

# Truth Twister

Lydia Graves

Unveiled Sins Series

Book I

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Also by Lydia Graves

Unveiled Sins Series

Wrath Did Grow: The sin of wrath

3 Chances: The sin of envy

Daddy's Girl

Toxic Loves

# Chapter 1

I got rumbled by the man I respected the most. That's how it started.

As Dolly Parton's 'Jolene' faded, I heard the familiar crunch of gravel outside. Joey's truck – the company vehicle for Grease Lightning – pulled up right on time as always. The local radio DJ, Bonio, barely had time to start the next song before the garage door creaked open and Joey stepped in.

Joey, my boss, had arrived at the garage earlier than usual. As always, he was dressed in oily overalls and steel-toe-capped boots that gave him an extra inch in height. A long time ago the overalls had been light blue and personalised, stretched tight across his broad shoulders and wide chest. Some muscle was gone now but the stitching was still intact: 'poster-boy good' he would say because his deceased wife Sybil had sewn it. Above the left-breast pocket, you could still make out the name in yellow-and-black thread: *Grease Lightning*.

For the last four years, we'd passed the days well enough by not taking anything too seriously while doing an honest day's work. He was the father I'd never had, and I liked to think I was the son he didn't have. To be honest, we were too busy with our hands to feel or think much.

Mr Jangle, as one of the locals was known, would stop by on Wednesdays with the latest copy of a car magazine called *Start!* that he'd read from cover to cover and pass it to us for our brew room. We'd pass it on to another regular who came by on Mondays, usually around eleven when we took a brew break. On Thursdays, the good doctor, long retired, would take his morning walk (6.3 miles) and take the magazine before finishing up at Cath's café for a coffee. He and Joey got on like a house on fire debating environmental issues. Health-related matters remained strictly off the menu.

Joey was an ageing widower having a long, dry spell, and I couldn't remember seeing him wearing anything but dirty overalls. I wondered if he slept in them. With no partner like I had to nag him to clean up before bed, perhaps he didn't bother. Joey was a good advert for the 'grease' side of the business but less so for the lightning. More 'rust crawling', if the truth be known.

A growing part of me was envious of his simple bachelor life – the seamlessness of grease from work to home and home to work – whereas I left the garage each day to be deep cleaned, resealed in a fresh pair of clothes, then into another set to sleep in, and so it went on.

Anyway, like I said, I got rumbled one morning when Joey arrived at work early.

Things might have carried on as they were if autumn hadn't started in the meanest way. The early morning frosts were so bitter that I switched on the fan heater in the brew room. It was a kitchenette, only a small space with no windows, a small Formica table and two wooden chairs that were not at all comfortable. However, I figured if I were a boss trying to make a living and getting too old to be bent over an engine six days a week, I wouldn't replace them with soft, comfortable chairs in my brew room either.

Joey kept a slim calendar above the sink where he noted his doctor's appointments and anything social, which was little. We used a black A4 diary for the business, mostly filled with Christian names like *Bob*, *Noon Head Gasket*. Surnames were usually unnecessary given that we lived in a small town.

The previous day Joey should have been at the doctor's at 2pm but I knew he didn't bother going because we were working on a transition replacement. I made a mental note to ask him about that. He loved his food and made it known that he didn't want me nagging about his BMI.

In the brew room I made his tea with three sugars and a generous amount of milk. I expected him to drink it down in two gulps, wipe his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, swill the

mug with cold water, leave it upside down on the draining board and then get on with whatever needed doing in that black A4 diary of ours.

Only he didn't.

'Cynthia put me some beetroot through the letterbox,' he said. 'She doesn't give up.'

'Ah, the old "beet" your way into a man's heart strategy.'

Joey chuckled.

'What was it last week?' I asked, trying to remember.

'Something green and funny-looking,' Joey replied.

He carried his mug to the other chair and sat down. That might sound like an insignificant deviation but our routines gave us confidence in who and what we were. In my case, at least, they stopped me from thinking too much about what I shouldn't be.

Beyond the garage walls and Hawthorn Hollow, it seemed that people and businesses were in a rush to get even madder and busier. Cars had to be quicker and smarter and people relied on technology instead of their own brains. When a computer in the car said it needed something new, folk listened – even those living in a backwater with more derelict buildings than occupied ones.

Joey could have made a killing at Grease Lightning because he had no competition in the area but instead he charged a pittance, fixed the messed-up car computers and sent the drivers away with a word of wisdom.

According to Joey, most local folk needed to damn well slow down. I was happy to go along with that, though my stepdaughter Chastity said I was getting old before my time. A big part of me buried under my skin knew she was right.

