

Chapter One

Medical equipment. Gizmos and gadgets that belonged in a hospital, not a person's home.

Andrew Bigby pushed past the miscellaneous items stacked along the hallway by the back door. He took a deep breath as he walked further into the room. Gram was not that sick. In fact, when he got into living room there sat Gram in her favorite chair, sipping a cup of tea.

“What’s all this stuff, Gram?”

Gram set her cup of tea on the rickety round table his great uncle such and such had made and looked up at him with a resigned expression on her face.

“That stupid caseworker Matilda Talcott. The nurse told her I wasn’t doing what I’m supposed to be doing for therapy. So now they’ve got some other nurse who’s going to come in and take care of me. They think I need all this junk.”

A couple months ago, Gram's children, a.k.a. Andrew's parents, aunts and uncles, decided to try to take over the family farm after Gram broke her leg in a riding accident. While their initial bid was not successful, they had succeeded in getting Gram assigned a caseworker. The caseworker was supposed to make sure that Andrew, his sister Allie, and his cousin Caroline were not abusing Gram, or exercising undue influence over her to gain control over her finances.

Andrew shook his head. What a joke. Only the not funny kind. Just a ridiculous waste of everyone's time. Though the caseworker agreed that none of them were abusing Gram, nor taking advantage of her in any way, she kept butting in when it came to Gram's medical care. Apparently the way Andrew and his family took care of Gram, as in, treating her like a grown woman capable of making her own decisions, wasn't what the caseworker wanted. Gram didn't like modern medicine, and that was just fine by Andrew. Unfortunately, the caseworker didn't agree.

Gram pointed at the other side of the room, where Andrew saw a petite woman who barely looked like she could lift a feed sack, let alone do any of the stuff Gram needed, sat.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Layla Avila."

"I assume you're the new nurse. I'm Andrew Bigby." This was the third nurse the caseworker

had sent to their home to take care of Gram. Most of them got frustrated with Gram's eccentricities and quit. He wasn't going to bother getting to know this one either. After all, she'd be gone just as quickly as she'd arrived.

He'd admit she was kind of cute, though, if a man were to be interested in that sort of thing. Andrew had given up on admiring a pretty girl a long time ago. Still, there was something about that long, silky hair and dark eyes...

No. Focus. Andrew took a deep breath and tried to smile at her. "What's with all the equipment?"

Layla folded her arms across her chest. "I'm afraid that's privileged information. HIPAA laws and all that."

So she was one of those. Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Andrew turned to Gram.

"Would you like to do the honors, or shall I?"

Gram grinned. They'd had this conversation a time or two, and by now, a person would think that someone would have noted it in her records.

"We speak freely in this house. All the lawyer documents have been signed. I don't keep secrets from my grandchildren. Now, my blood-sucking children, well, that's another story."

This time, Andrew didn't bother hiding the groan. "I thought we were working on being nice, Gram. Remember your blood pressure."

“I am thinking of my blood pressure,” Gram said. “Keeping it all in only makes it worse. I don’t know how Edward and I raised such a bunch of greedy ingrates. Except for Adam, of course, may he rest in peace.”

Andrew came alongside Gram and put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it. Gram had been mentioning her late son more often lately, and he wondered if being forced to slow down was making her more aware of her losses. Andrew liked to keep busy for the same reason — keeping the pain of his own unbearable loss at a dull ache.

He’d only met his Uncle Adam a few times before Adam was killed in an accident. Since Andrew had only been a child, he didn’t remember his uncle, except that he’d made Andrew laugh, and since Adam’s death, nothing in the family had been the same.

Some people thought Gram was crazy, and maybe she was a little bit. But grief did funny things to people, and while Andrew didn’t remember a lot about how Gram was before Adam’s death, he knew firsthand how the death of a loved one changed a person. Poor Gram had lost a husband and a son. He’d only lost half that much, and some days, Andrew felt like the struggle to breathe was almost not worth the effort. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to walk down the aisle with Mykel. She’d died too soon. If this was the grief he felt

having been robbed of a life with her, how much more so did Gram feel her losses? No, he wouldn't judge her like so many did.

Instead, he gave her another squeeze. "Let's do what we can to keep you around for a while longer, all right?"

