

Chapter 1

When Caroline Hearst walked through the doors of Arcadia Valley Community Hospital, her stomach didn't twist in fear at the look on Dr. Sloan's face as he met her. She'd already been apprised of Gram's condition, and she had no doubt that Gram was already making the staff do her bidding. Rather, it was the fact that her parents trailed behind the doctor, closely followed by her other aunts and uncles, that made her want to vomit. They'd all been trying to put Gram in a home for years, and from the steam rising from the collective group of Bigbys, Caroline knew it would take a miracle to stop them this time.

"Caroline. So glad you could join us." Dr. Sloan gave her an apologetic expression, like he knew she was being ambushed and felt terrible about the fact.

He should feel terrible, since the only reason Caroline knew about the ambush was because Amy Larson, one of the nurses taking care of Gram, called her to warn her.

Caroline's mother, Camille Bigby Hearst, tugged at her precious string of pearls like she thought they would somehow protect her from Caroline's wrath. Because clearly, something was up, and it wasn't that any of them were concerned for Gram's health. You didn't fly from all corners of the globe just because your mother broke her leg.

And then Caroline spotted him.

"Who's the guy in the suit?"

The aunts and uncles glanced at each other nervously. Mr. Suit stepped forward, but Caroline's father held his hand up.

"Princess..."

Caroline glared at him. She hadn't been his Princess since she was five years old, and now was not the time to relive her childhood.

"Look, Caroline, I know you care for your grandmother, but we've all been talking, and it's time that we let the younger generation off the hook in taking care of Mother. We know we haven't paid as much attention to her in recent years, but all that's going to change."

She hated the way she was immediately suspicious of her father, especially since she'd spent so much time praying to soften her heart towards him. But Stephen Hearst was a hard man to love, because to him love was all about dollars and cents, and money wasn't a language Caroline spoke.

"Gram doesn't need anyone taking care of her," Caroline said, trying to soften her tone. "She's more capable than any of us. She can milk the goats, feed the animals—"

"She broke her leg riding a horse!" Uncle Edward's face was so red Caroline almost asked him if he'd been spending too much time in the sun.

Caroline sighed. "I'll grant you that Demon was not the wisest choice of mount for Gram."

"You let her ride a horse named Demon?" Aunt Mary, married to her Uncle Bart, joined the fray.

"No one *lets* Gram do anything." Caroline shook her head as she looked at her relatives. "Gram is a grown woman who makes her own decisions. And yes, the horse's name is Demon,

which is actually an ironic name, because he's as docile as a turtle. And about as fast. Which is how the whole accident happened. Gram likes to go fast, asked how to make Demon go, and one of the little boys thought it would be funny to throw some pebbles to try to spook Demon into going, only it worked too well. He threw Gram, and she landed funny. Happens to the best of us."

Her explanation didn't seem to make any of them calm down. Uncle Bart turned to her father. "Can that lawyer of yours go after the kid for damages?"

"Are you kidding me?" Caroline turned to her father. "Is that who the suit is? You brought a lawyer to visit your mother-in-law in the hospital?"

Glaring at the suit, she said, "I'm sorry they wasted your time. But Gram is not going to sue a seven-year-old."

Unfortunately, the suit must be fairly decent at his job, because his expression betrayed nothing. He just stood there, all GQ, with his expensive suit and slicked back dark hair. She supposed he must think pretty highly of himself, from his cocky posture, aloof and watching.

"We're not suing anyone," her father said quietly. "But we are going to be discussing our options as a family. Clearly your grandmother isn't capable of taking care of herself anymore, and it's time we discussed making her comfortable for her last years."

"She has a broken leg. She's not dying." Caroline tore her gaze from the suit and turned her attention to the doctor for confirmation, and he nodded. "The only reason Gram even stayed overnight was because they had to do surgery to put some pins in and they wanted to be sure there were no after

effects. Andrew should be on his way to pick her up at any time.”

