

BOOK 2: ON THE RECORD SERIES

UNDER

# YOUR SKIN

WEDDING PLANNING  
JUST GOT WEIRD...

LEE WINTER



# Chapter 1

## The Idiot from Iowa

SENATOR FREDERICK T. HICKORY WAS practically dead—not that he seemed to know it.

His brown suit had all the fashion savvy of a corpse, and his craggy sixty-three-year-old face indicated early-onset rigor mortis. But it was more than that.

Catherine Ayers had been reading the man's autobiography of late. Never had a shallower book crossed her news desk. Somewhere between asides on fly fishing, pie baking, and cow tipping lay an ambitious politician desperate to be taken seriously but who didn't have a clue how.

She gazed at the senator from Iowa, who was holding forth with a monotonous nasal drone.

This was *not* how.

Catherine glanced around at her media colleagues squinting under the sun's midday glare lancing off the water pool at the Memorial for American Veterans Disabled for Life.

A pair of veterans in wheelchairs bookended the senator at the lectern. The one on the right had nodded off ten minutes ago. The one on the left looked envious.

She could relate.

Most of the gathered journalists appeared semi-comatose. They hadn't so much as twitched for five minutes.

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“Christ, Ayers,” muttered Pete, beside her, as he adjusted his TV camera. “Can you do something to resurrect this boring clusterfuck? I don’t often beg, but hell, if anyone can put a rocket up ole Hicks, it’s you.”

“Pete, here’s a shocking thought—why don’t you get your own reporter to ask a relevant question? Or any question?”

Both their gazes travelled to a young, lantern-jawed blond man with a smart suit and vacant expression. He was fiddling with his hair—and had been for some time.

The cameraman gave Catherine a pained look.

“I see.” Catherine sighed. “Would it be too much to expect the rest of DC’s media to actually do their jobs?”

“But that’s what our Caustic Queen’s for.” He grinned at her, apparently sensing victory. “If you’re going to slum it with us lowly media rabble today, you gotta expect we’ll call you in as the big guns.”

She rolled her eyes, already regretting her interest in a story outside her usual White House beat. Curse her curiosity over the bizarre topic, and the fact she’d been stuck for a column idea all week. Catherine took a few steps closer to the front, drawing the eye of the senator.

Hickory blanched in recognition. Not surprising, really, since she’d already obliterated his career once, years ago. Back then he’d come up with the *genius* suggestion of using “quantitative easing” to solve his state’s budgetary woes.

When she’d asked him, in a live press conference, why he thought Iowa somehow had the power to simply print more federal money, Hickory’s gaping, shocked moment of realization about what his bold idea actually meant had become a viral sensation. The only surprise was that he’d bounced back at all after that humiliation.

But here he was, once again attempting political relevance and promoting the stupidest idea she’d ever heard in her life. And that was saying something.

At least he was consistent.

She cleared her throat and about a dozen half-lidded eyes popped wide open and looked suddenly interested. The reporters around Catherine all shifted slightly away from her, as though afraid any impending fallout from her questions might spatter in their direction. Even so, their tape recorders and microphones swayed toward her, like spokes on a wheel.

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Figures. *Now* they were awake.

“Senator Hickory, Catherine Ayers, from the *LA Daily Sentinel*.”

Despite the six lanes of traffic crawling along Washington Avenue beside them, it suddenly seemed silent as a church.

“Yes, the *Sentinel*’s infamous DC bureau chief. Should I be honored you’ve deemed my little press conference worthy?”

His snark needed work.

“Senator, as I understand it, your idea for solving the veterans’ health-care claim backlog is to implant each person with a data chip in the left hand, between their thumb and index finger—”

“It’s so small! The size of a grain of rice—”

“—so, when they seek assistance, they have to wave their hand across a scanner for their medical data to appear on screen.”

“It’s entirely voluntary,” he said, nodding furiously, “not to mention fast, and it will streamline a complicated process. Even the worst bureaucrat or computer system can’t lose a veteran’s files or confuse them with someone else’s. MediCache is revolutionary. Vets are lining up to volunteer for the trial.”

“No doubt because the people who sign on get fast-tracked for treatment over the rest. Are you really suggesting that because our government’s systems are so awful, we should outsource medical records to a patient’s *own anatomy*?”

“Lost medical histories could cost lives. And if this fixes it, why not?”

“What about privacy laws?” Catherine countered. “And how the current technology is so unsecured that any veteran walking past any radio frequency ID scanner would have their medical results pop up instantly?”

The reporters tittered.

There was an indignant sound from Hickory. “Did you forget the part about it being *voluntary*, Ms. Ayers? Want me to look that up in a dictionary for you?”

Catherine’s smile turned dangerous. “I really don’t think you, of all people, should be lecturing me on misunderstood definitions. Do you?”

At his momentary silence, satisfaction flooded through her.

The surrounding snickers made the redness rise up his neck. Hickory’s jaw worked. He turned to the rest of the gathering. “Are there any other questions?” His tone was faintly desperate now.

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"I have just one more," Catherine said.

"*Anyone?*" His gaze roamed the crowd.

Catherine glimpsed a familiar profile out of the corner of her eye. Her heart did its usual pleased flip at the sight of her fiancée. She kept her professional mask firmly affixed and tried not to react when Lauren quietly stepped up beside her.

The senator sagged at the absence of other questions. "Well, if that's all," he said, shuffling his papers and turning to leave.

"One more," Catherine tried again. "If this is such a brilliant idea, Senator, when are you getting your own data chip embedded? For solidarity with the vets?"

The group burst into laughter.

The slumbering vet suddenly jerked awake. "The hell?" he grumbled.

"It'd make a great photo op, too," Catherine continued, her tone droll. "Just name the day and time. You'd have plenty of volunteers to capture the moment." She gestured to the other reporters who called out a few cheers of approval and suggestions.

