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LISA  
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UNDER

MY

A NOVEL

SKIN

SNEAK PEEK

# UNDER MY SKIN

Lisa Unger



# Prologue

I like him. I do.

But.

There's always a *but*, isn't there?

He's talking and I should be listening. I'm not. Does he see it, that I'm scattered, distracted? Doubtful. He doesn't seem especially observant, has that way about him that people do now. As if they are putting on a show of themselves, as if the moment is being *watched* rather than *lived*. He glances about as he talks. Up at the television screens over the bar, all on mute, all tuned in to different sporting events. Down at the phone that sits dark beside him. Back to me, off again to the rowdy table across from us—a postwork gathering I'm guessing from the ruffled suits and tired eyes.

I soak in the details of him: his shock of ink black hair, thick—any girl would kill for it; dark stubble on his jaw, just enough—sexy, not unkempt, style, not neglect; his gym-toned body. Beneath the folds of his lavender oxford, the dip of cut abs, the round of a well-worked shoulder.

If I had a camera in my hand—not a smartphone but a real

camera—say a mirrorless Hasselblad X1D, ergonomic, light—old-school style with high-tech innards—I’d watch him through the lens and try to find the moment when he revealed himself, when the muscles in his face relaxed and the mask dropped, even for just a millisecond. Then I’d see him. The man he *really* is when he steps off the stage he imagines himself on.

I already knew he was handsome, stylish, in shape, before we agreed to meet. His profile told me as much. He works in finance (of course he does). His favorite book is the Steve Jobs autobiography. (What else?) But what’s under his skin, that carefully manicured outer layer? Beneath the mask he puts on in the morning—what’s there? The camera always sees it.

He runs his fingertips along the varnished edge of the table between us, then steeplés them. I read somewhere that this is the gesture of someone very sure of himself and his opinions. It tracks. He *seems* very sure of himself, as people who know very little often are.

He laughs, faux self-deprecating, at something he’s just said about himself. His words still hang in the air, something about his being a workaholic. What a relief that it’s just drinks, not dinner. No point in wasting time, if *it’s* not there, he wrote. Who could disagree? So adult. So reasonable.

I never thought it would be. It can’t be. Because *it* has nothing to do with the way he looks. *It* isn’t about his eyes, black, heavily lashed and half-lidded. Or the bow of his mouth, full, kissable. (Though I might kiss him, anyway. Maybe more. Depends.) Attraction, desire is nothing to do with the physical; it’s chemical, a head trip. And my head—well, let’s just say it’s not on straight.

A woman laughs too loud—a cackle really, harsh and jarring. It startles me, sends a pulse of adrenaline through me. I scan the crowd. I really shouldn’t be here.

“Time for another?” he asks. His teeth. They’re *so* white. Per-

fectly aligned. Nothing in nature is so flawless. Braces. Whitening.

The rim of the glass is ice-cold beneath my fingertip. The drink went down fast, too fast. I promised myself I wouldn't drink, not with everything that's been going on. It's been a long day, a long week. A long *year*. The weight of it all is tugging at me, pulling me under.

I take too long to answer and he frowns, just slightly, looks at his phone. I should just leave. This is crazy.

"Sure," I say instead. "One more."

He smiles again, thinks it's a good sign.

Really, I just want to go home, pull up my hair, put on my sweats, get into bed. Even that's not an option. Once we walk out of here, it's back to the jigsaw puzzle of my life.

"Gray Goose and soda," he tells the waitress when he's flagged her down. He remembers what I'm drinking. A small thing, but so few people pay attention to the details these days. "And Blanton's on the rocks."

Straight bourbon, very manly.

"Am I talking too much?" he says. He looks sweetly sheepish. Is it put on? "I've heard that before. My last girlfriend, Kim—she said I ramble when I get nervous."

It's the second time he's mentioned her, his "last girlfriend, Kim." Why, I wonder? Carrying a torch? Or just trying to market himself as someone who's been in a relationship? Also, "last girlfriend." It begs the question: How many others? Maybe I'm reading too much into it. I do that.

"Not at all."

*I am a seeker. I want to explore the world. Don't you? I love to learn, to cook, to travel. I get lost in a good book.*

That's what his profile said. In his picture, he smiled, nearly laughing, hair wind-tossed. It was a good photo, could have come from a magazine—which is always suspicious. Photographers know all the tricks to capturing beauty, the right an-

gles, the proper lighting, the magic of filters. The truth is that most people aren't *that hot* in person. Even beautiful people, real ones, are flawed in some way—not airbrushed, or prettily windblown, eyes glittering. Lines around the eyes and mouth, an almost imperceptibly crooked nose, a faint scar—chicken pox or a childhood fall from a bike. People, real people, have a little stain from lunch on their ties, maybe something hanging from their nose or in their teeth, patches of dry skin, shoes that need replacing. These imperfections make us who we are, tell the truth of our lives.

