



## Chapter One

### *Three Years Later*

Cody O'Brien pulled herself into her final sit-up. "Two-fifty," she breathed, wiping her forehead with her sleeve. Rolling onto her stomach, she pressed twenty-five push-ups to complete her round.

She heard the familiar ding of E-mail and stood up from the nine-by-nine rug where she worked out, then crossed the room to the computer and desk that were her office. Three years ago, she never would have imagined life could feel good again. Now, working as a programmer and consultant from home for start-ups in Silicon Valley, Cody had everything she could want for herself and Ryan. R.J., she reminded herself, still fighting calling her son something other than his natural name. Cody, on the other hand, had started to grow on her.

Most of her mail, including her paychecks, came addressed to "Mr. Cody O'Brien." And that was perfect for her. She didn't want to be known. Her jobs were booked through a referral service with whom she'd interviewed three years ago. Almost none of her work was done over the phone and none was in person. It was part of her stipulation. It would have sounded bizarre in the traditional business world, but techies were weird and untraditional; everyone knew it.

She touched her mouse and stared at the request for a follow-up on some work she'd done a few months back. She sat down and typed a quick message to indicate her schedule was open for the work and sent it off. Glancing at her watch, she ran through the office door and up the short flight of stairs into R.J.'s room.

"Sleepyhead, it's time to get up."

The denim lump in the bed moaned and then rolled over.

Cody sat on the edge of the bed, prying the covers out of her son's hands and exposing his face. He squinted at the light and rolled over again, burying his nose in his pillow. Watching him struggle with the mornings always made Cody think of his dad. She tickled him, and he bucked and laughed.

"Come on, up and at 'em."

He rubbed his eyes with balled fists and Cody could still picture him as an infant doing that same thing. "Can I stay home with you today?"

She shook her head. "No way."

"Ah, Mom." He groaned and tried to dig his way back under the covers. "It's too cold to go to school."

"Too cold? This is California. It's warm here."

"Uh-uh. It's freezing."

"Then you'll have to wear a turtleneck and sweater." Cody stood and stripped the bed, so he had nowhere to hide. "Up, soldier. Right now. I'll make pancakes if you promise to be downstairs in ten minutes. Plus, it's Friday."

"It's Friday?" R.J. sat up in bed. "I'm playing with Peter Landon after school today."

"Okay." Peter Landon had become R.J.'s best friend over the past year. She kept hoping the choice would change, but she shouldn't have complained. Most people would be thrilled to have their son play with Travis Landon's son. Landon was an extremely successful entrepreneur. His first company, WebMast, had been a small, unlikely start-up ten years ago. Less than five years ago he'd sold the Web browser software to Yahoo!.

Landon's more recent start-up, TecLan, was about to put revolutionary new Web page software on the market. Despite one pesky glitch in testing, the TecLan Pro software was supposed to be the best. And Travis Landon himself was probably worth \$100 million on a bad day.

She'd done some work for him here and there, and she saw him often enough when he came to pick up Peter in the evenings. One of those nights, he'd asked her out. She'd had a glass of wine after a long day and had let herself enjoy his easy banter. Pretty soon they were laughing, and he'd suggested dinner. A casual enough proposition, but she'd turned him down flat. Men, and especially high-profile men, were not in her future.

And she would have preferred R.J. had chosen a lower-profile friend. There was still at least an article a week on Landon, his dual life as CEO and single parent, although she'd noticed more of them had started to focus on the software glitch, but that was typical media.

Cody crossed the room, glancing at the computer with the bright fish floating across the screen. Beside it was a stack of computer games. She picked up the one on top: Rogue Warrior. "Don't forget to return his game to him when he's here tonight."

"I won't, Mom. We borrow all the time. He even loant--loaned me his Chicago Bulls jacket."

She ran her hands over the jacket on the back of the chair. "It's nice, but be careful not to get anything on it."

"Yeah." R.J. swung his feet onto the floor and rolled his eyes at her warning.

Cody launched herself at her son, knocking him back onto the bed and tickling him until he was howling.

"Uncle, uncle," R.J. screamed.

Cody rolled off and R.J. promptly started to tickle her. She rolled back and forth, pretending to try to escape him until he finally stopped and they were both breathless.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"You've got roots."

Cody sat up and looked at her son's dark hair. They were light-haired naturally, but she and R.J. had been dying their hair since they'd left New Orleans. "Guess it's time for a root party."

"Can we have root-beer floats?"

"Of course. And beetroots."

R.J. scrunched his nose. "I didn't like the beetroots. How about root beer candy?"

"Sounds good. How about we do it tonight?"

R.J. turned his back to her. "Not tonight, Mom."

Cody went around and sat beside him. "Why not?"

"Cause I want to play with Peter."

Cody shrugged. "I thought we could do it after he leaves. Or we can do it tomorrow. Did you want Peter to spend the night?"

R.J. stared at his feet. "That's the thing, Mom. I want to go to his house."

Cody flinched. "No way."

R.J. leaped to his feet. "Mom, he's got the new Sony system."

She stood up. "You can play Nintendo Sixty-four instead."

"No."

"Yes." She was through discussing it. She started for the door.

"But he has a pool."

The image made her shudder. She'd had a bad pool accident as a child, and she hated the thought of him in the water almost as much as anything else. "No." She disliked the water herself, but in training as an

agent, she'd spent plenty of time in it. Eventually she'd learned to set aside her fears when swimming was necessary, but she hadn't been in water since she left the Bureau.