"We can do it right now!"

"Say yes, Senator!"

"You'll make history."

"Even better! You'll lead the news!"

Hickory coughed sharply, remembered an important engagement, and declared the press conference over. He strode off.

Pete wheezed with laughter. "Thanks, Ayers, that was perfect." He flicked off his camera. "Christ, you're always good for a bloodless evisceration. Did you see that choking expression he made? My boss will love you. Thanks again." He gave an admiring mock-salute and started packing up.

Catherine turned to Lauren. "Hello. You're a welcome sight after the world's most idiotic press conference. Are you just passing by?"

"Nope, I saw your calendar at breakfast and knew you'd be here, so I wondered if you've got time for lunch?"

"Sure." Catherine glanced around. "Where?"

"Not far. Walk with me. I have a surprise."

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As they walked, Catherine shot an appreciative gaze over Lauren's rear-hugging khaki pants, pale blue button-up shirt, and smart brown boots. The sight of her in any outfit, though, never failed to improve her mood. Such a shame Lauren's newspaper had moved ten blocks from Catherine's office building. Their lunches together had been sporadic ever since.

"Did you have fun demanding my state's senator get microchipped like a stray puppy?" Lauren gave Catherine's sleeve a teasing flick.

"Probably," Catherine admitted with a smile. "But he has a knack for endorsing atrocious ideas."

Lauren nodded and then beamed at her.

"All right, spill. What has you in such a good mood?"

"You'll see." Lauren grinned even wider.

They crossed Washington Avenue and made their way into a small, immaculate triangle of garden.

"Bartholdi Park?" Catherine examined the sign. "There aren't any food outlets here."

"Nope. Not yet."

"I don't follow."

"Patience." Lauren led them to one of several heavy wooden tables dotted around a paved area that surrounded an enormous, ornate fountain.

They settled into the chairs, and Catherine's gaze scanned the area with interest. The centerpiece featured lamps, cherubs, turtles, fish, and... "Nymphs?" Catherine's eyebrows rose. "While I appreciate the admiration of statuesque women, can't we just find a nice corner table at Mastro's?"

"You missed the frogs." Lauren pointed them out. "And it'll be here soon."

"What will?"

Lauren gave her a small smile and then turned to watch the park's entrance. "Wait and see."

A few minutes later, a low whirring noise reached her ears. A small, six-wheeled white robot appeared and rolled along the path. A long rubbery antenna was at the back of the unit, with a round camera on top, like the pouf on a poodle's tail.

Catherine stared at it as it trundled around the far side of the fountain and then made a beeline for them. "What...?"

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Lauren grinned as it stopped five feet away. “Not bad. Pretty accurate. I supplied the Google Maps coordinates of where we’d be.” She walked over and lifted the curved lid on top, tapped a code, and then flipped up a smaller inner lid. “Our lunch is served.”

“What *is* that thing?”

Lauren lifted some Italian-smelling dishes to the table. “This is an autonomous delivery unit. Cutting-edge, temperature-controlled, cheaper than hiring a driver, and it can shoot all around the streets delivering takeout. Customers just stand outside their home or office to wait for it when it’s due to arrive. The owner ordered a pair of them from Estonia. This is their first day in service for Antonio’s Pizzeria. It’s part of a story I’m working on.”

There was a rustle of plastic as Lauren tugged more bags out of the machine and sorted through their lunch. The moment she slapped both of the robot’s lids closed, the machine beeped, made a tight about-face, and whirred out of the area.

The feast involved several pasta dishes and one small pizza box. Delicious scents of garlic and tomato filled the air.

“So, a new delivery robot is your story?” Catherine asked in surprise. “Doesn’t sound like something for the *Washington Post*’s metro desk. Nothing crime-related about robo-takeout.”

“Ordinarily true.” Lauren handed her some plastic utensils. “Here’s what I know: Both robots each have a camera onboard which snaps 360-degree images of their journey and beams the photos back to the restaurant in real time. So, if anyone interferes with them, the owner, Antonio, knows pretty much immediately the where and the who.”

“Ah.” Catherine snared a foil container and peeled back its cardboard lid. Tomato penne with mozzarella. *Promising*. She eyed her fiancée. “Now, why do I think this is about to end badly? Since you’re on the case and all.”

“Nothing escapes you.” Lauren’s eyes twinkled. “And yes, despite all Antonio’s security efforts, one of his two robots was stolen. Simply disappeared. The thief might be any of the witnesses it filmed just before that. Which is where I come in. I’m on the case of the missing pizzeria bot.”

“How exciting,” Catherine drawled.

“Not exciting, but surprisingly funny.” She pulled out her phone and scrolled. “And here’s why. These are all the screen snaps from the footage

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sent back to the restaurant just before the robot vanished.” She laid her phone on the table.

Catherine swiped through the photos between bites, watching as image after image of curious people stopped, stared, waved, did bunny ears, and even mooned the passing robot’s camera. “I see it attracts a high class of tourists.”

“Yup. But this lady’s my favorite.” Lauren scrolled to a picture of a forty-something woman in a bright orange top peering into the camera as if it were a creature from outer space. In six of the photos, her long, painted-green fingernail was tapping the camera as though convinced it might start talking back.

“I take it she never did figure out what she was poking?” Catherine asked.

“Doubt it. But her *what-is-this-demon?* expression is an Internet meme just waiting to happen.”

“I suppose so.”

“Oh yep, she’s about to be famous. See, Antonio says he’s already sent all these pics to the cops for them to follow up, so I get to keep these copies and run any I want with my story.”

“Well that’s nice.” Catherine paused. “But so far I’m seeing not much more than click bait. Where’s the story?”

“The story is what happened to Washington DC’s first automated food-delivery unit. The mystery. The theft.”

