from the living room, she thought. But before she could even begin to puzzle out what it could have been, she heard a series of loud bangs. Oh God, she thought. Gunshots!

With the colored lights on the dash flashing and the siren blaring, Cade made the two-hour drive to the safe house in half that time. The local police were already there, as was an ambulance, and Cade felt his blood run cold at the sight of the latter. Had that bastard Caruthers succeeded in killing Riley this time?

Cade barely put the car in park before he was out and running toward the house, flashing the silver star on his badge to the cops standing along the perimeter as he did so. Taking the steps two at a time, he hurried into the house to find the paramedics kneeling down beside the Marshals that had been guarding Riley. Both men had been shot, Thompson in the shoulder and Morris in the stomach. Afraid to think what that meant for Riley, Cade strode over to crouch down beside the woman tending to Thompson.

“Where’s Riley?” Cade asked.

Thompson jerked his head toward the rear of the house, only to wince at the movement. “She must have gone out the back,” he said. “The shooter went after her.”

Swearing under his breath, Cade got to his feet and raced through the living room and down the hallway to the back of the house, pulling his weapon as he went. The kitchen door was wide open and Cade immediately headed for it.

In the backyard, there were several uniformed cops standing around talking, and Cade hurried up to them.

“Has anyone gone after them?” Cade asked, referring to Riley and the man hunting her.

One of the cops shook his head. "No," he said. "We have some dogs that should be here any minute, though. We're waiting for them."

Cade stared at the other men in disbelief. The ground was soaking wet and the tracks through the mud were obvious to anyone. He could have stood there and berated them for their lack of police work, but decided that it would be a waste of time. Instead, he headed into the woods behind the house.

A path led directly from the backyard to a dense, wooded area, and even if the ground hadn't been muddy enough from the rain they'd had earlier in the day for him to see footprints, Cade instinctively knew that was where Riley had gone. It was the only place to go really. And though Cade was grateful for the muddy tracks, he also knew they would give Caruthers an advantage as well. But Riley was a fast runner, Cade reminded himself as he set out after her. And if she had a good head start, there was no way Caruthers would catch up to her. Unless she ran out of places to run.

Cade had been running for at least twenty minutes through the wet, slippery forest, at the same time working hard to keep his eyes on the tracks in the mud, when a dark shape suddenly burst through the trees and over a small hill directly ahead of him. Skidding to a halt, Cade instinctively took aim with his pistol, only to let out a sigh of relief when he realized it was Riley. Her long hair was a wild tangle around her shoulders, and there was mud all over her clothes. But Cade didn't think he'd ever seen her look more beautiful.

For a moment, Riley just stared at Cade, unable to believe that he was really there. Then, with a cry of relief, she closed the distance between them and threw herself into his arms. His closed around her tightly, enveloping her in his warmth, and she sobbed against his chest. She was safe now, she told herself.

"Oh God, I w-was so scared, Cade," she told him, her breath coming fast and hard, the words half-muffled against his chest. "I d-didn't know wh-what to do, so I ran. But he f-followed me..."

Cade smoothed her hair with his hand. "Shhh, you did good, sweetheart," he said softly. Then, still holding onto her, he took a step back to gaze down at her. "Where is he, Riley?"

She looked up at Cade through her tears. "Somewhere behind me, I think," she said. "I doubled back, but I think he must have realized it because as I was running, I could still hear him behind me every once in awhile."

Cade's gaze quickly darted to the wooded area around them before going back to her. "Go back to the house," he told her. "The police are there, so you'll be safe."

Riley frowned up at him. "What are you going to do?"

His jaw tightened. "I'm going after the guy that tried to kill you."

She tightened her grip on his arm. "You can't!" she protested. "He's got a gun!"

"So do I," Cade told her. "Now, go back to the house."

"Cade..." she began, but he cut her off.

"Dammit, Riley, for once in your life just do as you're told!" he growled. "Now, go!"

