

## CHAPTER ONE

### — *Present Day* —

Dawn bloomed, pink as a rose, tinting the snow-drenched mountains with delicate color. Elk bugled as they swam through mists on their morning pilgrimage, and the rooster crowed his insistent alarm.

Savoring the last of her coffee, Bodine Longbow stood at the kitchen door to look and listen to what she considered the perfect start of a November day.

The only thing that could make it better was one additional hour. Since childhood she's wished for a twenty-five-hour day, had even written down all she could accomplish with just sixty minutes more.

Since Earth's rotation didn't accommodate her, she made up for it, rarely sleeping beyond five-thirty. When dawn broke, she had already completed her morning workout—a precise sixty minutes—showered, groomed, dressed for the day, checked e-mails and texts, eaten a breakfast of yogurt, which she was trying to convince herself to like with granola that she didn't like any better than yogurt, while she checked her schedule on her tablet.

Since her schedule already lived in her head, the check wasn't necessary. But Bodine believed in being thorough.

Now, with the predawn portion of the day in the bag, she could take a few moments to enjoy her morning latte—double espresso, whole milk, and a squirt of the caramel she promised her inner critic she'd wean herself off of eventually.

The rest of the household would pile in soon, her father and brothers from checking on the stock, getting the ranch hands going. Since it was Clementine's day off, Bodine knew her mother would sail into the kitchen, cheerfully and perfectly produce a Montana ranch breakfast. After feeding three men, Maureen would put the kitchen to rights before sailing off to the Bodine Resort where she served as the head of sales.

Maureen Bodine Longbow was a constant wonder to her daughter.

Not only was Bodine dead sure her mother didn't actively wish for that extra hour a day, she obviously didn't need it to get everything done, to maintain a solid marriage, help run two complex businesses—the ranch and the resort—while continuing to enjoy life to the fullest.

Even as she thought it, Maureen breezed in. Her short, roasted-chestnut hair crowned a face pretty as rosebud. Lively green eyes smiled at Bodine.

“Morning, my baby.”

“Morning. You look great.”

Maureen skimmed a hand down a narrow hip and the trim, forest green dress. “I've got meetings on top of meetings today. Gotta make an impression.”

She slid open the old barn door that led to the pantry, took a white butcher's apron from the hook.

Not that a pop of bacon grease would dare to land on that dress, Bodine thought.

"Make me one of those lattes, would you?" Maureen asked as she fastened the apron. "Nobody makes them as good as you."

"Sure. I've got a meeting straight off this morning with Jessie," Bodine said, referring to the resort's events manager of three months, Jessica Baazov. "About Linda-Sue Jackson's wedding. Linda-Sue's coming in at ten."

"Mmm. Your daddy tells me Roy Jackson's crying in his beer over the cost of marrying off his girl, but I know for a fact Linda-Sue's ma's determined to pull out every stop, and then some. She'd send that girl down the aisle to a celestial chorus of angels if we could provide it."

Bodine meticulously steamed the milk for the latte. "For the right price, Bessie'd probably manage it."

"She's working out real well, isn't she?" With an enormous skillet on the eight-burner range, Maureen began frying up bacon. "I like that girl."

"You like everybody." Bodine handed her mother the latte.

"Life's happier if you do. If you look for it, you can find something good about anybody."

"Adolf Hitler," Bodine challenged.

"Well, being what he was, he gave us a line in the sand most never want to cross again. That's a good thing."

"Nobody's like you, Mom." Bodine bent from her superior height—she'd passed her mother's five-three at twelve, and had kept going another five inches—kissed Maureen's cheek. "I've got enough time to set the table for you before I go."

"Oh, honey, you need breakfast, too."

"I had some yogurt."

"You hate that stuff."

"I only hate it when I'm eating it, and it's good for me."

Maureen sighed, lifting the bacon out to drain, adding more. "I swear, sometimes I think you're a better ma to yourself than I ever was."

"Best mom ever," Bodine countered, taking a stack of the everyday plates from the cabinet.

She heard the racket seconds before the back door opened. The men in her life piled in along with a pair of dogs.

"Mind you wipe your boots."