“Are you sure? Isn’t it the implications of a less personalized society? What if everyone uses robots and drones for everything? What’s next? What will we become in even five years?”

“Catherine, my paper doesn’t want me to write intellectual commentaries on society. They want me to do light, fun, factual, and engaging. I’m expected to stick to the basics of my beat and not drill too deep unless I somehow unearth a major scandal. But *this* is my job.” She tapped her phone screen. “They’d laugh me out of the bullpen if I turned in an analytical think piece on society’s woes based on a stolen food robot. My job is chasing...” She waved at the photos.

“People doing bunny ears,” Catherine finished.

Lauren nodded. “Yeah. And it’s not *that* tragic. We’re not all at the top of the mountain like you are. We don’t all cover the White House and get to write deep philosophical columns every week.”



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“True.” Catherine dabbed her lips with a paper napkin she’d found in the food bag. “Sorry. I don’t mean to judge. I’m just used to looking for the layers in stories. It doesn’t help that the senator from Iowa is ruining my famously friendly disposition with this absurd campaign to shove tech into people’s bodies.”

“Well, hopefully, lunch is helping your mood.”

“It’s pretty good. Thank you.”

“High praise.” Lauren grinned. She pulled a small pizza box toward herself and thumped her feet up on a low wall beside them. “By the way, the pizza’s totally lousy, so I won’t foist it on you,” she joked. “But I better have another piece, to be sure.”

Catherine eyed the elevated boots. “Ground...now. Or I call security about a wild animal loose in the gardens.”

Lauren’s boots plopped to the ground. “You don’t mind me being a wild animal sometimes. Last night ring a bell?”

Catherine packed the empty containers into one of the bags as she smirked. “That’s different. Liberties are allowed in certain situations.”

“Like when we’re naked in bed?” Lauren’s lips curled.

A flash of desire shot through Catherine. Her skin still felt heated from the memory of the many and varied places those taunting lips had been last night. She refused to blush. Clearing her throat, she quickly cast around for something else to discuss. “Are you feeling any better?”

“About?”

“Our trip to Iowa next week? To plan a certain wedding?”

“Oh. That.” Lauren hesitated and shot her a bright smile. “So, we’re getting married in three months. And I’m taking you home next week to meet the family. No big deal.” Her laugh was weak. Her gaze shifted away from Catherine.

“And yet you change the subject whenever I so much as mention the weather in Cedar Rapids.”

“Oh,” Lauren said again. “Actually, I think maybe work’s been on my mind. Distracting me.”

“Why? You can write lost robot stories in your sleep.”

“Well, yeah. It’s not that. Sometimes my boss looks at me like he can’t believe I’m the same reporter who helped get a world-famous scoop. The thing is, I only pulled off the first big story with you. But he hired *me*,

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not both of us. Besides, as long as I'm assigned to write metro briefs and puff pieces, where's my opportunity for pulling another rabbit out of the hat anyway?"

Catherine stopped. "You really think I'm the only reason we got the SmartPay story? We each independently worked out something odd was going on at their business launch."

"Yes, but we worked out what it all meant together. I haven't had any major scoops since, and I'm wondering if I've already had my biggest story. Like, is this as good as it gets for me? What if it's all downhill from here? So maybe that's why I'm a little checked out."

Catherine bit back her smile. "You're not even thirty-five, and think you've peaked?"

Lauren gave a miserable shrug.

"Mm. Well, all right, let's review: Together we won a national award for our exclusive. And then I oh-so cleverly lost my head and outed us to the world in my thank-you speech last year. Then, mystifyingly, given how much I loathe virtually everyone in DC, I invited the whole room to attend our wedding. In Iowa."

Lauren exhaled. "Yeah." She bit her lip. "That was unexpected. Especially for President Taylor."

"You know, he did tell me later he was sorely tempted to say yes just to annoy his party's conservatives." Catherine still appreciated the devilish look he'd had in his eyes.

Lauren stared mournfully at her pizza. "Please just tell me the White House press corps isn't going to invade our wedding? You know what reporters are like with the offer of free food and booze."

"Is that's what's been stressing you? Lauren, our nation's finest media would sooner drink bleach than voluntarily go to the Midwest."

"Now you're just trying to make me feel better." Lauren's attempt at humor morphed into a wan smile. "Hey? I'm sorry my fears are leaking all over you."

"As is your pizza."

The slice Lauren had set aside was starting to droop off the table. Her arm flashed out and she plucked it from thin air as it began to fall.

"Trust your softballer's reflexes to kick in to save a pizza."

"No better cause," Lauren said earnestly.

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Catherine laughed. “Now, although I’d love to admire your athletic skills some more, I have to turn Senator Hickory’s weird addiction for terrible ideas into a news column.”

“No probs.” Lauren began packing up their leftovers.

“And I somehow have to do it without resorting to citing *Brave New World* about the destruction of humanity as we know it. For some reason my editor doesn’t appreciate my end-is-nigh societal autopsies nearly as much as I do. He thinks it’s a downer.”

“Shocker. I’m with Neil.”

Catherine huffed out a breath. “Even so, it’s important. This is an invasion of our bodily integrity. I don’t understand why everyone’s asleep on the implications.” She paused. “What will you do with the rest of your day?”

“I’m backgrounding food-delivery robots around the world for a sidebar. You should see the freaky-cool shit Japan does.”

“*Fascinating.*”

“Well, smarty-Ayers, it *will* be to my readers. Never underestimate people’s interest in new ways to get food.”

“I suppose there is that. And on that note, I definitely appreciated my food delivery today.”

“Good.” Lauren leaned forward to give her a quick kiss. “See you at home tonight. Oh, and the best part is, I’m cooking.” She waggled the bag of leftovers. “And by cooking, I mean reheating.” She offered Catherine a stunning smile, then spun on her heel and walked away.