Gram smiled up at him with watery eyes. "Only the Good Lord knows how long we'll be on this earth, but I reckon I have so many questions to ask Him, that He's going to take His time calling me home. No one likes listening to an annoying old lady."

"You're not annoying, Gram." Andrew gave her another pat, then sat in one of the nearby chairs. He turned his attention to Layla. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, why don't you explain to me what's going on? You can start with all the medical equipment in the house. Gram doesn't need all that garbage."

Layla looked at him in the same indulgent way a person looks at a child. "Your grandmother's rehab hasn't been going so well. She's been missing her appointments. She's also starting to develop some complications from not listening to her doctors."

Andrew turned to his grandmother. "That true Gram?"

"They want me to do yoga." The indignation on Gram's face made Andrew want to laugh.

However, he knew from experience that if he did laugh, it would only make her angrier.

“Yoga, huh?”

“Do I look like a pretzel to you?”

Andrew just smiled at his grandmother. “Nope. But Gram, you’ve got to go to rehab. That leg of yours needs some extra care so that it’s strong enough for you to come out and help us in the garden. We’re going to need your help with all those extra cucumbers you wanted planted for that new pickle recipe you’re dying to try.”

Gram frowned. “Mona already tried it. They’re disgusting.”

With a smile, Layla came towards them. “My abuela makes great pickles. I can ask her if she’d be willing to share the recipe.”

Gram’s face twisted into a scowl, and Andrew already knew what was coming. Why such a nice offer would set her off, he didn’t know, but Layla would be running for the hills when it was over.

“I don’t know any Abuelas. If I don’t know them, then they must not be much of a cook. I know every good cook in Arcadia Valley.”

Leaning in to Gram, Andrew said softly, “I believe abuela means grandmother in Spanish.”

“Well, I don’t know Spanish.” Gram crossed her arms and stared at Layla. “I wouldn’t be able to read the recipe.”

“My abuela is fluent in English. We use Spanish words and endearments as a way of preserving our heritage.” Layla spoke softly as she approached Gram.

“How about I bring you some of her pickles next time I come? Abuela says there isn’t a food that can’t be pickled, so I’ll bring some regular pickles as well as one of her interesting varieties. I’m told you have rather unique food choices.”

Andrew had to give Layla some credit. She was enough of an optimist to believe that she’d be coming back. He respected that. Even though he’d pretty much given up on hanging on to any optimism of his own long ago.



Layla was doing her best not to lose her temper with the cranky old woman in front of her. She’d been told that Enid Bigby was a nasty woman with a tongue as sharp as a razor. They’d specifically asked Layla to take the case because they knew Layla was good with difficult patients. As far as she could tell, the difficulty wasn’t going to be with Enid, but with getting her grandchildren to stop coddling her. Already she could see the apologies on Andrew’s lips for his grandmother’s behavior.

“How do I know it’s not poison? Does she put gluten in it? Does she know any of my children, who are trying to kill me?”

One of Enid’s previous nurses had put in her notes that the old woman was paranoid about a number of strange things. Clearly she hadn’t been exaggerating. Yet as Layla looked at the old woman’s eyes, she could see genuine fear that she thought someone was trying to hurt her.

“Why do you think your children are trying to kill you?” Layla asked pleasantly, hoping to defuse the situation.

Enid glared at her. “Because they hate me. And they hate the farm. They want to destroy everything we’ve worked for.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” She looked over at Andrew, who shook his head.

“You’d think,” he said. “But no. I’ve heard every single one of them say they hate their mother. And they also hate the farm. I don’t think they’re trying to kill Gram, but they have been trying to put her in a home for years.”

“Which will kill me,” Enid wailed, pounding the floor with her cane.

Andrew let out a long sigh. “I told you. No one is putting you in a home. Me, Allie, and Caroline have all promised you that. We’ll do whatever it takes to keep you right here where you belong.”

And there it was. The one thing Layla needed to do her job. She couldn't help but smile as she crossed the last few steps to Enid.

"Then we should have no problem. As long as you do everything I say, you get to stay right here. But if you continue to be noncompliant with your treatment, I'll have no choice but to recommend to Ms. Talcott that you be admitted for inpatient care."

