

Chapter 1

"That's it, Uncle Huey!" Imogene Duckworthy whipped off her apron and flung it onto the slick, stainless steel counter. "I quit!" Her order pad, pencil, even the straws skittered out of their pouches and across the floor. She took a step back, her shoes sticking to the trod-upon-after-lunch debris, mostly squished lettuce, blobs of gravy, and bits of unidentifiable brown stuff.

"You can't quit, darlin'," drawled Uncle Huey in that thin, nasal voice that made him seem six inches shorter than his five ten. "You're family." He dipped a scoop of mashed and a ladle of gravy onto a plate and handed it to the cook.

"I'm not working double shifts again next week." Immy hoped she sounded serious. Convincing.

"Well, you'll just have to, won't you? With Xenia quitting on me, you and April are all the waitresses I've got left."

Clem, the cook, piled the hot plate with thick slabs of meatloaf, spooned green beans beside them, and shoved it into the waiting hands of April, the other waitress. Immy hadn't eaten lunch yet and the oniony smell of the meatloaf kicked up some saliva. She watched April swing through the double doors and glimpsed the white-washed dining room, full of scarred wooden tables and chairs, almost empty of customers now.

Would she miss this place? Maybe, but she was quitting anyway.

Immy pounded her fist on the work counter. Hugh Duckworthy jumped. "No, Uncle Huey. April is all you've got left. And if you'd kept your mitts to yourself, you'd still have Xenia." Immy's hands shook as she snatched her purse and jacket from her cubby, but she succeeded in stomping out the back door of the diner, past the cook and busboy who were staring openmouthed. Aside from troublesome customers, she didn't talk back to people often, even when she wanted to.

Even if Uncle Huey was her father's brother, he was a first class jerk.

In the alley, she paused beside the dumpster. Leaned against the sun-warmed metal. Gulped a big breath of relief. And choked on the stench of rotting vegetables. She decided to move a little farther from the dumpster for her next breath.

She collapsed against the brick wall, trembling in the aftermath of her bravery. Immy closed her eyes and let the sun soak into her upturned face, willing it to calm her. She turned her mind to the future. A purchase was waiting for her in Wymee Falls, but she had no transportation to pick it up. What should she do now? She tried to focus--

"What in the hell got into you, Immy?"

Her eyes flew open at the sound of the deep voice. Baxter, one of Huey's two busboys, emptied a bin of food scraps into the dumpster, plunked it onto the alley paving, and strolled over to stand a couple of feet from her. Her pulse raced at the closeness of his lean, hard body. Damn, that man was handsome.

Immy had had a crush on Baxter Killroy since he started to work in the diner two and a half years ago. He was at least ten years older than Immy, mid-thirties. But, in the time she'd known him, that gap seemed less and less. The problem for her was that Baxter continued to become more mature and manly, while Immy seemed to stay skinny and young looking.

"I never heard you talk back to the boss like that before."

That lazy smile drew her closer. She pushed off the brick wall and took a step toward him. "Well, I guess I never did before."

"Gotta admire that in a woman. That's spunk, Immy."

She glowed at his approval, feeling her face flush. She didn't think Baxter had ever thought of her as a woman before. To avoid falling into those deep, dark eyes, she looked over Baxter's shoulder. On the other side of the dumpster stood two pickups, Huey's and Baxter's. An idea formed.

"Say, I have a little problem," she said. "You don't suppose I could borrow your pickup to go into Wymee Falls, do you?"

He shrugged. "Don't see why not. I'm tied up here for awhile. It needs gas. Bring it back full and have it here by closing." He reached into his back jeans pocket and tossed her the keys.

Immy surprised herself by catching them.

"Hey," said Baxter. "You catch pretty good for such a scrawny gal."

She climbed into the pickup and backed into the alley, giving Baxter a wave. As she drove out of Saltlick, she couldn't help clenching a fist, yelling, "Yee haw," and pounding Baxter's grimy steering wheel. She was free. She had quit. Little, mousy Immy had shown gumption. Yes, she had. Even Baxter admired her for it. And she had an important, secret errand to run. The world was wide open to her without that job tying her down.

During the noon rush, Immy had watched in jaw-dropping awe as Xenia whirled on Uncle Huey (who had just pinched her bottom for the ten thousandth time), smacked his hand, as usual, then walked out, which had never happened before.

Soon after, when most of the lunch crowd was gone, something had reared up inside Immy, something she could no longer deny. It wasn't that she minded hard work. She didn't. She could sling hash and run her legs off with the best of them. But that wasn't what she wanted to do with her life. She finally let herself admit she hated working in the diner, hated working for Uncle Huey, hated waiting tables, period. There was a big, wide world outside Saltlick, Texas, population 1234, and it was waiting for Imogene Duckworthy. First step, pick up the purchase that would be a stepping stone to help make her dream come true.

It shouldn't be a problem getting another job to tide her over until she could land her dream position. The Wymee Falls paper was full of want ads every day. Wasn't it? True, she hadn't looked lately. But it used to be.