Catherine inhaled deeply. She still wasn’t used to the sight of all that love directed at her. She let out the breath and marveled at how so much had changed for her in such little time.

With a final glance at Lauren, Catherine rose and turned in the opposite direction. She had to get back to her office. She still had a story to write about the idiot from Iowa. And he most definitely wouldn’t like it.

# Chapter 2

## Evil Twins

TWO DAYS LATER, LAUREN PUT down the phone and dropped her pen to her notepad. She glanced at her work calendar. Damn. Still Thursday. Only one more day and they were officially on vacation. A week and a bit in Iowa. Lauren exhaled. Her usual insecurities floated up and marched a circuit around her brain.

Dying for a distraction, she peered at the surly bear of a man working at the desk facing her. Bob Grimes was stuffed into an old brown suit and typing up his usual two-fingered storm. She could see only his forehead and furry eyebrows above the frosted-glass divider.

“Has it happened?” she asked. “Has the judgment been handed down in the Charlton case?”

He didn’t answer immediately, so she glanced up to one of the twenty-one monitors that encircled the walls above the news hub inside One Franklin Square’s east tower. She paused when she spotted her story on the food-robot abduction. It was still trending strongly, according to the live analytics.

She got a pleased jolt every time she saw it doing well. Even so, Lauren was pretty sure that the hilarious photos of all the curious onlookers had a lot more to do with the story’s viral success than her reporting. Especially Orange Shirt Lady, as she’d come to think of the most hilarious witness.

Her smile faded. Catherine wasn’t entirely wrong. This was barely news. Not exactly the White House beat she’d always dreamed of doing.

Bob Grimes grunted a belated affirmation to her question.

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Lauren looked at him. He wasn't the most talkative colleague, although he wasn't that much worse than the others.

The truth Catherine didn't know was that her outing of them had cost Lauren a lot of respect. Catherine had been so delighted that she'd overcome her fear of revealing their relationship that Lauren didn't have the heart to reveal the downside.

Lauren had returned to work after the awards night to a much chillier newsroom. Not because her colleagues were homophobic—far from it—but they'd looked at Lauren with fresh eyes. And they'd seen someone with a limited news background, whose most immediate reporting beat had been the LA party circuit. Put alongside Catherine's exhaustive, in-depth CV that stretched back two decades, despite a brief fall from grace, they'd reached a certain conclusion. They clearly assumed Catherine had given Lauren credit on their scoop because she was sleeping with her.

One photographer had even elbowed her the day after her national outing, winked, and said, "It's not what you know, but who, am I right?"

The fact Lauren hadn't been pulling out huge scoops since starting at *The Washington Post* just convinced colleagues like Grimes that their assumptions were right. She glanced back to the analytics monitor. Stories about stolen food robots, no matter how viral or funny, wouldn't change their view, either. Lauren still had to prove herself.

A familiar despondency settled over her. It had been building for a while. It wasn't just work. Not just next week's Iowa trip, either. It was everything.

She chewed her lip and thought back to the call she'd just finished to select an Iowan wedding planner. Time would be tight. They only had ten days in Iowa to book the venue, catering, and order outfits, so it made sense to use a professional. Even just choosing a planner, though, made it all feel so immediate.

Her work phone jangled, and she recognized the internal number.

"King."

"Front desk security here. I have a Fiona Fisher demanding to speak to you. She appears...agitated."

"Oh?"

"Something about a story you wrote?"

Lauren grimaced. "I'll be right down."

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She hung up, grabbed her notebook, and headed down to the foyer. She passed through the low glass security barriers and looked around. A large, dark-skinned woman was pacing the front area. She was in her forties, with piercing brown eyes, and seemed sort of familiar.

*Oh.* Orange Shirt Lady.

The security guard cleared his throat and pointed the woman in Lauren's direction.

The stranger turned her head sharply, meeting Lauren's eye with a furious expression.

*Uh-oh.*

"You King? Lauren King?"

"Yes." Lauren pointed her over to a seat.

"Fiona Fisher. You put me in the paper." Her lips turned into a snarl as she dropped into the seat.

"The missing-food-delivery robot story." Lauren nodded, sitting beside her. "You were one of the witnesses who interacted with it as it passed."

"Witness, my ass. I just stuck my face in for a look, and next thing I know you run my picture with your story. People think I stole that damn thing."

Lauren frowned. She'd made sure she hadn't worded it that way. So had the *Post's* lawyers. "Sorry," she said, "but I didn't say that. I mentioned how dozens of people stopped and engaged it in funny ways before it disappeared. We ran photos of ten people, not just you. And in none of them did we say the people had anything to do with stealing it."

"Bull. Lady, you out and out called me a thief."

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry you see it that way, but I really didn't."

"Then how do you explain this?" Fiona pulled out a cell phone and scrolled to an app button that had the initials "MET" over a picture of a balaclava. "My daughter's friends were playing with this stupid thing at school. It's called My Evil Twin."

"Okay." Lauren hadn't heard of it. "What's it do?"

"You give it a photo of a person and it matches it with a criminal—the criminal who looks most like you. Now look right here who my Sadie's picture was matched with." Fiona spun the phone around with a soft growl.

Lauren examined it. A teenage girl's photo was next to one of Fiona. Except the photo of Fiona had prison bars running down the picture,

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“Evil Twin” stamped on her forehead, and the words: “Suspected Thief” underneath. She frowned. “But what’s that got to do with...” Lauren suddenly noticed the orange top in the photo. It was the photo taken by the robot’s camera. The same photo her paper had run.

“See? Now tell me, why are you giving my photo to those app people to tell lies about me? I’m no evil criminal. Worst I ever had was a parking ticket. My girl’s a laughing stock and so am I.”