His tone brooked no argument, and this time, Riley obeyed. Still reluctant to leave Cade alone, however, she took off at a slow trot over the sloppy, uneven ground. She was exhausted and would rather just have waited and walked back with Cade, but she understood his desire both to keep her safe and to catch the guy that had been terrorizing her once and for all.

But that didn't mean she wasn't worried for Cade, and she couldn't help but stop when heard the sound of

footsteps crashing through the forest behind her. The hit man had caught up to her already, she thought. Even though Cade had told her to go back to the house, Riley found herself turning around and heading back toward the clearing where she had left Cade. Heart hammering wildly in her chest, she got there just in time to see the hit man standing in front of Cade, gasping for breath.

“Drop the gun and put your hands in the air!” Cade ordered, leveling his own weapon at the man.

Riley held her breath as she waited to see what the man would do. For a moment, he just stood there, his gun still pointed at Cade, and Riley felt fear grip her. Oh God, what if he shot Cade? But to her relief, the hit man tossed the gun onto the ground and slowly lifted his hand above his head.

Relieved that it was finally over, Riley jogged back over to where Cade was standing. Though it wasn't her intention to distract him, she did, and in the split-second it took for him to glance her way, the other man charged.

Riley opened her mouth to warn Cade, but it was too late. The other man had already knocked him to the ground and they were grappling.

Her eyes wide, Riley watched helplessly while the two men struggled with each other. She had to help Cade, she thought. But how? Not quite sure, she ran toward the men, only to jerk to a halt when she saw Cade's gun go flying into the bushes. Her first instinct was to go look for it, but she knew it would take forever to find it, so instead, she reached down and scooped up a heavy branch that was lying on the ground.

Gripping it tightly, she slowly approached the two men. They were rolling around on the ground, each of them struggling furiously to gain the upper hand. She had to be careful, she told herself; she didn't want to end up hitting Cade by mistake.

Suddenly, the hit man rolled on top of Cade and drew his arm back to punch the Marshal. Knowing she wouldn't have a better opportunity, Riley swung a vicious blow at the hit man's head, only to hit Cade across the shoulders instead when he rolled his opponent over.

“Dammit, Riley, what the hell are you doing?!” he yelled at her while he still grappled with the man.

“I'm trying to help!” she shouted back.

“Well, stop it!” he ordered.

Disregarding what Cade said, Riley tightened her grip on the branch, ready to whack the guy again if she got the chance, but it wasn't necessary. Within a few moments, Cade had the hit man subdued and cuffed.

Cade glared at her as he hauled the man to his feet. “I thought I told you to go back to the house,” he growled.

She gave him a sheepish look as she dropped the branch on the ground. “I know, but I thought you might need help or something.”

“Really?” he said sarcastically. “And how did that work out for you?”

The question really didn't require an answer, but Riley gave him a sheepish shrug anyway. “I'm sorry I hit you,” she said.

Cade gave her an exasperated look but made no comment. “Come on,” he said, and still pushing the hit man in front of him, led the way back to the house.

When they got back, the place was a complete madhouse. There were dozens of police cars, as well as what looked like every Marshal from the Seattle and the Tacoma office. Of course, there was already a lot of press there as well, but to Riley's relief, they were relegated to a spot behind the yellow tape at the bottom of the

driveway.

Riley didn't really need any medical attention, but at Cade's insistence, she allowed the paramedics to check her out. The EMT fussed over every scratch and scrape, and was just finishing up with her when Deputy Chief Conner walked over.

"The other Marshals that were with me," she said. "How are they?"

He nodded. "They're both in surgery, but they're expected to make a complete recovery."

She nodded, relieved to hear that. "That's good," she said. "So, what happens to me now?"

Conner shrugged. "Actually, that's up to you."

Her brow furrowed. "Up to me?" she said. "I don't understand."

"It turns out that Albert Donatti didn't hire Caruthers to kill you. After all," Conner explained. "As a matter of fact, Donatti is really no longer a threat to you at all. He turned evidence on some of his own and is now in the WitSec Program himself. We'll have to go through some bureaucratic procedures, but I would think that you would be removed from the list of protected witnesses."