She drove toward Wymee Falls to pick up the order she had placed over a week ago with the stationery store. On her way, driving past barbwire-fenced stretches of flat, sparse grassland dotted with distant cattle herds, she rehearsed what she would tell her mother. She rejected one scenario after another.

Before she knew it, her musings had brought her to the edge of town. She glanced up when she passed the waterfall to see if it was running. No, it was turned off. Must still be too dry. When the spring rains came the pump would be started up again. The local townspeople told of the time there had been a real waterfall, back when mostly Indians roamed the high plains surrounding the narrow Wymee River. The "river" ranged from a trickle to a good-sized stream, depending on the time of year. Immy thought it must have been an awfully small waterfall, maybe more of a rapids, since it had disappeared mysteriously by the time a few settlers began to squat in the area. But the settlement had already begun to call itself Wymee Falls, after the vanished cataract, and eventually the town fathers, and some mothers, decided to build themselves a waterfall beside the river. So now a pump carried water to the top of a manmade rock hill beside the river and sent it cascading into a pool from which it was, again, pumped uphill.

Immy drove on into Wymee Falls, the nearest sizeable town and the county seat. Her life lately reminded her of the waterfall, pointlessly going up and down, in and out, over and over. Never making progress. It was time for her to do something for herself. Days, weeks, months were fleeting past, leaving her in the dust with a minimum wage job

while her dream floated out of reach, seeming to recede more and more rapidly, into the distance. She was going after that dream before it disappeared.

Immy crossed her sparsely grassed West Texas front yard. The lawn hadn't greened up yet, so early in the season that passes for spring in these parts. She tiptoed up the steps to the single-wide and opened the door. After returning Baxter's truck to the diner, she'd walked the short distance home, as she usually did after work.

"Imogene, dear? Is that you?"

Busted by those ancient, squeaky hinges.

"Yes, Mother," she shouted over the strains of a soap opera theme. Even though she didn't see Mother in her recliner, Immy was not going to make it to her bedroom undetected.

Her mother filled the doorway from the kitchen, a frown above her wobbling chins. "What are you doing home this time of day?"

Immy gritted her teeth and smiled. "Uncle Huey let me go early today, Mother." She had rehearsed her excuse, but it sounded phony as she said it. Immy shrugged her sweater off and threw it onto the battered pine bench next to the door, attempting casual, ordinary movement. Did she look as stiff as she felt? She also didn't want to tell her mother where she'd been for the last hour. Mother would not approve of her purchase.

Her mother's look changed from almost worried to definitely worried. "What about your remuneration? Will he compensate you for the remainder of your shift?"

A small knot formed in Immy's stomach. "Um, sure. I'm sure he will. I'll go back, um, tomorrow and he'll--"

"What aren't you telling me, Imogene? You know I can always perceive your prevarications."

Big sigh. Mother would find out sooner or later. Might as well fess up. "I, well, I don't work there anymore." Immy flinched, anticipating the explosion.

"He fired you? He terminated his niece? His only living relative? That *scumbag*. Who does he think he is? He's gonna hear from me, I'll tell ya." Hortense stumped to the hall closet, shaking the whole trailer, and yanked her jacket off its hanger.

Immy had noticed, on other occasions, that her mother's erudite vocabulary vanished under stress. It kinda made her chuckle sometimes. But not now. Her stomach roiled around a hard, growing knot. She'd never lied to her mother, except for a small fib or two, nothing like this.

"Mother, wait."

But Mrs. Hortense Duckworthy was out the door, stomping down the wooden steps.

"Dammit, listen to me," Immy yelled from the doorway. "He didn't *terminate* me, I quit." Whew. That felt good. Even at her advanced age of twenty-two, Immy wasn't accustomed to cussing at her mother. Cussing and lying in the same day. She was going to hell.

When Hortense reached the curb-less asphalt at the edge of the yard, she stopped, hunched her shoulders, then turned and called back, "Why the hell did you quit? Where do y'all think money's gonna come from? The moon?"

"Mother, quit yelling. Come back here and I'll tell you about it."

Immy returned to the worn living room and sagged into the soft couch. Her mother must have refilled the lemon scented plug-in recently. Immy could tell because her nose started to drip. She kicked off her clunky waitress shoes and lifted a foot into her lap to rub her aching arch.

The television emitted her mother's soap opera at full volume, a heartbroken man pleading with a bleached blonde to take him back. It cut to an even louder commercial for hair coloring. Immy reached over and snatched the remote from the arm of the recliner and clicked the damn thing off, waiting for Mother's return. Her elbow knocked her mother's glass of iced sweet tea to the carpet.

Now I'll hear it. Her precious sweet tea. And her precious carpet.

The tea sank into the thin gray mat that her mother vacuumed every day to within an inch, no, to within a millimeter of its life. When the green plaid couch and recliner had been new and the carpeting thicker, they'd looked distinguished in the dark paneled room. Sort of British, Immy had thought back then.

Feeling the floor shake from her mother ascending the porch steps, she got up, straightened her shoulders, and prepared to face her consequences.