But to his credit, he is close to as good-looking as his profile picture. But something's off. What is it?

There's nothing special about *my* profile picture, nothing misleading, just a photo snapped by my friend Layla who set the whole thing up. Of course, she's a talented photographer, my oldest friend and knows how to shoot me. No filter, though, no Photoshop tricks. What you see is what you get. Sort of.

“What about you?” he says.

The waitress delivers the drinks to our high-top. Her ears are lined with silver hoops; another in her lip. She is fleshy but pretty with startling green eyes that give her an otherworldly look. I bet she reads a lot of teen fantasy novels. *Twilight*. *Harry Potter*. *Hunger Games*.

“Thank you, *darlin'*,” he says to her. He drops the *g* and inflects the word with a twang, though I know he was born and raised in New Jersey. She beams at him, flushes a little. He's a charmer in a sea of snakes.

I notice that he has a way of looking at women, a warm gaze, a wide smile. It seems like a choice. A technique. He knows that women like to be gazed upon, attended to with male eyes. It makes them feel pretty, special in a world where we too rarely feel like either of those things. She smiles at him, does this quick bat of her eyelashes. She likes him. I can tell; she glances at him from time to time as she shuttles back and forth along

the bar, between the other high-tops she's also serving. Even if I walk out of here, I'm sure someone will go home with him. Good looking, charming guys emanating the scent of money rarely go lonely.

"What do you want to know?" I ask when he turns back to me.

He takes a sip of his bourbon, gazes over his glass, mischievous. "In your profile, you said you were a runner."

Did Layla put that in my profile? Layla—this dating thing? All her idea. *Time to get back out there, girlfriend.* I honestly don't remember what we put in the profile.

"I *run*," I say. The truth is that I *used* to run. "I don't know if I'd call myself a runner."

"What's the difference?"

"I run—for exercise, because I like it, because it calms me. But it doesn't define me. I don't have a group, or register for races, travel to do marathons or whatever."

Am I rambling?

Finally, "I run. I am not a runner. Anyway, I'm more indoors lately, at the gym."

He nods slowly, a pantomime of the careful listener, looks down at his glass.

I almost tell him about Jack then; it's always right on the tip of my tongue.

*My husband was killed last year, I want to say. He was attacked while he was running in Riverside Park at 5:00 a.m. Whoever it was—they beat him to death. His murder is still unsolved. I should have been with him. Maybe if I had been... Anyway. I don't find running as enjoyable as I used to.*

But then he's talking about how he started running in high school, ran in college, still runs, travels for marathons, is thinking about a triathlon in New Mexico next year, but his work in finance—the hours are so crazy.

Kim's right, I think. He talks too much. And not just when he's nervous. Because he's not nervous, not at all.

It's his nails. They're perfect. They are, in fact, professionally manicured. Expertly shaped and buffed squares at the end of thick fingers. He steeple them again on the table between us. That's the "but." Vanity. He's vain, spends a lot of time on himself. The gym, his clothes, his skin, hair, nails. Which is fine for tonight. But in the long game, when it's time to stop worrying about yourself and start thinking about someone else, he's not going to be able to do it. The lens would have seen it right away.

Should I mention my nervous breakdown, the one I had after Jack died, how days of my life just—*disappeared*? Probably not, right?

The space grows more crowded, louder. It's one of those Upper East Side sports bars with big screens mounted at every angle, games from all over the country, all over the world playing. It's filling up with the after-work crowd, men who are really still babies with their first jobs, fresh out of school, girls—tight-bodied, hair dyed, waxed and threaded, tits high—who have no idea what the next ten years will hold, how many disappointments small and large.

It's Thursday, tomorrow the end of the workweek, so the energy is high, exuberant voices booming. Our waitress drifts back and forth, deftly balancing trays of clinking highballs, frothy pilsners of beer, shot glasses of amber liquid. Shots? Really? Do people still do that?

There's a buzz of anxiety in the back of my head as I scan the crowd, turn to look through the big windows to the street. *Someone's been following me*, I almost say, but don't. *I've been suffering from some sleep disturbances, some unsettling dreams that might be memories, and to be truthful my life is a bit of a mess*. But I don't say those things. He's still talking, this time about work, a boss he doesn't like.

It's closing in, all the laughter, cheering, bodies starting to

press, ties loosening, hair coming down. I let him pick the meeting place. I'd have chosen a quiet spot downtown—in the West Village or Tribeca, someplace soothing and serene, dark, where you speak in low tones, lean in, get to know someone.

Note to self: don't let them choose—even though the choice speaks volumes. In fact, this dating thing, maybe it's not for me at all.

"I've got an early day tomorrow," I say, in the next lull between things he's saying about himself. He's been practically yelling, to be heard above the din. I *should* get out of here. Huge mistake.

I see it then. A flinty look of angry disappointment. It's gone in a millisecond, replaced by a practiced smile.