The thing was that for a few weeks I'd been coming to work early. Really early, like 7am when we didn't open till 9am unless we were doing a favour for one of the locals. In a small community like Hawthorn Hollow that happened quite often; folk had to get to work for a certain time and take the kids to school. You know how it is.

'Everything alright at home, Wods?' Joey asked, looking me straight in the eye.

By then the heater had been on for almost two hours, filling the small room with dry, warm air that made my skin itch. 'Jessie's fine, ta.' I reached for the switch to turn off the heater. 'Not running on all cylinders, but her asthma is under control. Become a home-bird since that last bad attack, though.' The switch sounded louder than usual when I flicked it off.

'Still?'

'Fraid so.'

And that was the truth. The last attack had happened while she was at work. I'd rushed to the hospital thinking it was game over, her last breath. I was terrified, though Chastity kept her head.

Since Jessie had given up her job, money had been a bit tight but we'd managed with my small pot of inheritance money to dip into. Jessie complained about the overtime I did for Joey free of charge, but she didn't understand.

Joey was taking in everything I said; I knew because he nodded his head while he was listening and thinking. I could tell he wasn't in any rush to speak so I kept on. 'Maybe one day she'll go back to work, but I've found it's best not to mention it.'

'What time d'you come in these days, Wods?'

I rubbed my hands nervously up and down my jeans to scratch the itch. I wasn't dressed in my overalls and was surprised how sensitive my skin was through the denim; it was like shaving with a blunt razor. It was stinging for some reason, though the tingling sensation wasn't new.

'Not much before you,' I replied.

The slurp of Joey's tea broke the heavy silence. He leaned back in his chair, increasing the distance between us. 'Only first thing lately, it's been pretty warm in here.' He put his feet up on an old toolbox and looked at me with that knowing face of his.

I itched behind my ear and picked at what I thought was a bit of dried soap.

The heating cost him money he could ill afford when he was nearing retirement and putting money aside to support a poor pension.

And I'd lied.

## Chapter 2

Grease Lightning sat in the middle of town, its rusted sign creaking in the wind. The air was thick with the smell of oil and metal mingling with the faint scent of something else. Perfume.

I was elbow-deep in an engine when I heard Joey call out from the front of the garage. 'Wods! Chastity's back.'

My stomach tightened at the mention of my stepdaughter. Chastity, barely sixteen and already causing more trouble than most adults I knew, had a habit of showing up unannounced.

I got myself out from under a VW van and stood upright sharpish so Chastity didn't try her latest trick of getting me to look up her skirt when she was going commando. I was younger and leaner than Joey so I worked under vehicles on the creeper because he could no longer fit.

Joey's meaty hands worked restlessly, twisting and fraying a rag that had once been a pair of pink-spotted knickers. Those panties had likely travelled a long road from some local lady's drawer to a charity bin and finally to us. Now, marred by oil stains and Joey's anxious fidgeting, they were meeting their inglorious end. As he pulled at loose threads, the fabric unravelled, mirroring his fraying nerves.

The harsh light of a work lamp illuminated his face, pooling shadows where the skin folded under his triple chins.

'Did you hear that?' Chastity asked, her voice low and measured for effect.

I strained my ears but heard nothing unusual, just the typical sounds of the garage: metal on metal, the hum of machinery. Before I could respond, she continued, 'That sound, like something's coming. Can't you feel it?'

'Nope,' I replied, moving cautiously around the back of the van with its recently fitted new tyres.

She was watching my every move, her eyes never leaving me. For all her thinness, she had presence and she moved with a confidence that belied her age,. Each piece of her, from her waist to her wrist, was a page that added to one giant thumping storybook, a storybook she wanted people to read. And read. And read.

'You hearing things?' Joey shouted as he went into the brew room earlier than usual. He closed the door behind him.

'Shouldn't you be at school?' I asked Chastity like an idiot.

She picked up a wrench from one of the benches. If she hadn't been Chastity and my stepdaughter, I might have told her to stop messing about and sling her hook, but Jessie wouldn't like that. My mother used to say, 'Keep shtum through thick and thin.'

'I'm on my way there, as it happens.' She tossed a package, aiming at my crotch, then turned up the radio. It was playing a country-and-western song she liked. Her taste in music was eclectic but most of the time it was okay.

For once she'd arrived with a legitimate reason, to drop off the cheese-and-tomato sandwiches Jessie had made me the night before that I'd forgotten to bring with me.

'Don't want you to go without, do we, Wods?' Chastity said in that melodic voice of hers while stroking that damn wrench. 'A life without sex is a life without food. Besides, I thought you'd be pleased to see me.'