At least that’s what Caroline hoped. She and her cousins lived on Bigby Farm, Gram’s farm, and her cousin Andrew agreed to pick her up this afternoon. Only Caroline had gotten the call about her family and dropped what she was doing to race over.

She took a deep breath and said a silent prayer that Andrew would come quickly. At least Andrew was on her side, no, Gram’s side.

Her father cleared his throat. “We’ve decided that your grandmother isn’t going home. We’ve found a bed for her in a rehabilitation facility, and then she will be transferred to an assisted living home.”

“Does Gram know?” Caroline couldn’t muster the kind of glare her father deserved. A death ray would be the only appropriate expression.

“Sweetheart, your grandmother is not well. It’s time you faced the truth and let us take over.” He gestured to the suit. “This is Hayden Donnelly. He’s the attorney for a company specializes in transforming rundown properties into vacation destinations. The Bigby name will live on as part of a planned resort community.”

He did not just call the farm that had been in their family since 1910 a rundown property. Caroline felt her temperature rise.

The aunts and uncles all murmured their agreement with her father’s plan, as though this was going to be the best thing ever, instead of the end of Gram’s life. Like any of them ever spent time on the farm.

“Does Gram know?” Caroline asked again.

The suit, Hayden Donnelly, stepped forward. “That’s why we’re all here,” he said, his voice as smooth as his silky slicked back hair.

Disgusting.

“We thought it would be best to share news that she might find difficult while under the care of qualified medical professionals.”

He sounded so reasonable, but Caroline knew this was all a game to him, and to the rest of her family. They’d been trying for years to get Gram to sell Bigby Farm. People from all over the world flocked to Arcadia Valley, not just for the incredible nearby falls, but for the wonderful outdoor activities and natural beauty. Maybe that was tourism-speak, but in Caroline’s opinion, Arcadia Valley was the best place on earth, but rather than enjoy it, her family was always scheming to wrest the farm from Gram’s control to have it be pillaged by others.

Caroline gave Mr. Slick Suit Hayden Donnelly a smile. “So what you’re saying is that you’re going to provoke Gram by giving her the worst news ever in hopes that she’ll come unglued in front of medical professionals who are willing to testify that she’s not of sound mind, and then you and my family will take control of her estate and raid it by force.”

“Now, Princess, that’s not at all what we’re trying—”

“Don’t lie to me.” She turned to position herself so she was facing her family. All of them. “And don’t any of you pretend that you’re here because you care about Gram. All you see are the dollar signs that will come from selling the one thing that’s kept her going all these years.”

“Sweetheart, it’s not just about us, but for you. Think about it. You could finally have your own place, and get a real job instead of wasting your life in her hovel.”

And that was exactly why Caroline had to spend every day praying, asking God to help her find a way to love her father. He just didn’t get it. Never had.

“I do have my own place,” she said calmly. “I live at Bigby Farm because that’s where I want to live. The whole second floor of the farmhouse is all mine. And I do have a real job. I help Gram run a working farm that is also a living history museum where children can come and learn about farming and...”

The looks on their faces said it all. They weren’t listening. Nor did they care. Bigby Farm barely broke even most years, but if they sold the land, the family would have millions.

Hayden stepped forward, a sympathetic look on his face. “I think if you hear me out and you see what we’re trying to do here, you’ll see it’s a good thing. Parks. Outdoor activities. Places for families to connect.”

Caroline nodded, forcing herself to be pleasant to this man who clearly cared only about the bottom line. “It sounds like the copy from a really nice brochure. But you see, we already have all that at Bigby Farm. And if you, or any of these people who call themselves family, actually came out to enjoy the farm, you’d know that.”

Looking around, she realized that they were all standing in the waiting room of the hospital. People were watching them. More than anything, Caroline hated scenes, hated being a part of this. Even if it was in defense of Gram.

She turned to the doctor. “Is there a private place where you can send the family to wait? I’d like to speak to Gram alone.”