"Oh, now, Reenie, as if we'd forget." Sam Longbow took off his hat—nobody ate at Maureen's table wearing a hat.

He stood six-three, most of it leg, a raw-boned, handsome man with silver wings sweeping through his black hair, with character lines fanning out from the corners of deep brown eyes.

He had a crooked left incisor, which Bodine thought added charm to his smile.

Chase, two years Bodine's senior hung his cattleman's hat on the peg, shrugged out of his barn jacket. He'd gotten his height and build from his father—all the Longbow siblings had—but in face and in coloring, he favored his mother.

Rory, three years her junior, combined the two with deep brown hair, lively green eyes in a twenty-two-year-old version of Sam Longbow's face.

"Can you make enough for one more, Mom?"

Maureen arched her eyebrows at Chase. "I can always make enough for one more. Who's the one?"

"I asked Cal to breakfast."

"Well, set another plate," Maureen ordered. "It's been too long since Callen Skinner's been at our table."

"He's back?"

Chase nodded at Bodine, headed to the coffee machine. "Got here last night. He's settling into the shack, like we talked about. A hot breakfast'll help that along."

While Chase downed black coffee, Rory added generous doses of milk and sugar to his own. "He doesn't look like some Hollywood cowboy."

"A disappointment to our youngest," Sam said as he washed his hands in the farmhouse sink. "Rory hoped he'd walk around with jangling spurs, a silver band around his hat and polished-up boots."

"Didn't have any of them." Rory snagged some bacon. "Doesn't look much different than when he left. Older, I guess."

"Not a full year older than me. Save some of that bacon for the rest of us," Chase added.

"I've got more," Maureen said placidly and lifted her face when Sam bent down to kiss her.

"You look pretty as a candy box, Reenie. Smell just as pretty, too."

"I've got a morning full of meetings."

"Speaking of meetings." Bodine checked her watch. "I have to go."

"Oh, honey, can't you stay to say hey to Callen? You haven't seen that boy in near to ten years."

Eight years, Bodine thought, and had to admit she was curious to see him again. But ... "I just can't, sorry. I'll see him around—and you, too," she said, kissing her father. "Rory, I need to go over some things with you at the office."

"I'll be there, boss."

She snorted at that, aimed for the mudroom where she'd already put her packed-for-the-day briefcase. "Snow's coming by afternoon," she called, bundling into her coat, hat, scarf, and, pulling on gloves, walked out into the cold morning.

She was running a minute behind, so she walked briskly to her truck. She'd known Callen was coming back, had been at the family meeting about hiring him on as head horseman for the ranch.

He'd been Chase's closest friend as long as she could remember, and had wavered between being the bane of her existence to her first secret crush, back to bane, back to crush.

She couldn't quite remember which category he'd been in when he'd left Montana. Now, as she drove over the corrugated snowpack of the ranch road, it occurred to her he'd been younger than Rory when he'd left home.

About twenty, she calculated, no doubt pissed and frustrated at losing the bulk of his birthright. Land, she thought now, her father had bought from the Skinners when—if you said it politely—his father had fallen on hard times.

He'd fallen on hard times because he gambled any good times away. Dead crap as a gambler, she'd heard her father say once, and as addicted to it as some are to the bottle.

So with the land he'd surely loved down to less than fifty acres, the house, and a few outbuildings, Callen Skinner had set off to make his own way

According to Chase, Cal had done just fine, ending up wrangling horses for the movies.

Now, with his father dead, his mother a widow, his sister married with a toddler and another baby on the way, he'd come back.

She'd heard enough to know that what Skinner land remained wasn't worth what was owed on it from mortgages and loans. And the house stood empty as Mrs. Skinner had moved in with her daughter and family in a pretty house in Missoula where Savannah and her husband owned a craft shop.

Bodine expected another meeting soon about buying the last fifty acres, and as she drove she weighed whether that parcel would work better for the ranch or resort.

Fix up the house, she mused, rent it to groups. Or for events. Smaller weddings, corporate parties, family reunions.

Or save that time and expense, tear it down, build from there.

She entertained herself with possibilities as she drove under the arching Bodine Resort sign with its shamrock logo.