"Oh," he says. He looks at his watch—a Fitbit, wouldn't you know it. "Yeah, me too."

"This has been great," I say. He picks up the check which the bartender must have laid in front of him at some point.

I take my wallet out.

"Let's split it," I say. I prefer to pay or split in these circumstances; I like the feel of equal ground beneath my feet.

"No," he says. His tone has gone a little flat. "I've got it."

It's not just the nails. There's a sniff of arrogance, something cold beneath the flirting. I can see the glint of it, now that he knows he's not going to get what he came for. Or maybe it's not any of those things. Maybe there's nothing wrong with him at all. Very likely it's that something is wrong with me.

Or most likely of all, it's just that he's not Jack.

*Until you let your husband go, no one else will measure up.* That's what my shrink said.

*I'm trying. I'm dating.*

*Setting them up to knock them down isn't dating.*

Is that what I'm doing? Just killing time with men who can't help but to ultimately reveal themselves as *not-Jack*. They won't be as funny as he was, or know just where to rub my shoulders.

They won't run out at any hour for anything I need, without being asked. *I'll go grab it for you.* They won't have his laugh, or that serious set to his face when he's concentrating. They won't bite on the inside of their cheeks when annoyed. They won't feel like him, or smell like him. Not-Jack.

*Until one day, says Dr. Nash, there's someone else who you love for all new reasons. You'll build a new life.* I don't bother telling her that it's not going to happen. In fact, there are a lot of things I don't bother telling Dr. Nash.

On the street, though I reach out for his hand, he tries for a kiss. I let his lips touch mine, but then I pull back a little, something repelling me. He jerks back, too. It's awkward. No heat. Nothing. I shouldn't be disappointed, should have *long ago* lost the capacity for disappointment. I suspected (knew) that it wouldn't be there. But I thought maybe if there was heat, some physical spark, I wouldn't need the sleeping pills tonight. Maybe we'd go back to his place and I'd have a reprieve from putting back the pieces of my fractured life.

Now I must decide where I will go tonight—back to an apartment I was supposed to share with my husband but where I now live alone and no longer feel safe, back to Layla's penthouse, maybe to a hotel.

A police car whips up Lexington. *Whoop. Whoop.*

"Maybe we could run this weekend?" He's still working it, though I can't imagine why. "Ever try the trails up in Van Cortlandt Park? Short but pretty; you feel miles away from the city."

"Nice," I say.

Unless there's someone lurking in the shadows, and no one can hear you call for help.

"Should I text you?"

He'll never text me, of course.

"That sounds great."

Even if he does text me, I won't answer him. Or I'll put him off until he gets the hint. It's easy like that, this dating thing in

the age of technology. You can dangle someone off the edge of your life until they just float away, confused. Ghosting, I think the millennials call it.

“Can I see you home?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

I feel wobbly, suddenly. It’s after nine, and those two vodka sodas are sloshing around in an empty stomach, not to mention the other chemicals floating in my bloodstream. I haven’t eaten anything since—when?

“You okay?” he asks. His concern seems exaggerated, his tone almost mocking. There are other people on the street, a couple laughing, intimate, close, a kid with his headphones on, a homeless guy sitting on the stoop.

“I’m fine,” I say again, feeling defensive. I didn’t have *that* much to drink.

But then he has his arm looped through mine, too tight, and I find myself tipping into him. I try to pull away from him. But he doesn’t allow it. He’s strong and I can’t free my arm.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” he says, a nasty little mimic. “You’re okay.”

*Of course I’m okay*, I want to snap. But the words won’t come. There’s just this bone crushing fatigue, this wobbly, foggy, vague feeling. Something’s not right. The world starts to brown around the edges. Oh, no. Not now.

“She’s okay,” he says, laughing. His voice sounds distant and strange. “Just one too many I guess.”

Who’s he talking to?

“*Let go of me*,” I manage, my voice an angry hiss.

He laughs; it’s echoing and strange. “Take it easy, sweetie.”

He’s moving me too fast up the street, his grip too tight. I stumble and he roughly keeps me from falling.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask. Fear claws at the back of my throat. I can’t wait to get away from this guy. He pulls me onto a side street; there’s no one around.

“Hey.” A voice behind us. He spins, taking me with him. There’s someone standing there. He looks distantly familiar as the world tips. Somewhere inside me there’s a jangle of alarm. He has a dark hood on, his face not visible.

*It’s him.*

He’s big, bigger than—what’s his name? Reg, or something. Rex? The big man blocks our path up the sidewalk.

“Hey, seriously dude,” says Rick. Yes, Rick, that was it. “Step aside. I’ve got this.”

But the world is fading fast, going soft and blurry, tilting. There’s a flash, quick-fire movement. Then a girlish scream, a river of blood. Black red on lavender.

Then arms on me.

Falling.

Nothing.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7783-6978-3

Under My Skin

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