It took a moment for Riley to wrap her mind around what Deputy Chief Conner had just told her. "So you're saying that I don't have to move then? That I can go back to using my real name again?"

The older man gave her a small smile. "I think that's all going to be up to you now," he told her. "We would certainly move you one more time, though, if you wanted us to."

Riley glanced at Cade to find him watching her with those remarkable gold eyes of his. "Actually," she said softly. "I kind of like it here in Seattle."

Conner nodded. "Then it's settled," he said. "I'll have someone take you home."

Riley hoped that Cade would volunteer, but to her dismay, Deputy Chief Conner was already calling over another Marshal.

"Like I said, there's some paperwork we'll need to go over, Ms. Barnett, but we can do that another time. Deputy Brogan will take you home," the older man said to Riley, and then, giving her a nod, pulled Cade off to the side to speak to him before walking over to intercept the group of reporters coming their way.

Riley hesitated, giving Cade a glance out of the corner of her eye, but he was deep in conversation with the uniformed police officer that had come up to him. Disappointed that he wasn't even going to say goodbye to her, she followed Deputy Brogan toward his car.

She was just about to get in when she heard Cade calling her name. Her pulse skipping a beat, Riley tried to hide her eagerness as she turned to see him jogging toward her.

"I wanted to catch you before you left," he said.

Riley held her breath as she waited for him to continue. He glanced at the other Marshal standing by the driver's side door, and then back at her. "I can't really talk to you here, though," he said. "Would it be okay if I stopped by your apartment later?"

She was tempted to ask him what he meant when he'd said that he couldn't talk about it there, but Deputy Chief Conner was already calling Cade over to talk to the press. "Of course," she said. "That would be fine."

He looked relieved. "I'll see you tonight, then."

As she watched him walk away, Riley tried to tell herself not to read too much into Cade's wanting to see her, but she couldn't suppress the surge of excitement that began to course through her.

Riley changed clothes half a dozen times that night before finally settling on a simple skirt and camisole top. She had no idea why Cade had asked to come over, and told herself again not to read too much into it. For all she knew, he might be bringing over that paperwork that Deputy Chief Conner had mentioned. God, she hoped not!

The doorbell rang then, interrupting her thoughts, and Riley felt her pulse quicken. Smoothing her hands over her short skirt, she gave herself one more look in the mirror before hurrying to answer the door. Once in the entryway, however, she paused to take a deep, calming breath. She couldn't ever remember being so nervous! Wetting her lips, she ran her hands over her skirt again, and then threw open the door.

Cade was dressed in jeans and a button-up shirt, and looking even more gorgeous than Riley remembered, and she must have stood there gazing at him for a full minute before she finally managed to find her voice.

"Come in," she said, taking a step back so that he could do so.

He took in her outfit, his gaze lingering on her legs for a moment, and Riley felt herself blush. "You look nice," he told her.

"Thank you," she said softly.

He cleared his throat. "I didn't know if you'd eaten already, so I stopped by to pick up some Chinese food," he said.

Riley glanced down at the bag in his hand in surprise, realizing that she hadn't noticed it before. This was definitely not an official call, then. "No, actually I haven't," she said. Giving him a smile, she took the bag. "I'll get some plates."

"That'd be great," Cade said as he followed her into the kitchen. "But I was hoping we could talk about what happened the other night first."

Riley's heart plummeted, the smell of the food wafting up from the bag making her feel sick all of a sudden. This was the part where Cade told her that he hoped she hadn't read anything into what had happened between them at the hotel, and that while they couldn't have a relationship, he hoped they could still be friends, she thought. Swallowing hard, she set the bag down on the counter and turned to look at him.

Cade cleared his throat again. "I know that we didn't really get off on the right foot, and that there was a lot of stuff that happened between us at the safe house, but I think we have a connection," he said, and then immediately held up his hand. "Before you say anything, let me finish."