She circled around, noting the lights on in the Trading Post as whoever caught the first shift prepared to open for the day. They had a trunk show this week with leather goods and crafts, and that would lure in some of the late-fall guests. Or with Rory's teams' marketing blast, draw in non-guests who'd stay for lunch at the Feed Bag.

She pulled up in front of the long, low building with its wide front porch that housed reception.

It always made her proud.

The resort was born before she was, at a gathering with her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother—with her grandmother, Cora Riley Bodine, driving the train.

What had started as a bare-bones dude ranch had grown into a luxury resort that offered five-star cuisine, personalized service, adventure, pampering, events, entertainment, and more, all spread over more than thirty thousand acres, including the working ranch. And all, she thought as she got out of the truck, with the priceless beauty of western Montana.

She hurried inside where a couple of guests were enjoying coffee in front of the massive, roaring fire.

She caught the fall scents of pumpkin and cloves, approved, as she waved a hand toward the desk, intent on reaching to her office and getting organized. Detoured to the desk when Sal, the perky redhead Bodine had known since grade school, signaled her.

"Wanted you to know Linda-Sue just called to say she'd be a little late."

"She always is."

"Yeah, but this time she's saying it instead of just being it. She's going by to pick up her mother."

The solid foundation of Bodine's day suffered its first crack. "Her mother's coming to the meeting?"

“Sorry.” Sal offered a sorrowful smile.

“That’s mostly Jessie’s problem, but thanks for the heads-up.”

“Jessie’s not in yet.”

“That’s all right, I’m early for the meeting.”

“You always are,” Sal called out as Bodine veered off, taking the turn that led back to the resort manager’s office. Her office.

She liked the size of it. Big enough to hold meetings with staff or managers, small enough to keep those meetings intimate and personal.

She had a double window looking out on stone paths, a portion of the building that held the Feed Bag and the more exclusive Dining Hall, and fields rolling toward the mountains.

She had deliberately arranged her grandmother’s old desk with her back to that window, avoiding distractions. She had two high-backed leather chairs that had once graced the office in the ranch house, and a small sofa—once her mother’s and now reupholstered with a sturdy weave in a strong summer blue.

She hung her coat, hat, and scarf on the coatrack in the corner, smoothed a hand over her hair—black as her father’s, worn in a long, straight tail down her back.

She had the look of her grandfather—so his widow always said. Bodine had seen photographs, and acknowledged her resemblance to the young, doomed Rory Bodine who’d died in Vietnam before his twenty-third birthday.

He’d had bold green eyes and a wide, top-heavy mouth. His black hair had had a wave to it while hers ran ruler straight, but she had his high cheekbones, his small, pugnacious nose, and the white Irish skin that required oceans of sunscreen.

But she liked to think she’d inherited her grandmother’s canny business sense.

She went to the counter that held the pod machine that made tolerable coffee, took a mug to her desk to go over her notes for her first two meetings of the day.

As she finished up a phone call and an e-mail simultaneously, Jessica came in.

Like Maureen, Jessie wore a dress—a sharp red in this case paired with a short leather jacket the color of top cream. The short, high-heeled boots wouldn’t last five minutes in the snow, but they matched the red dress as if they’d been dyed in the same batch.

Bodine had to admire the slick, unassailable style.

Jessica wore her streaked blond hair pulled back in a sleek coil as she often did on workdays. Like the boots, her lips matched the dress perfectly and suited her slashing cheekbones, her slim, straight nose, and her eyes of clear, glacier blue.

She sat as Bodine finished the call, taking her own phone out of her jacket pocket and scrolling through something.

Bodine hung up, sat back. “The coordinator for the Western Writers Association’s going to contact you about a three-day retreat and farewell banquet.”

“Do they have dates? Numbers?”

“Projected number ninety-eight. Dates are January nine arrival, departure on January twelve.”

“This January?”

Bodine smiled. "Their other venue fell through, so they're scrambling. I checked and we can work this. We slow down right after the holidays. We'll hold the Mill for them, for the meeting rooms and banquet, and the number of cabins she requested for forty-eight hours. The coordinator—Mandy—seemed organized, if a little desperate. I've just now sent you, my mother, and Rory an e-mail on the particulars. Their budget should work."

"All right. I'll talk to her, get a meal plan, transportation, activities, and so on. Writers?"