Dr. Sloan looked uncomfortable. Her father cleared his throat again.

“Your grandmother is being evaluated right now to see if she’s able to continue making decisions for herself.”

How could she be related to this man? A man who had no compassion or genuine love for his mother-in-law?

Except this was one battle Caroline knew she’d win. She smiled. “Then it’s a good thing I have full medical and legal power of attorney for Gram should she be declared incapacitated.”

The best part of the horrified expressions on her family’s faces was that none of them had seen that one coming. Even poor slimy Hayden Donnelly looked outmaneuvered.

Caroline turned to Dr. Sloan. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to see my grandmother. If, in fact, they are having her mental capacity tested, I would like to be present.”

Dr. Sloan nodded. “Of course. Follow me.”



Caroline Hearst was something else, Hayden would give her that. Even though her dark brown hair was falling out of the braids she’d pulled it into, and her face had smudges of dirt, she was a sight to behold. And not in a bad way. It didn’t matter that she wore faded jeans, and that as she followed the doctor down the hall, she left behind clods of dirt from boots caked with the stuff. It was her eyes, he decided. The fire that warned anyone against messing with her — or her gram.

Someone like Caroline, Hayden didn’t want to mess with her even on one of his best days.

Besides, the woman clearly loved her grandmother, and clearly loved the farm. How was he supposed to fight that?

Hayden took a deep breath. Because he had to, that’s why. It was his job. And if he was ever going to prove his worth at Carpenter and Donnelly, he had to do his job. The son of Mark Donnelly didn’t get handouts, didn’t get the easy jobs, no, he had to claw his way up and fight for his rightful place at the table. Even if it meant stepping on someone who seemed like a nice person.

Stephen Hearst turned to Hayden. “What now? This was supposed to be easy, proving my mother incompetent, then sealing the deal. If Caroline’s in control, there’s no way we can sell.”

The trouble was, based on what Stephen had said, Hayden thought the old lady sounded pretty crazy. But Caroline?

“Is she taking advantage of her grandmother in any way? Mismanaging funds?”

Hayden couldn’t understand why he felt relieved at the shake of Stephen’s head. “There’s no money. It’s all in the land.”

Bart Bigby stepped forward. “It’s true. I caught a peek when my son Andrew did Mom’s taxes. She barely cleared ten grand last year. Ten grand. What do they live on?”

Family members began bickering among themselves, and a nurse approached. “Dr. Sloan has made a conference room available for you all to wait where you’ll be more comfortable.”

Hayden forced back a grin. Yup, Caroline Hearst was something else. He had to give her credit, she’d at least tried hearing out her family before dismissing them.

As they followed the nurse down the corridor, he spotted Caroline walking next to an elderly woman being pushed in a wheelchair.

"Elder abuse," the woman yelled. "That's what this is! You can't let an old woman live in peace. I want to go home where you can't make me take your poison!"

"Gram!" Caroline gave her grandmother a quick glance and then looked at them. "That's enough."

"I'll say when it's enough." Enid Bigby, the topic of the debate, finally looked over at the family group that had gathered. "Ah, yes, the vultures. Coming to pick at my leavings. Well, I'm not dead yet, you greedy fools. And I've put it all into a trust so you can't have it even when I do kick the bucket."

"Gram!" Caroline's voice was sharp, and even she seemed to realize it as she put her hand over her own mouth.

"No sense in denying it, girl. They all want me gone so they can sell off the farm to some fancy schmancy developers who will turn it into a golf course or something."

Hayden had never felt bad about making a deal, but as she described exactly what they were going to do, he found that he did. Actually, quite a lot. Granted, it was going to be more than a golf course, but the way the old woman said it, it was like it was a swear word or something.

"Mother..." Stephen stepped forward, a smile on his face. "It's so good to see you. I'm so glad you're all right. We've missed you."

"Missed me?" Enid turned to Caroline. "When was the last time your father came for a visit?"