'I'm at work.' I forced a smile as I dropped the sandwiches on the bench. 'Busy earning money to keep a roof over our heads, like dads do.'

Her smile shifted from warm to chilling in an instant and then back to full brightness when Pete arrived to collect his VW.

I had better things to do than be impressed by Pete's cowboy boots, tan leather jacket and the goat-shaped pendant around his neck suspended from two thin leather boot laces. The only thing I liked about him was his blue VW van and the four tyres I'd fitted.

Pete worked in the bowling alley on the edge of town. When he wasn't handing out shoes or flirting with the teenage girls, he'd sit on his stool reading a cowboy comic series called *Lucky Luke*. The girls thought he was special because he was thirty and had the perfect vehicle in the car park to show them a good time.

'It's all yours,' I said, passing him the keys.

'Cheers, mate,' he said without making eye-contact. I almost felt sorry for him.

Joey emerged from the brew room. 'Can you pay before you go?' he asked Pete, then looked at me to ensure I'd make sure the cowboy hopped into the saddle and rode off into the sunset.

Pete was looking at Chastity. 'Well, howdy there, little lady. Did it hurt when you fell from heaven into this here saloon?'

I laughed out loud. 'If you were a cactus, Pete, you'd be a real fine-lookin' prick.'

Chastity's green eyes flashed him a predatory gleam as she tossed her long dark hair over one shoulder and twisted the wrench. The movement made the jewellery on her wrists jingle hypnotically: seven bracelets, one for every day of the week.

She leaned against Pete, pulled a cherry lip balm from her pocket, wiped it over her lips then dabbed a little on his. He was all eyes, one hand in his ripped denim pocket, a bulge to the right of it.

'Jesus,' I muttered under my breath.

Joey headed back into the brew room with a grimace on his face and slammed the door.

'Show me the inside of your VW,' my stepdaughter said, showing Pete the pinkness inside her mouth and her white teeth, then closing it shut like the lid of a coffin.

'Again?' A smile dripped off his lips as he leaned in to smell her neck. 'That perfume is gorgeous. Is it called Sinner?'

'Yeah, it is. Want some sin?'

She tossed her hair again and leaned closer like she was hard of hearing. Pete was reclining against the door of the VW like he was a big stunt guy waiting his turn. 'Can we use your loo?' he asked.

'Be my guest.' I smiled because I'd worked in the garage for years and the toilet had not been cleaned once in all that time.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Chastity left the building in a hurry. I kidded myself it was because she didn't want to be any later for school than she already was. Jessie thought she was a conscientious pupil, but local gossip and the report cards I found in the bin said otherwise. Some of her exercise books were interesting to read, mainly the graphic-novel kind.

Seconds later, Pete emerged. 'Where'd she go?' He looked around, a little unsteady on his feet.

For one horrible moment, I thought he was going to cry. 'School,' I said, about to get back on my creeper for the next job on a Fiat Punto with an oil leak.

He rubbed against a stack of tyres and, when that proved unsatisfactory, he tried the lip of the bench.

'You got some kind of problem down there,' Joey said, having re-emerged to get on with the day's jobs.

One of Pete's hands was down his pants and his whole lower body had got turrets. A grimace was pulling the skin on his face, stretching across his skull like a drumhead. He walked around the garage in circles as if he were airing himself. Behind him was a line of skin like dust, like breadcrumbs showing the girls the way.

The other way.

'Holy m—'

As he jiggled about on the spot, his car keys fell out of his ripped jeans and landed with a metallic clang. He picked up the wrench and shoved it down his pants, threw his head back and worked his jaw up and down like he was swallowing pain. The cold metal brought a few seconds of respite.

Sweating and red-faced, teary-eyed, too, he removed the wrench, fell to his knees and stayed there.

'It's too late to pray,' Joey mumbled.

'What the hell's going on, Pete?' I asked, catching Joey's eye. He shrugged in such a way that he said he didn't give a shit and the bloke deserved everything he got.

I helped Pete stand and eased the invalid into the 'stud' van. His strength was sapped, all his energy eaten away, and he was lugging his limbs around like lead pipes. It was a strange thing to see: an empty shell of a man with a face contorted in pain – and owning a banging vehicle like that.

Getting him strapped into the driver's seat with the seat belt across his heaving chest brought more sweat above his lip. More skin came out of his trousers into the footwell.

'You look real pale,' I said, thinking I'd have liked to be driving his wheels out of town.

Joey turned on the radio. Bonio interrupted the music with a weather warning: there was a high risk of flooding.