"Yep."

"I'll alert the Saloon." Jessica made another note on her phone. "I've never organized an event for writers that doesn't run a big bar tab."

"Good for us." Bodine wagged a thumb at the little coffeemaker. "Help yourself."

Jessica simply lifted the Irish green Bodine Resort insulated cup of water she carried habitually.

"How do you live without coffee?" Bodine wondered, sincerely. "Or Coke. How do you live on water?"

"Because there's also wine. And there's yoga, meditation."

"All of those things put you to sleep."

"Not if they're done right. You really should do more yoga. And meditation would probably help you cut back on the caffeine."

"Meditation just makes me think about all the other things I'd rather be doing." Leaning back, Bodine swiveled her chair side to side. "I really like that jacket."

"Thanks. I went into Missoula on my day off, splurged. Which is nearly as good as yoga for the mind and spirit. Sal tells me Linda-Sue's going to be a little late—newsflash—and her mother's coming with her."

"That's the latest. We'll deal. They're booking fifty-four cabins for three days. Rehearsal dinner, wedding, wedding reception, basically taking over Zen Town the day before the wedding in addition to the other activities."

"The wedding's only four weeks away, so that's not much time to change their minds, add more fluff."

Bodine's wide mouth tipped into a smirk. "You've met Dolly Jackson, right?"

"I can handle Dolly."

"Better you than ... anybody," Bodine decided. "Let's go over what we've got."

They went over the list top to bottom, and had moved on to a smaller holiday party event the week before Christmas when Sal stuck her head in the door.

"Linda-Sue and her mom."

"Be right there. Wait, Sal? Order up some mimosas."

"Now you're talking."

"Smart," Jessica said, after Sal popped out again. "Fuss over them and soften them up."

"Linda-Sue's not so bad. Chase dated her for about five minutes in high school." Bodine rose, tugged her dark brown vest into place. "But mimosas never hurt. Let's soldier up."

Pretty, curvy, easily flustered Linda-Sue paced the lobby with her hands clasped between her breasts.

“Can’t you just see it, Mom? Everything decorated for Christmas, the trees, the lights, a fire going like now. And Jessica said the Mill’s just going to sparkle.”

“It better. I’m telling you we need those big candle stands, Linda-Sue, at least a dozen. Gold ones, like I saw in that magazine. Not the shiny gold, the classy gold.”

As she talked, Dolly scribbled on a page in the brick-thick, bride-white wedding binder she carried.

Her eyes looked slightly mad.

“And red velvet—dark red, not bright red—laid out on the path from where the sleigh stops instead of white. It’ll show off your dress better. And I’m telling you we need a harpist—wearing red velvet with that classy gold trim—to play while people are coming in to get seated.”

Jessica drew in a breath. “We’re going to need more mimosas.”

“I hear you.” Bodine pasted on a smile, stepped into the breach.

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Bodine gave the classy gold wedding forty minutes, then escaped. In the three months since Jessica had filled the slot as events manager, she’d proved herself more than capable of handling a fussy mother and a dithering bride-to-be.

In any case, Bodine had a meeting set with the food and beverage manager, needed to answer a couple of questions from one of their drivers, and wanted to cross a discussion with their horse manager off her list.

The winding, hilly gravel road from her office to the Bodine Activity Center (the BAC) ran nearly a half mile, but the minute she stepped outside, in that apple-crisp air, she decided she wanted the hike rather than the drive.

he could smell the snow now, judged it would start to fall before mid-afternoon. But for now, the sky hung pale blue under the crowding clouds.

She walked by a couple of the little green Kias they provided to guests during their stay (on-property use only), then turned onto the narrow gravel road and saw no one.

Fields spread on either side, buried in snow. She spotted a trio of deer loping through it, white tails flashing, dark winter coats thick.

The cry of a hawk had her gaze lifting to watch it circle. Falconry ranked high on her three-year-plan for the resort, and she’d made progress in that area as she came to the end of year one.

The wind whipped snow off the ground, sent it swirling around her like sparkling dust while her boots rang on the iron hard ground.

She spotted movement near the BAC, some of the staff out with a few of the horses in the sheltered paddock. The warm smell of horses carried to her, as did the scents of oiled leather, hay, and grain.