Riley almost smiled. She hadn't been going to say anything, but it seemed obvious that Cade had rehearsed whatever he was going to say quite a bit and didn't want her to interrupt him. In all honesty, she didn't know where he was going with this, but the part about them having a connection definitely made her pulse quicken.

"Actually, there's more than a connection. As cliché as this is going to sound, I think we were meant to be together," Cade continued. "I know that when this started, you were just a witness I was supposed to protect, but even though you drove me crazy most of the time, I found myself drawn to you. And that feeling got stronger the more we were together. I don't know if you feel the same way, but I do know that for my part, I want you in my life."

She blinked up at him, suddenly unable to breathe. "What are you saying, Cade?" she asked softly.

Cade reached out to gently brush a strand of hair back from her face. "I'm saying that when you were in danger, I could barely think straight, and that made me realize what you mean to me." He paused and took a deep breath. "What I'm trying to say is that I'm in love with you, Riley Barnett."

Riley caught her breath, speechless. Of all the things she had expected Cade to say when he had come over tonight, telling her that he had fallen in love with her had definitely not been one of them.

In front of her, Cade suddenly looked unsure of himself. "I think this is the part where you're supposed to say something," he told her quietly.

She took a step closer to him, her lips curving into a smile. "Well, then how about this?" she said. "I love you too, Cade Cutler."

A grin spreading across his handsome face, Cade slid his hand into her hair and bent his head to kiss her on the mouth. Riley melted against, parting her lips to urge him on with her tongue, and by the time he lifted his head a few minutes later, she could barely breathe.

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way," he said. "We need to talk about what happened in those woods behind the safe house today."

Her brow furrowed in confusion as she looked up at him. He wanted to talk about that now? "What about it?" she asked.

He lifted a brow. "I told you to go back to the safe house, and instead, you decided not to."

She chewed on her lower lip. "I told you," she said. "I was worried about you and thought you might need help."

Cade's jaw tightened. "Riley, you once again foolishly put yourself in danger," he said. "And more importantly, you refused to do what I told you to do."

Riley looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I promise I won't do it again."

He let out a sigh. "I know you believe that," he said. "But I need to make sure, and since the only way I can ever seem to get you to really listen to me is to give you a spanking, that's what I'm going to have to do."

She blinked at him in surprise. "A spanking?" she echoed. "You're not serious!"

Cade couldn't really mean to spank her, not after telling her he loved her, she thought. But he had already taken her hand and was leading her into the living room.

"But you said you loved me!" she protested.

"I do love you," he told her over his shoulder. "That's why I'm doing this."

That could only make sense to a guy, she thought. "But what about dinner?" she reminded him. "It'll be cold."

He turned to face her. "We'll reheat it," he said, and then his mouth quirked. "Right now, I'm more concerned about warming that sexy, little bottom of yours and making sure that you don't do anything as foolish as you did today again. At least not until you forget how much a spanking stings."

Though her lips formed into a pout, Riley allowed Cade to draw her over his knee without too much more protest. Considering how that most recent spanking he'd given her at the hotel had culminated in some incredibly hot sex, she supposed she could put up with a sore bottom. But she really would have to talk to him about this habit of his to spank her every time she didn't do what he told her. He was going to have to learn that just because he was from in Texas, he couldn't spank her like this was the old west.

But that would have to wait, she supposed, because he was obviously intent on spanking her right now. Wiggling into a more comfortable position, Riley pillowed her head on her arms and waited for Cade to begin.

Even though she knew it was coming, the first spank still caught her by surprise. Ouch, she thought. Couldn't he start a little bit softer? But before she could ask him about it, he landed a second smack to her other cheek.

"Owwwww!" she cried. "Cade, that stings!"

"Good," he told her, bringing his hand down again in another stinging smack. "That way you won't be tempted to do anything foolish for a long time."