"I'm a good swimmer, Mom."

It was true. He swam like Mark had, as though he'd been born for the water. But thinking about it, even more than watching it, terrified her.

"I went there last time and it was fine."

"Not overnight."

"I'm eight years old, Mom. You can't hide me here forever," Ryan said in a defiant voice.

His words knocked the wind out of her. She turned back. "Ryan, we've talked about that. You know why."

"I know about Dad and everything." He waved his hand. "But no one knows who we are. I've never said a word--ever. I'm really careful, Mom, I swear."

She shook her head.

"Mom, please. I hate always asking kids here. And Peter is really cool. I feel like a dork asking him to always come to my house." Ryan gave her the wide-eyed look that had been his father's. "And you know Mr. Landon--he's real responsible."

Cody sank into Ryan's desk chair, deflated.

"I'm going to have to do it sometime, Mom. How would I go to college?"

She smiled at the image of her eight-year-old in college, but she knew he was right. She couldn't keep him under her wing forever. But she could keep him there longer. "We'll talk when you're ready for college."

"Mom!" Ryan launched himself off the bed toward her. "I want to go tonight. Come on."

She shook her head. With that, she stood and walked out of the room. "I'll see you downstairs in ten minutes for pancakes."

He didn't answer her, but she hadn't expected him to.

As soon as she reached the kitchen, Ryan called down to her, "Mr. Landon wants to talk to you, Mom. He's on the phone." She frowned at the kitchen phone as though it were hosting bacteria.

"This isn't going to work," she called back to him before picking up the receiver. She hated the phone. She didn't have friends, wasn't allowed to communicate with her family, and all her work correspondence was done via E-mail. It had been hard at first. She'd occasionally lifted the receiver

and started to dial one of her sisters before realizing she could no longer talk to them.

She remembered the last time she'd spoken to her family on the phone. It had been set up as a safe call from New Orleans more than three years ago, and the thought of that conversation made her ache. They had been such a close family--the house full of the sounds of girls bickering, laughing, and playing. Megan was the second of four girls, only six years between Alison, the oldest, and Nicole, the baby. All of them had stayed in Chicago. But Megan was gone now. There was no Megan--just Cody.

She wondered if they were all still there. How many kids did her sister Alison have? Was Amy married? The last time she'd heard from them Nicole was expecting. They'd all guessed it was a boy. Had it been?

"Mom!" Ryan called. "Phone."

Cody pushed her family from her mind and picked up the phone. "Hello?" she said.

"Mrs. O'Brien, it's Travis Landon." He spoke with the same awkward tone she'd heard since her rejection of his dinner offer.

Cody glared in the general direction of her son's room. "Hello."

"I realized when you were coming to the phone that I don't even know your first name."

"It's Cody, Mr. Landon," Ryan added from the extension upstairs.

"Thanks, R.J."

"Okay, R.J.," Cody said, "You can hang up now."

She waited until she heard the click of the extension. "How can I help you, Mr. Landon?"

He paused. "I understand you don't want R.J. to come over tonight. I promised Peter he could. I told the kids I'd pick them up myself and we'd rent *Terminator*. Are you sure he can't come, Cody? They have such fun together."

Cody shook her head. "I think it's great that they want to play together. They are welcome to come here if they want to have a sleepover."

"Of course, but you should let me return the favor. You've had Peter spend the night lots of times."

"Thank you, but..."

Ryan appeared at the kitchen door, dressed and holding his backpack in one hand and an overnight bag in another. His wide eyes pleaded.

"I promise they'll be fine."

Cody turned her back to her son and blinked hard, forcing back the fear. "You'll be picking them up from school?"

"At three o'clock on the dot."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

"I'll make sure he eats vegetables," Travis added with casual humor. He had no idea what this could mean.

"I'd prefer they not swim unattended. And it's a bit cold out right now."

"The pool is closed and the gate is locked. They won't even be near it."

She blew her breath out. "Have R.J. call me before bed."

"I will. Peter will be thrilled. And you enjoy the evening alone."

"Thanks," she choked, knowing she would do no such thing. She said good-bye, the fear from her days in New Orleans rising to the surface again.

Cody hung up the phone, thinking about how difficult things had been for them. R.J. was her best friend. She couldn't bear it if something happened to him.

No mother and child she knew had ever been through the kind of ordeal they had. And despite her continuing fears, R.J. had finally started to feel comfortable with his school and with his friends.

Cody knew she couldn't let her own fears stand in the way of letting her son have some semblance of a normal childhood.

She turned to Ryan and saw a mirror image of her husband's eyes and the stubbornness in them. Ryan was just like Mark.

"I'll be fine, Mom. I promise."

She reached out and pulled him to her in a quick hug. "You'd better," she warned. Then, with an aching breath, she said, "Pour yourself some juice and sit down. I don't want you to be late for school."

As Cody mixed the batter for pancakes, she watched Ryan pour his juice and sit down at the table. He pulled open the paper and found the comics and began to read. Every motion reminded her of Mark, and pride filled her like a warm rush. She hoped Mark was watching them to see how incredible their son was.

Cody turned to the skillet and poured batter, feeling the heat on her hands and praying she would someday be able to let go of the fear.