She lifted a hand in greeting as the man in the heavy barn coat and brown Stetson glanced over. Abe Kotter patted the paint mare he’d been brushing, then walked a few steps to meet Bodine.

“Gonna snow,” she said.

"Gonna snow," he agreed. "Had a pair outta Denver want a ride. They knew what they were doing, so Maddie took 'em out and about for a bit. Just got back."

"Just let me know if you want to rotate any to the ranch, switch out."

"Can do. You walk down from the main?"

"I wanted the walk, the air. But you know, I think I'll saddle one up, ride it back, go around see the ladies of Bodine House."

"You tell them hey for me. I'll saddle you up, Bo. Three Socks could use a ride. You'd be saving my old bones."

"Old my ass."

"I'm sixty-nine in February."

"You say that's old, you'll have my grannies taking some shots at your bones."

He laughed, stepped back and gave the paint another rub. "Maybe so, but I'm taking that winter break like we talked about. Heading to see my brother in Arizona, me and the wife. Right after Christmas, and through to April."

She didn't wince, though she wanted to. "We'll miss you and Edda around here."

"Winters get harder when the years add up." He checked the paint's hoof, pulled out a hoof pick to clean it. "Not so much call for trail rides and such in the winter. Maddie can step up, manage the horses for a couple months. She's got a good head on her shoulders."

"I'll talk to her. Is she inside? I've got to go in, talk to Drew anyway."

"In there now. I'll get Three Socks ready for you."

"Thanks, Abe." She started out, walked backward. "What the hell are you going to do in Arizona?"

"Damned if I know except stay warm."

She walked around inside the building. Starting in spring right through till October, the big, barn-like space would hold groups gearing up for white-water rafting, ATV jaunts, trail rides, cattle drives, and guided hikes.

Once the snow got serious, things tended to slow down, and now the space echoed with her boot steps as she crossed to the curved counter and the resort's activities manager.

"How ya doing, Bo?"

"Doing, Matt, and that's enough. How about you?"

"Quiet enough we're catching up on things. We've got a group out cross-country skiing, another shooting skeet. Family group of twelve's taking a trail ride tomorrow, so I gave Chase the word on that. He said Cal Skinner's back, and going to handle that end."

"That's right."

She talked to Matt about inventory, replacing gear and equipment, then pulled out her phone with her notes to discuss additional activities for the Jackson wedding.

"I'll be sending you an e-mail with all the details. For now, just make sure you block all this out, pull in whoever you need to cover it all."

"I got it."

"Abe said Maddie was in here."

"She's in the ladies'."

“Okay.” She glanced at the time on her phone before pocketing it. She wanted that ride to see the grannies, then really had to get back to the office. “I’ll wait a few.”

She wandered to the vending machine. Jessica was right—she should drink more water. She didn’t want water. She wanted something sweet and fizzy. She wanted a damn Coke.

Damn that Jessie, she thought, plugging in the money and taking out a bottle of water.

She took the first annoyed swig as Maddie stepped out of the restroom.

“Hey, Maddie.”

Bodine headed over to the horsewoman. She thought Maddie looked a little pale, a little tired around the eyes despite her quick smile.

“Hi, Bo. Just back from the trail.”

“I hear. You okay? You look a little peaked.”

“I’m fine.” After waving it away, Maddie puffed out a breath. “Do you have time to sit a minute?”

“Sure I do.” Bodine gestured to one of the little tables scattered around the room. “Is everything okay? Here? At home?”

“It’s great. Really great.” Maddie, a lifetime friend, sat, and pushed back the brim of the hat that sat on the chin-length swing of her sunny blond hair. “I’m pregnant.”

“You’re—Maddie! That’s great. Isn’t it great?”

“It’s great and it’s wonderful and amazing. And a little scary. Thad and I decided, why wait? We only got married last spring, and the plan was to hold off a year, maybe two. Then we said why do that? So, we dived right in.”

She laughed, then tapped Bodine’s water. “Can I have a sip of that?”

“Take it all. I’m so happy for you, Maddie. Are you feeling all right?”