After another dozen spanks, her bottom really felt like it was on fire, and unable to control herself, Riley reached her hand back to protect her tender asscheeks. But Cade only grabbed her wrist and held it pinned against the small of her back.

"You're not getting off that easy," he told her with a chuckle. "I tend to remember you hitting me with that branch pretty hard."

"But I didn't mean to hit you!" she protested even as his hand came down on her bottom again. "If you...owwww!...had stayed still...owwww!...for a minute, I would have...owwww!...gotten him!"

"You know," he said, pausing to rest his hand on her stinging bottom. "I don't think you're getting the point of this spanking. Maybe I should try a different approach."

Before she could even ask what he meant by that, Riley felt Cade push up her skirt, exposing her skimpy black thong. She had worn it because she'd hoped they might end up making love that night, but the realization that he was seeing her wearing something so sexy was enough to get her pussy purring. Which was strange, she thought, considering that the spanking stung so much. She'd definitely have to give that some thought later, she decided.

"Very nice," he commented, running his hand over her bare bottom. "It's almost as if you knew you were going to get a spanking tonight."

Riley gasped and started to tell him that she knew nothing of the sort, but the words disappeared on her lips when his hand connected with her right cheek.

"Owwwww!" she yelped, going rigid over his lap. "Not so hard! You may not realize it, but that skirt provided a lot of protection."

Cade chuckled. "Then it's a good thing I pushed it up," he told her as he began to apply his hand firmly to first one cheek, and then the other in an east rhythm.

That had her kicking and squirming all over the place. The spanking wouldn't have been nearly that bad if it weren't for the cell phone, or whatever it was he had in his pocket, jabbing her in the hip every time she wiggled.

"Okay, okay!" she squealed. "I get the point! I promise to be good and do exactly what you say from now on!"

"I really doubt that," Cade drawled, a hint of amusement in his voice. "In fact, I imagine you'll be getting yourself in trouble frequently. Which is fine with me, as long as you realize that you'll be getting a spanking every time you do."

He punctuated his words with one more hard spank to her bare bottom before he took her hand and helped her to her feet.

Riley gave him a pout as she stood there rubbing her sore bottom. Her poor ass was on fire! But just like with the

spanking he'd given her at the hotel, her pussy was soaking wet. Of course, there was no way she was going to let Cade know that the spanking had gotten her all excited. He'd want to give her one every day! That thought made her face turn almost as red as her bottom.

"That was a really hard spanking," she pouted. "Next time, could you remember to at least pull the cell phone out of your pocket before you put me over your knee. That thing is really uncomfortable when I'm wiggling around."

Cade's mouth quirked. "Sorry about that," he said, getting to his feet. "It's not my cell phone, though. But I'm glad you brought it up. I was going to give it to you later, but I think that now is probably the perfect time."

Riley watched as he pulled something out of his pocket, only to feel her heart begin to beat wildly as he dropped to one knee in front of her. The spanking she'd just gotten all but forgotten, she stared transfixed at the ring box Cade held in his hand.

"I know this might be kind of sudden," Cade said. "And I don't want you to feel that you have to give me an answer right now, but when I said that I wanted you in my life before, I meant forever."

With that, Cade opened the box in his hand to reveal the most beautiful engagement ring Riley had ever seen. Oh God, she thought, he was really asking her to marry him!

"Like I said, there's no time table here," he told her. "But I hope that someday you'll agree to marry me."

Riley smiled down at him, tears of happiness in her eyes. "I can give you my answer right now," she said. "Of course, I'll marry you!"

For a moment, Cade seemed surprised that she had given him an answer so quickly, but then he grinned. Taking the ring from its velvet-lined box, he slipped it onto the third finger of her left hand, then got to his feet and pulled her into his arms for a passionate kiss.

Lifting his head a moment later, Cade gave her a serious look. "You know what this means, don't you?" he said. "You'll have to change your name again."

Riley laughed. "That's okay. I'm used to it," she said pulling his head down to kiss him again.

The End