Caroline shifted, frowning. "I don't know, Gram. A few years at least."

“Ha!” Enid’s wrinkled face showed even more lines as she grinned. “If you missed me, you’d have come to visit more often. You haven’t been here since 2003, and that was only to drop off Caroline to come stay with me.”

Caroline nudged her grandmother. “He came for my high school graduation, Gram.”

“He didn’t even spend the night. That doesn’t count.”

The old woman glared at her son, and Hayden immediately recognized the expression. At least he knew where Caroline got it.

“He spent the night when he came for Gramps’ funeral two years ago. That was the last time he came.” Caroline’s voice was quiet, sorrowful.

“But he left as soon as they read the will, and he found out he wasn’t getting a penny.” The old woman’s scowl deepened. “Three times in nearly fifteen years. And every one of them was a forced visit. That doesn’t show he cares, just that he’s barely willing to do his duty.”

For a moment, Hayden questioned whether or not he was on the right side. Except, as his father often told him, his job wasn’t to figure out which was the right or wrong side. His job was to represent the client to the best of his ability.

Even though he represented Stephen, Hayden couldn’t help but feel sorry for an old woman whose kids never came to visit. He also wondered about Caroline. He’d heard of kids who lived with their grandparents, of course, but they came from bad families. Not one as prominent as the Hearsts.

Hayden shook his head. That’s not what he was here for. Do the deal, not get sucked into some weird family drama. But he couldn’t deny there was something about the sadness on Caroline’s face that made him want to make it all better.

"Let's not quibble over details," Stephen said smoothly. "We're here now, and we care about you. We wanted to see you, but Caroline insisted on separating you from us, she wanted us to go sit in a conference room rather than spend time with you."

"It's true, Mom," Donna Bigby Marsh said. "With you screaming elder abuse, I'm wondering if Caroline truly has your best interests at heart."

Hayden closed his eyes. He knew exactly where this was going. Since the Bigby clan would fail in their attempt to declare Enid incompetent and gain control, because Caroline had Power of Attorney, they were going to accuse Caroline of elder abuse. Which, if they were successful, Caroline would lose control, and the deal would be back on.

These people were sick. Terrible people. And Hayden had any other choice in the matter, he'd turn around and walk away. But where would that leave him? His father had already warned him that this was his last chance at proving himself. If Hayden failed, he'd be fired. And if Hayden were fired, he'd never have the chance to even try to have a relationship with his father. But worse, even if Hayden left, his father would simply take over. And when Mark Donnelly wanted something, he took no prisoners.

He opened his eyes and tried not to look at Caroline Hearst. But he could feel her eyes on him. Like she knew that he would be the one to destroy her. God help him, he didn't want to destroy her. He didn't want to destroy anyone. But God didn't help men like him, didn't help little boys like him, who'd grown up praying for God to see him, praying that God would give him a dad just like all the other boys. When he finally stopped praying, his father had finally come back into

Hayden’s life. And all Hayden had to do to keep him was prove that he was worthy of a man like Mark Donnelly.

Which meant hurting what seemed to be an innocent woman.

The din of voices around him, asking Caroline questions about her grandmother’s care, they all blended together as he watched Caroline shrink, like a gazelle on one of those wildlife shows, just before it was about to be devoured by a lion.

Hayden took a step back. He couldn’t be a part of this. Not when there was nothing in him that believed Caroline was guilty. But if he left, his father would step in. His father would have no problem crucifying Caroline. Like a God forsaking his only son. Why did Christians believe that garbage anyway? To justify sacrificing their kids to achieve their own ends?

Sick. Sick, sick, sick.

So why did Hayden crave the approval, the love, of a man who would be so vicious?

Maybe Hayden was a little sick, too.

If there was a God, a God who actually cared about people, Hayden just hoped he’d hurry up and make his move. Do something to stop this family from eating each other alive. Or at least give Hayden some way to not be part of the carnage.

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