“I puked three times a day the first couple months. First thing in the morning, lunchtime, and dinnertime. I get tired quicker, but the doctor says that’s how it goes. And the puking should let up altogether pretty soon—I hope to God. I guess it has, a little. Just now I was queasy, but I didn’t barf, so that’s something.”

“Thad must be doing backflips over the moon.”

“He is.”

“How far along are you?”

“Twelve weeks come Saturday.”

Bo opened her mouth, closed it again, then took the water back for another gulp. “Twelve.”

After sighing out a breath, Maddie bit her bottom lip. “I almost told you straight off, but everything says how you should wait to get through the first three months, the first trimester. We haven’t told anybody but our parents—you just have to tell them—and even then we waited until I had four weeks in.”

“You sure don’t look pregnant.”

“I’m gonna. And truth is, my jeans are so tight in the waist already, I’ve got them hooked up with a carabiner.”

“You do not!”

“I do.” To prove it, Maddie lifted up her shirt, showed Bo the little silver clip. “And look at this.”

Maddie lifted her cap, bending her head to show a good inch of brown roots bisecting the blond. "They don't want you dyeing your hair. I'm not going to take off my hat until this baby comes, I swear. I haven't seen my natural-born color since I was thirteen and you helped me color it with that box of Nice 'n Easy."

"And we used some to put a blond streak in my hair that ended up looking like a slice of neon pumpkin."

"I thought it looked so cool. I'm a blonde in my heart, Bo, but I'm going to be a pregnant brunette. A fat, waddling-around, peeing-every-five-minutes brunette."

On a laugh, Bodine passed the water back. As she drank, Maddie stroked a hand over her as-yet-invisible baby bump. "I feel different, I really do, and it's a kind of wonder. Bodine, I'm going to be a mother."

"You're going to be a terrific mother."

"I've got my mind set on that. But, well, there's another thing I'm not supposed to be doing."

"Riding."

With a nod, Maddie drank again. "I've been dragging my feet there, I know. Jeez, I've been riding since I was a baby myself, but the doctor's firm on it."

"So am I. You went out on the trail today, Maddie."

"I know it. I should've told Abe, but I thought I should tell you first. Then he's talking about how I can take over for him while he's gone this winter. I didn't want to say because he really wants this trip, and I could just see him putting it aside."

"He won't put it aside, and you won't be in the saddle until you get the all clear from your doctor. That's it."

Biting her lip again—a sure sign of anxiety, Maddie twisted and untwisted the cap on the water bottle. "There's the lessons, too."

"We'll cover them." She'd figure it out, Bodine thought. That's what she did.

"There's more to the horses than riding, Maddie."

"I know it. I already do some of the paperwork. I can groom and feed and drive the horse trailer, drive the guests to the Equestrian Center. I can—"

"What you can do is get me a list, from your doctor of the dos and the don'ts. What's on the do side, you do—what's on the don't side, you don't."

"The thing is, the doctor's awful cautious, and—"

"So am I," Bodine interrupted. "I get the list and you stick to it, or I let you go."

Slumping back, Maddie sulked. "Thad said you'd say just that."

"You didn't marry an idiot. And he loves you. So do I. Now, you're going home for the rest of the day."

"Oh, I don't need to go home."

"You're going home," Bo repeated. "Taking a nap. After the nap, you're calling your baby doctor, telling him—"

"It's a her."

"Whatever. You tell her to make up that list and send it to you, to copy me. Then we'll go from there. Worst thing, Maddie, you switch a saddle for a desk chair for a few months." Bodine smiled. "You're going to get fat."

"I'm kind of looking forward to it."

"Good, because it's gonna happen. Now go home." Bodine stood, leaned over to give Maddie a hard hug. "And congratulations."

“Thanks. Thanks, Bo. I’m going to tell Abe before I leave. Tell him you’ve got it all covered, all right?”

“Do that.”

“In fact, I’m telling everybody. I’ve been dying to since I peed on the stick. Hey, Matt!” Rising, Maddie patted her belly. “I’m pregnant!”

“Holy shit!”

Bodine had time to see him boost himself right over the counter and run over to lift Maddie off her feet.

Parents got told about babies first, Bodine thought as she went back outside. But there was a lot of family around here.