Hortense, out of breath from her unaccustomed exertion, yanked the door open and paused. "What is transpiring? You tell me that, little missy."

"Mother, close the door. The neighbors'll hear." **Ha. That's what she always says to me.**

Hortense slammed it shut. "I'm awaiting your response."

She makes me feel like I'm ten, dammit. But at least she's back to normal with her vocabulary. "I quit, I told you." Immy was proud that there was a little edge to her voice.

"Why?" Hortense asked, with a puzzled, pained look.

That knot was taking over her insides. Immy wanted to double over. Uncle Huey was one thing, but she wasn't sure she could get used to standing up to Mother. Even with the door closed, the neighbors were getting an earful through the thin metal walls.

Immy glanced at the air to her left for an answer.

"He asked me to put in double shifts again next week."

"Working extra hours would not be injurious to your person. Or to your pocketbook, Imogene."

Hortense didn't hold with people not willing to do the work. This wasn't going to fly. Immy focused over her mother's right shoulder and pulled a reason out of thin air, or, rather, pinched it out of the goings on at the diner earlier. "I'm so sick and tired of him pinching my bottom."

"What? You're...he..." Hortense stumbled across the living room and took the seat Immy had vacated. She didn't even notice the spilled ice tea.

Immy hadn't known her little fib would shock Mother that much. Immy hadn't thought Mother would believe her. Did Hortense really think her own husband's brother would pinch Immy's bottom? The brother of her own dead, *sainted* husband?

"Uncle Huey is...is a dirty old man?" Hortense must have been so shocked she couldn't think up a big word for creep. She looked older than she had a moment before. Her thinly plucked eyebrows furrowed upwards toward a mass of curly gray hair, curls compliments of Cathy's Kut and Kurl on Second Street.

"Yes." Another big sigh. How deep should she go with this? Might as well go all the way. "Uncle Huey is a filthy, dirty, lecherous--"

"I get it." She waved her hand for Imogene to stop. "Enough adjectives."

"He's always hit on the waitresses." **That much, at least was true.** "I've told him over and over to keep his hands off, but..." **I'm getting in deep. Maybe I should tell her the real reason I quit? No, not yet.** The lie was gaining momentum. Immy had a sour taste in her mouth.

"Why have you never told me this? How could he? This is the family's business. He's impugning the honor of your dead father, your dear, *sainted* father." Hortense shook her head and stared at the spreading tea stain, still not seeing it. Immy's father had owned half the restaurant when he was alive. He would always be missed by both his widow and his daughter. Hortense wasn't the only one who wished he were still here. In fact, Immy kept his detective badge in her top dresser drawer and got it out often to rub her fingers over the shiny surface. He was the reason for her dream. His had failed. Hers would not.

Imogene watched her mother process the information, then come to a conclusion. Not a good one, she could tell.

Hortense caught the fabric of her polyester pants in a clenched fist. "I'll tear his damn puny testicles off." Her voice was soft, almost gentle. Bad sign. "I will remove them from his insignificant torso and I will cram them down his damn throat."

The sour mass in Immy's stomach doubled. Could she distract her? "Mother, where's Drew?" Immy's daughter was usually home from pre-school by now.

"They had a field trip today. They'll be home late." Immy should have known that, if she'd read the notes Drew brought home. Hortense read them and also picked Drew up from daycare, since Immy worked until after their pickup time. "The school said they'd drop the kids off at their houses around five." Her fleshy face grew grim. "Huey, you no good...."

Hortense heaved herself up from deep in the couch and lumbered out of the room, gathering momentum as she marched out the door a second time and careened down the stairs.

Immy pressed her stomach where it ached and considered her options. Her toddler daughter was not a concern for a couple of hours, Mother had said.

A third big sigh. **Better stop doing that or I'll hyperventilate.** Immy pulled her shoes back on, donned her sweater, and cracked the door open after a discreet interval.

Mother was achieving a fast waddle down the road. Uncle Huey was in for a tongue-lashing. But, since he'd never pinched Immy's bottom, Huey wouldn't know why the hell Hortense was screaming at him. Maybe Immy should hear what went on in case she needed to defend her lie to Mother.

She would tail Mother. She needed the practice anyway. Immy entered the place in her head where she existed not as Imogene Duckworthy, overeager but ineffectual unwed parent of Drew, nor as the smothered only daughter of her doting but critical mother, nor as a clumsy waitress--no none of these. In this Nice Place, where her stomach

never hurt, Imogene was Detective Duckworthy, a daughter her father would have been proud of. But one whose existence her mother would prevent if she could.

She watched until Hortense disappeared around the corner of the last trailer on the block. Then Immy dashed outside and ran in the opposite direction to get to the diner by another route. She could beat her mother there and hide in the doorway of the library next door. Would Mother really harm Uncle Huey? She sure did look mad enough to spit. Maybe madder. It worried Immy a little.

She hadn't been honest with Uncle Huey, nor with Mother, because her dream was too fragile to take the ridicule she expected. When she made it come true, they'd all sit up and take notice. She hoped.

For now, Immy had no idea what to do about the situation. She hoped Detective Duckworthy would know.