Lauren shook her head. “I’m really sorry this has happened, Ms. Fisher, but it has nothing to do with me or my paper. Now, Antonio’s Pizzeria gave a copy of those photos to police. And, I mean, it’s just a guess, but it looks to me like the police have uploaded the witness photos into their database, probably looking for a match with a criminal, and somehow that Evil Twin app has found your photo from that.”

Fiona Fisher blinked at her and then rose to her full height, towering over Lauren.

“That sounds like ass-covering bull to me. How could some stupid free app like this be able to get into a police database?”

Now *that* was a really good question. Lauren thought hard. “I really don’t know. Look, I think you’re right; it’s something to investigate. I will do my best to get to the bottom of this. Can you leave me your contact details?” She held out her notepad and a pen. “I’ll let you know what I find, okay?”

“This better not be some brush-off. ’Cause I’m mad enough to sue someone.” She reached for the pen and notepad and began to scribble. “Sue someone real hard.”

“I can understand why. I’d be mad as hell, too.”

The woman shoved the notepad back at Lauren, turned, and stomped out of the foyer, muttering under her breath, “This ain’t damned right.”

No. It really wasn’t.

Lauren felt a familiar sensation creep along her skin. It was similar to how she’d felt at a business launch party two years ago when something seemed very wrong indeed. Curiosity mingled with excitement. If her hunch had been right once...

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Returning to the seventh floor, Lauren sat at her desk and typed *My Evil Twin* into her search engine. *Ouch*. 527,000 results.

“Okay.” Lauren hitched up her sleeves, rolled her shoulders, and got to work.

She started with her half a dozen contacts at the Metropolitan Police Department. They seemed mystified, and each confirmed no one had been supplying photos to anyone beyond their own police databases. No security incursions, either. No hack attempts. She knew these officers well. They were straight shooters, and she believed them.

She phoned Antonio, who denied passing his photos to anyone but her and the police. Then he cheerfully offered her a lifetime pizza discount if she found his robot-napper.

Next, she did a series of corporate searches. Far from being shady, *My Evil Twin* belonged to a regular brick-and-mortar DC company, Lesser Security. It offered a suite of respectable protection and security software programs and hardly seemed the sort of business to offer such a lowbrow app at all.

She downloaded *My Evil Twin* onto her phone and emailed the ten photos from the robot-napping story to her device. It was the easiest way she could think of to find if they were all in the app’s criminal database or just Fiona. She presumed the program would just match each person to themselves.

One by one, she loaded up each of the witnesses’ faces. One by one, they were paired with other “evil” people, but not themselves.

Lastly, she put Fiona’s photo in. Sure enough, she was matched with her own picture. Lauren studied the image of Fiona behind cartoon jail bars and *Suspected Thief* stamped underneath it. What was it about Fiona that made her different from the others caught on camera? All ten witnessed the same thing that day. All ten had had their photos given to police by Antonio. But only Fiona was now in *My Evil Twin*.

Two hours later, Lauren decided to simply ask Lesser Security. The company CEO insisted on handling her call himself for some reason. He agreed immediately to an interview but insisted it happen face to face. How unusual.

She stared at the company website on her phone as she waited in the foyer to be admitted up to his office. The business’s other apps were mostly



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run-of-the-mill, such as My Security Hours, a staff-management tracker for security companies. Another one, My Suspect Customer, tracked “problem” customers in real-time and flagged them to a mall or store owner’s on-site security guards to keep an eye on. She wondered how the app decided who was a problem or not.

She added it to the growing list of questions for the founder and CEO of Lesser Security.

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Douglas Lesser was thin, tall, and pale, with a smile that was only just on the polite side of condescending. He was not the sort of man you’d expect to be running security apps at all, Lauren decided as she eyed him over his enormous power desk.

She’d been surprised to find his office, in a prime real estate location, was lavishly furnished in dark woods. Was security really *this* profitable?

Lauren showed him Fiona Fisher’s photo on her phone. “So, as I explained during our call, I was wondering how this woman ended up in your My Evil Twin database? She has no criminal past. Police tell me they have no particular reason to suspect that she’s the one who stole the food-delivery robot this photo was taken from.”

“I’m sorry,” Lesser said. “I can’t discuss proprietary information.”

Lauren gritted her teeth. He’d made her come out to visit him for a *no comment*? “Your app is free. You’re not exactly going to be losing money if you tell me.”

“Retaining confidentiality gives us our competitive edge.”

“What competitive edge? There are no other criminal-matching apps out there.”

Another almost-mocking smile was his answer.

“Okay, well, can you at least tell me if the database info comes from DC’s Metropolitan Police Department?”

“It doesn’t.”

Lauren shifted in her chair. “If it’s not sourced from the local police, and only they and I have a copy, how do you explain this?” She waved at Fiona’s photo.

“All my data is obtained legally, Ms. King. That’s all you need to know.”

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“Fiona could sue you. You’ve plastered her face as a suspect all over America’s most-downloaded app.”

“Who, *her*?” He peered at the photo, studying Fiona’s bright outfit in detail. “She won’t.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am sure.” He leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. “She’s wearing a ten-dollar Walmart top and three-dollar plastic earrings. She’d hardly be a compelling witness, either.”

“How can you say that?”

“She’s too stupid. It’s clear from the photo she can’t even work out what an autonomous delivery unit is.”

“Come on, these robots are brand new. Not something you see every day. That actually makes her intellectually curious, not stupid.”

He laughed. “I know people. I study people. She won’t sue. Next question.”

*So smug.* She looked about his office, thinking hard. “Why are there so many number twelves in here?”

For the first time, he seemed surprised. “No one usually notices. Twelve’s my favorite number. By the way, you seem familiar and I’m good with faces. Hell, look at my apps. They’re all about faces, aren’t they?”