Her words, however, did not have the desired effect. Enid smiled as she leaned back against her chair. "You can recommend, but you can't force me. I know my rights. And I have my lawyer on speed dial."

Andrew looked at Layla sympathetically. "Just so you know, she's not bluffing. We're not joking about how aggressively our family has been working to get Gram out of the way. She knows her rights inside and out, and now that Caroline is engaged to a lawyer, there's not a lot that gets by Gram."

The grandson meant well, as most of them did. But he obviously didn't understand that by helping, he was only making things worse. And yet, she couldn't help but admire how strongly he fought for the old woman. Most people didn't have that depth of loyalty.

"If the family is being as aggressive as you say, then why aren't you doing more to help your

grandmother be in compliance with her medical care so that your family has no ammunition against her?”

“Because the doctors are all in on it!” Enid jumped up from her chair and immediately lost her balance.

Though many nurses would rush to her assistance, Layla could tell that Enid would only resent it, and her, even more as a result.

So instead, Layla kept her attention on the grandson. Weird to think of someone near her own age as someone’s grandson, but she was someone’s granddaughter, so it should have made sense. Except there was something different about the man before her. He seemed older, ancient, even, in the way he looked at her. But that was ridiculous, since Andrew Bigby was young, and, if she were honest, handsome. His sandy blond hair was tousled the way a model’s might be, only Layla knew that it was from the wind, and not hundreds of dollars of product. Though he was properly clothed, she could sense that he was muscular, not from hours in a gym, but hours on the farm.

Exactly the kind of man she could bring home to her family and they would approve of. At least her father would. He’d done everything he could to shed his Mexican heritage, and resented the fact that Layla had wanted to reconnect with her mother’s side of the family, who embraced being

Mexican, rather than trying to dispose of it. Connecting with her Mexican side of the family had brought a missing piece back into her life.

Which was why Layla had no interest in dating at this point in her life. She already had too much on her plate with figuring out her new family dynamic — learning all the new people and customs. It was still strange to her to have cousins dropping by her apartment at all hours and dragging her out to a family event. Besides, she couldn't date someone so closely connected to a patient.

Could she understand Andrew's dogged desire to keep his grandmother happy? Absolutely. But keeping her happy and keeping her healthy were two different things.

Layla smiled at Andrew. Her cheeks would hurt tonight from so many forced smiles, but sometimes the job required it.

“Do you think your grandmother's doctors are in on the plot to harm your grandmother?”

He sat back in his chair. “Leave me out of it.”

“Interesting.” She shook her head at him. “You say you care about her and would do anything to keep her out of a home, but when I ask for your honest assessment of the situation, you refuse to give an opinion?”

Enid chortled. It figured she'd enjoy someone else being called out for a change.

“Fine.” Andrew leaned forward again. “You want to know what I think? I think the doctors and the nurses have spent zero time figuring out what Gram wants, and how they can be partners in her healing. Instead, they’re forcing their own agendas on her without even trying to see things from her perspective. Do I think that’s coming from my relatives? No. I think it’s a problem with the medical community in general. You play God with people’s lives without considering the impact it has on those lives. So maybe, instead of forcing her to do a bunch of stuff she doesn’t want to do, like yoga, you can figure out things she can do instead that will achieve the same objective.”

Suddenly, Layla didn’t feel so confident in her job anymore. As much as she hated to admit it, he had a point. She’d come in with her plan, and was prepared to implement it, knowing that Enid Bigby was a stubborn old woman who argued with everyone over everything. But was that the whole picture?

“All right then,” Layla said, looking over at Enid.

“We all know that you’ve got some health issues to deal with. But you’re not taking your medicine, not doing your physical therapy, and making life difficult for everyone who tries to help you. So tell me how you think you’re going to heal when you’re

literally doing none of things necessary for your healing.”

Then she looked over at Andrew and gave him a small smile. Maybe he was right that people weren't looking at what his grandmother wanted. But since they all had the same goal of getting her well again, perhaps now he would see that she wasn't the enemy here.

Why she cared so much about what Andrew Bigby thought... Layla shook her head. It was just because he had so much power in Enid's life. But even as she offered that excuse, a tiny voice inside her called her a liar.

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