It was creepy when he said it like that. She shifted in her seat. “Why are you based in DC and not, say, Silicon Valley?”

“This is where the real power is. No, really, how do I know you?” He squinted at her.

Lauren ignored the question, well aware she’d never seen him before in her life. “What’s the deal with My Suspect Customer? How does it work out who’s a threat or not?”

“All customers are possible threats. Doesn’t matter how innocent they appear.” He leaned forward and put his palms on the desk. “But I wrote an amazing algorithm that takes into account many factors. Those factors are proprietary information, too.”

“An algorithm.” She gave a disbelieving laugh. “So, it just...guesses.”

“Educated guesses.”

“I’m sure the lucky customers getting side-eyed by security guards love that. ‘Don’t be offended, ma’am, I’m watching you because of the algorithm.’”

Lee Winter

He shrugged, but it was too practiced to be casual. “Simply put, my software isn’t designed with human sensitivities. If there’s a potential problem, it highlights it, no matter how unpalatable that truth may be for some. That’s it. Tell me, Ms. King, are my clever little algorithms what really interest you?”

She glanced around his office to avoid his intense gaze. On the walls were photos of him with various politicians—none at the top of the food chain—a framed photo of a bulldog, and a few odd symbols on paperwork on his desk that seemed meaningless.

“I take it by your silence that you’ve run out of questions?” Lesser’s voice contained just the barest politeness. “Was there anything else?”

Lauren shook her head and stood. “Thanks for your time, Mr. Lesser.” She held out her hand. When she met his eye again, there was a shift in his expression. It now contained recognition.

His eyes gleamed, hands unmoving. “Enjoy Iowa.”

She froze. “Why do you say that?”

“This is DC, Ms. King.” Lesser stretched back in his chair. “I told you: I’m good with faces.”

He laughed as she strode quickly out of his office. She could still see his smirk the whole time she hailed a cab and raced back to her office.

Lauren’s work phone rang just as she was settling into her chair, her nerves thoroughly jangled.

“*Washington Post* Metro desk, Lauren King speaking.”

“Mmm, I do so love your professional voice. It’s why I call your work phone so often.”

A warmth filled her. “Catherine,” she breathed.

“How did it go?”

Lauren blinked in confusion. *How did what go?*

“Is Mrs. Potts officially our wedding planner?” Catherine continued when Lauren didn’t reply. “Or will we have to employ the spirited and opinionated services of your Meemaw?”

Wincing at that frightening mental picture, Lauren said, “Mrs. Potts says she can do it. She’ll come by Dad’s place on Monday at nine.”

“First thing? Good.”

“Mm.” Lauren fiddled with her cell phone and stared at the picture of Fiona again. She puzzled at the mystery before her.

## Under Your Skin

“What are you up to? You sound distracted.”

“I just had the weirdest meeting with an app company’s CEO. He was creepy as hell. As I was leaving, he called out ‘Enjoy Iowa.’ I hadn’t even mentioned Iowa.”

Catherine went silent. Then her words were small. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“My spontaneous outing of us. I should have thought it through better. By inviting everyone to Iowa for it, I informed the whole world where you were from. I took away your privacy. And then the video of my proposal went viral, so now complete strangers recognize us.” Catherine’s disapproving tut would have been funny if Lauren wasn’t so disconcerted.

“Yes, but he said ‘Enjoy Iowa’ like he knew I was going back there next week.”

“He was just fishing, Lauren. Trying to get a reaction. Chances are you’d have to return home sooner or later, given our wedding’s there in three months. Besides, everyone knows everyone’s business in DC.”

“I guess so.” Her tension eased a little. “That’s true. You’d think they’d have something better to talk about than us.”

“Oh, they talk about that, too. Look, try and relax. You’ll have forgotten him by tomorrow.”

“Probably. He was just so annoying.”

“Sounds like it. Meanwhile, I’ve been researching Iowa. It’s frankly alarming the things I’m turning up.”

“Is this about Hickory? God, what’s he up to now?”

“No, it’s about me. I thought I should have at least some idea of local culture before I landed in it. Did you know there’s this thing called a Combine Demolition Derby?” Catherine’s voice rose to incredulous. “Combine harvesters collide into each other for fun. What will they think of next?”

“You’re adorable.”

“Mmph. *Lies.*”

Lauren laughed and glanced at the time. “Hey, I gotta go. I have the crime briefs to file now.”

“Until tonight, then,” Catherine said. “I’ll present you with the rest of my disturbing findings then.”

“Can’t wait.”

# Chapter 3

## Baggage Handling

THE NEXT EVENING, CATHERINE LOWERED her book as the front door to her DC apartment unlocked. It closed again with a loud snap. A backpack-sized clunk sounded on the floor. Then came two smaller, matching, boot-weighted thuds. She glanced at the clock. Almost ten.

A blur of girlfriend flew past in a sea of brown hair, shedding shirt, and flushed skin.

She cocked an eyebrow. *Well.* This was getting interesting.

“Oh, hey!” Lauren hopped back into view with one leg out of her jeans.

Catherine regarded her in amusement. “Hello.”

Lauren toppled back toward the bathroom. There came a bang, an “oops,” and one final thud.

Catherine didn’t ask. Shower time for Lauren could be a loud and uncoordinated affair when she was home this late and this exhausted.

She contemplated returning to her book, but Senator Hickory’s butter-dish-shallow worldviews were not holding her attention.

A head reappeared around the corner. “How late am I?” Lauren asked, yanking her hair from its ponytail. “Did I miss dinner?” Her look of hopefulness warred with her tone of sorrow that she’d maybe missed out.

“That depends on your definition of ‘missed.’” Catherine slid a bookmark in between the pages and placed it on her bedside stand. “I left you some. It’s in the oven.”

## Under Your Skin

“Ooh!” Lauren beamed. “Thanks. I’d kiss you, but I still smell of that factory fire today. My hair reeks of smoke and something weird. I think my notebook may have to be put into one of those bunkers for nuclear waste.”

“Well, by all means,” Catherine said with a wave, “get decontaminated. Try not to leave a glowing towel.”

Lauren laughed and disappeared. There was another familiar crash as Lauren skidded into the bathroom cabinet, courtesy of socked feet on shiny tiles. The teeth-rattling noise was accompanied by a pitiful “Crap! Sorry!”

Catherine picked up her book again. She glanced at the next page and dropped it with a sigh. Did Hickory really think people cared that his wife grew the neighborhood’s best pickles? Catherine was still having a hard time reconciling that the senator waxing lyrical about vegetables was also spearheading revolutionary new technology. It was like two different people.

She was tempted to ask him about it, but her column on his veterans’ data chip program had already come out, and she was definitely on Hickory’s black list. Again.

The hiss of the shower stopped.

Moments later, Lauren, in a white robe, stumbled into the bedroom, her hands furiously working a towel through her hair. She slung it over the back of a chair and flopped onto the bed with a hearty huff of air.

With a long look at Lauren’s wild hair and exhausted blue eyes, Catherine reached across, combed a stray tendril from her eyes, and smiled. Even when Lauren was too tired to see straight, she looked adorable. Well, adorably ruffled. “A late one tonight. Feeling better now?”

“You know, I think I do. Got my second wind. Whatever you’ve done in the kitchen smells amazing.”

“It’s seared tuna with scallops cooked in a reduction of lime butter, bok choy, and yellow pepper, and a corn salad with turmeric dressing—plus basmati risotto, of course.”

“Of course.” Lauren gave a tired laugh.

“Just something I threw together. I put the fish and scallops on when you texted me that you were on your way. There’s *nothing* worse than overdone fish.”

“Nothing.” Lauren broke into a smile. “My God, I live with someone who sears sesame tuna.” She sat up, rummaging under her pillow, and dragged out a pair of pajama bottoms and a tank top. Flinging off her robe,

she slid on her clothes and rolled over toward Catherine. She planted a kiss on her cheek. “You spoil me.”

Catherine shrugged, but she was warmed by her lover’s reaction. She’d always liked to cook as a solo pursuit, but when you had someone to cook for, it was surprisingly gratifying. Even eating her own portion alone at a more reasonable hour, all Catherine had thought of was what Lauren would think of it. Of course, the salad was something she assumed any Iowan girl would appreciate. It had corn in it, after all.

Lauren kissed Catherine again, on the lips this time, and whispered in her ear, “Love you.”

It made Catherine’s heart quicken. “Mm. That’s possibly your stomach talking.”

Crawling back to her feet, Lauren nodded. “Oh yep, that, too.” She plodded toward the kitchen.

Catherine smiled, rose, and followed.

With a yawn, Lauren rummaged around for cutlery. Catherine took the warmed meal from the oven to the square wooden kitchen table. After pouring herself a wine, she joined Lauren at the table.

“Thank God we’re on vacation next week,” Lauren said, digging into the meal with enthusiasm. “I know, I know. We have to pack tonight and ask the neighbors to collect the mail and *blah blah blah*, but I can’t wait to just finally *stop*. Relax. Unwind and suck in the fresh air back home.” She paused and chewed more slowly. “God. This is fantastic. You should write down the recipe. Hell, sell it.”

Pleased, Catherine sipped her wine and allowed the conversation to flow on to light topics as Lauren finished the rest of her food with a series of excited murmurs.

“So,” Catherine finally said when Lauren pushed the plate away, “can we talk about why you’re still changing the topic within a minute every time Iowa comes up?”

The haste with which Lauren swallowed down her wine was probably an insult to the vintage. She scooped up the empty glass and plate and headed for the sink. “I don’t think I am. Hey, did I mention how much we have to do? The planning? The packing? I really hate the packing. I truly lack that gene.”

## Under Your Skin

The whoosh of water and clanking filled the air as she rinsed off her dishes in a whirlwind of elbows. Lauren finished up, offered a tight grin, and bolted from the kitchen.

Catherine watched her go with a small frown.

\* \* \*

Lauren threw things into her bag in a frenzy, glad to have something to focus on. Well, something else. Underwear, socks, and jeans were pummeled into place. T-shirts were poked into corners as if with a jackhammer.

“What did that shirt ever do to you?” Catherine neatly prepped her own bag on the bed beside her.

Lauren glanced at it. Of course. It was like something from a magazine spread. *How to Pack—The Ultimate Traveler’s Guide*.

“It existed,” Lauren grunted. She hadn’t properly slept in two days. And one thought kept niggling its way into her head and torturing her. What if they got there and everyone hated Catherine? Yes, Catherine could be pleasant when she wanted. But Lauren had never seen her be forgiving when she was pushed. Lauren knew that better than anyone. So, what if her family pushed a little, then Catherine pushed back, and her family told Lauren to take sides? If her dad took Lauren to one side and said...

“Choose.”

Lauren’s head whipped around. “Huh?”

Catherine jangled two different boots. One, a black pair of designer footwear that would look stylish anywhere but would last all of three seconds in a rural setting.

“The brown ones.” Lauren pointed.

“But they look like I should be on a horse. Which is fair since I last wore them on one. When I was twenty.”

“Which means they’ll cope with a bit of wear and tear. We’re not off to a fashion expo.”

Catherine slid the brown boots into her bag. “All right, what’s wrong?”

“Why are weddings such a big deal?” Lauren whined. “I thought Mrs. Potts was nuts when she said the earliest bookings left for most wedding venues were in November. And how can December and January be already gone? It’s *Iowa*. How much demand can there be?”

“Iowans do get married in as vast numbers as anywhere else, I imagine.”



Lee Winter

“But she made such a big deal out of it. It’s a wedding, not an inauguration.” She glared at her T-shirts that were stubbornly refusing to stay tucked at the suitcase corners. “I’m not ready for this!” She rammed her T-shirts again.

“Not ready to get married?” Catherine asked quietly, turning to look at her.

“Not ready for Iowa,” Lauren whispered. “Not ready to have everyone...”

“Have everyone what? Judge you? Lauren, you’re a successful, award-winning journalist. You have nothing to be...”

“Not me.” Her words were a bare whisper.

Catherine inhaled sharply. “Ah. You think they’ll judge me?”

She looked away.

“Lauren, I know what my reputation is, but you know very well I can be nice when I want to be.”

“Like that senator you dared to microchip himself?” Lauren’s voice was tinged with skepticism.

“Well, to be fair, I didn’t *want* to be nice to him.”

Lauren appreciated the attempt at humor but couldn’t find it funny right now. She rammed more things into her bag.

“I see. Is it the me being from Boston thing, the lesbian thing, or the White House media thing that you think might be a problem?”

“It’s not really any one thing. I mean, you’re just different from what they’re used to. More...complicated.”

Even as she thought about it, Catherine meeting her family filled Lauren with dread. She loved Catherine, for all her protective walls and acerbic tongue. She was beautiful, brilliant, and every kind of fascinating. The Kings were nothing like Catherine and had almost certainly never met anyone like her before, either.

“*Complicated.*” Catherine tasted the word. “You’re worried I won’t play well with your family? We’ve just been over this. I can do nice.”

“What if they’re being idiots to you? I have the worst nightmares about this...you all not getting on.”

“You know what my job is. I am well used to dealing with big personalities.” She gave her a reassuring smile. “But I get it. There’s me with all my elite, liberal, media baggage. And there’s you with your five mechanic brothers and father. Who you’re terribly afraid will embarrass you

## Under Your Skin

somehow. And who will judge me. And I them. And as a result, I'll possibly judge you."

Lauren froze. Sickness filled her. "Is that what you think will happen?"

"No. I think it's what you're afraid of, though, and it's what's keeping you up at night. Now that the meet-the-family date is upon us, you're suddenly panicking."

"I am not panicking. And if you knew my brothers, you would so, um, not-panic, too."

"Mm." Catherine looked amused. "That was convincing."

Lauren's lips twitched.

"But if it makes you feel better," Catherine continued, "*my* nightmares involve my sister, who thinks she's as liberal as the next woman...well, the next rich, elite, white Boston woman with dressage as a hobby. Phoebe believes, in her usual oblivious way, that she's as down to earth as anyone, but she's never even met anyone from the flyover states. Her clueless entitlement is a thing to behold and will in no way endear her to anyone in the Midwest."

Lauren swallowed. "Oh, crap."

"But in my waking hours I remember something I think you've forgotten. Your family and I have something in common: we both wish you to be happy." Her serious look turned teasing. "But me especially. So... come here." Catherine's voice dared her to obey.

After a small pause as Lauren debated whether to comply or not, she swayed toward her. There was something about that exact tone of voice that always did funny things to Lauren's insides.

Catherine gave Lauren a kiss so reassuring that she lost herself for a moment.

"Trust me, Lauren," she murmured, "it will be fine." Catherine leaned back. "So, is that everything you're worried about?"

Lauren offered a wan look. "I guess. I'm sorry. I'm losing my mind and driving us both crazy."

"Yes, you are," Catherine agreed. "Fortunately, I am somewhat fond of you."

Lauren shifted her ball of socks to a roomier corner in her suitcase. "So funny," she muttered. She had to stop pre-disastering their trip. Catherine would be nice. Her brothers would behave. Meemaw and Dad would like her. It'd be fine. "It's just a wedding-organizing trip, anyway."

Lee Winter

"It's also so we'll get the family introductions out of the way now so that all we will be thinking about on our wedding day is each other."

"You are wise, Obi-Wan." Lauren glanced at Catherine's suitcase as her lover resumed packing. "Although I might revise my opinion if I see you in that in Iowa."

"Too much?"

"Overkill."

Catherine removed her designer mohair sweater from the suitcase.

"Pity," Lauren added. "I really like you in that. Always makes me want to stroke it."

"I know." Catherine suddenly sounded much huskier. "Why do you think I was packing it?"

"Oh no, none of that!" Lauren looked askance. "We are not getting up to any funny business while we're there. Not with Dad, Meemaw, and two of my brothers all just down the hall from the guest room."

Catherine gave her a skeptical look, and her eyes became half-lidded at the challenge.

"I know that look. I'm not changing my mind, either." Lauren shook a warning finger at her.

"Sure you are." Catherine's sexiest, ivory-colored satin briefs were pointedly tucked into her bag.

"I'm really not," Lauren whispered as the matching bra went in, too.

"Ten long days and you'll keep your hands off me the whole time?" Catherine's suggestive voice was doing thrilling things to the pit of Lauren's stomach. "*Really.*"

"Y-yes. Really."

Catherine's throaty laugh at Lauren's fading willpower was the final straw.

She pounced. Catherine was flat on her back, pinned to their bed in seconds, two suitcases flying to the floor with a crash.

"That does mean I will need to store up a lot of memories to last me for the next ten days." Lauren gazed down at her, memorizing her face. Her excited fingers undid Catherine's shirt buttons and slid inside, dusting her bra. "So, get ready."

The bright smile on Catherine's face was far too knowing.

Until Lauren covered it with her lips.

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PLEASE PURCHASE

# UNDER YOUR SKIN

BY LEE WINTER

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