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Opening extract from **Under My Skin**

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FINALE

I can't say I wasn't warned. This is what all those stories told us about. This is the dark at the heart of the forest; this is the Big Bad Wolf; this is both serpent and apple. There were warnings everywhere – in the Bible, on TV, in nursery rhymes. I always thought they were metaphors or allegories to get me to go to bed, to make me eat my vegetables. I ignored them. I think we all do.

And now it's too late. I was weak and now I am dead.

Oh, it's for the best. I hurt people every way people can be hurt. And I'd do it again.

This is not just badness.

This is not just wrong.

This is *evil*.



Chapter One

I'm not good enough.

The spotlight shone in Sally's face, blinding her. All she could see was dazzling, brilliant whiteness. It was entirely possible that she'd died of fright and was now glimpsing the glory of Heaven. She dug her fingernails into her palms. Saliva filled her mouth, lubricating it, ready to . . .

I'm going to vomit and everyone is going to see. People will talk about it for weeks. I'll be Sally Sick, Sick Sally, or maybe even Vomgirl. Or Chunks.

She swallowed hard, averting disaster. Not for the first time, Sally questioned her sanity. They say madness runs in the family, and there was a reason why the Feathers didn't see Uncle John so much these days. The only explanation Sally could think of as to why she was standing there was that she'd lost her mind.

Why did I agree to this?

'Who's next?'

Sally jumped as Mr Roberts yelled.

I can't do it. She heard him rustle through his sheets of paper.

'Erm . . . Sally Feather? Is that Sally?'

‘Yes!’ she squeaked. She felt dwarfed by the big, empty stage, reminded of the stunted wooden people in her old doll’s house. ‘I’m Sally.’ Her voice echoed through the hall dull and lumpy-sounding. She hated her talking voice.

‘Brilliant. Are you ready, Sally?’

She squinted through the spotlight and recognised the stocky, bearded silhouette of Mr Roberts. It wouldn’t be so bad if it was only him. In the auditorium behind him was a neat row of identical glossy heads lined up like *Girl’s World* hairstyling dolls. Dozens of eyes all fixed on Sally. Their judgement was palpable. *What’s SHE doing here?*

I really must have gone mad.

‘I’m ready,’ she muttered into the microphone and a wail of feedback tore around the room like a banshee. Sally heard the other girls giggle. ‘Sorry.’

‘That’s OK, dear. In your own time.’ Roberts was a flamboyant black guy with the most neatly pruned chinstrap beard Sally had ever seen. He had a fiery temper, but she had mostly liked his music lessons in Year Nine.

She knew she should just leave. Quit now and she could just turn away and exit in a dignified and poised manner – well, as much as her clumsy gait would allow. That was her only shot at coming out of this unscathed. But she couldn’t. This was the last show Sally could be a part of, and she’d *promised* her mum that she would at least audition. It would, after all, look good on her Cambridge application.

There was a part of her – a really small, neglected nubbin in her head – that quite wanted to be in a play. She’d get to sing, she’d get to dress up. She’d adored nativity plays in

primary school, back when people were kinder, but this felt very different. *For God's sake Sally, it's only a school play – get it together – it might even be fun.* Her stomach heaved again, reminding her this was *not* fun.

There was an impatient sigh from Miss Deevers, waiting at the piano. She looked like an older version of Sally in some ways – the same fine features and mousy, unruly hair – although Miss Deevers's was secured with a cheap plastic crocodile clip. Sally's, as ever, hung in its long plait, the end of which she now rubbed between her thumb and forefinger like a comfort blanket.

Deep breaths weren't having quite the magical healing effect her mum had promised they would. Nevertheless, Sally gave Miss Deevers the nod. The opening bars of 'Somewhere That's Green' started. The piano badly needed tuning; it sounded like bones clanking together.

You can do this, Sally told herself. *You know the words. You know you can sing.* But she also knew, deep down inside, in a toxic pit in her gut, that it was about so much more than having a pretty voice. What is it those awful TV talent shows say? *We're looking for the total package – for the 'X factor'.* Sally just wasn't one of those mannequins. To Sally, the beautiful, effortless sound that came out of her mouth when she sang must have accidentally landed in her body on its way to someone else.

Sally was so lost in doubt that she missed her cue. Nerves had sewed her lips shut. Miss Deevers let the notes die off. More giggling from the crowd. Sally didn't need to be able to see to know it was Melody Vine, Eleanor Ford and Keira Stevens. The unholy trinity.

‘Sally? Are you OK?’ Mr Roberts sat up straighter.

You’ve blown it. There was no way she was getting cast after this. And maybe that was OK. She could truthfully tell her mum she’d auditioned. ‘Sorry.’ She felt herself fluster. ‘Can . . . can I start again?’

A subtle glance at his watch. ‘Yeah, sure.’

Sally nodded to Miss Deevers. This time she closed her eyes.

I am no longer Sally Feather. I am Audrey from Little Shop of Horrors.

She conjured a picture in her head – beautiful and sexy, but naive and lost. She dug inside to capture the longing she felt for Seymour and the need to get away from Skid Row. The last one didn’t take much imagining – Sally couldn’t wait to get out of Saxton Vale High School.

This time the words came out. Her voice didn’t fail her. Sally heard herself and felt better at once. God knew how she did it, but her singing voice – quite the opposite of her normal voice – flowed like liquid gold, intuitively finding the right notes. *If the rest of me was like my voice*, she mused, *there wouldn’t be an issue*. She’d learned she could sing years ago at church and the choir mistress had quickly put her in the choir, but that was different; there she was hidden in a crowd with no eyes on her.

Before she knew it, she’d reached the end of the song. *I did it*. She opened her eyes and ceased being Audrey. Her shoulders hunched inward, shrivelling up. There was silence in the hall. Sally had become used to the empty seconds that followed her singing. It was the time required for the audience to recompose themselves following the mental turmoil brought on by the

conundrum: 'How did that gorgeous noise come out of that plain little thing?'

'Very good, erm . . . Sally. Excellent.' Mr Roberts snapped out of it quicker than most. 'Really, really lovely. Why aren't you in choir?'

'I . . . I am.' Sally's cheeks burned.

'Oh, OK. Even better.' She still couldn't see him properly for the spotlight, but she could see that he was smiling. But he was also stalling. This time, the delay was because he was now trying to do a drastic *Next Top Model* makeover in his head to see if he could turn her into an Audrey onstage.

He can't. I'm not right.

Sad, but true. As all the girls had to sing 'Somewhere That's Green' as their audition piece, Sally hadn't had a choice in the matter. She would happily settle for a place in the chorus. She would get to sing, and her mum could come to one show before she left school for good.

As tempting as the wigs and costumes were, there was no way she'd ever be able to handle a role like Audrey. Standing there in the spotlight, her skinny hands were shaking and her mouth felt so dry it could crack. Singing and performing are not the same thing. Getting all the solos wasn't worth the terror involved.

'Thank you very much, Sally. Again, that was just lovely,' Mr Roberts said. 'Keep your eye on the casting sheet.'

Sally nodded and headbutted the microphone, eliciting yet more hyena giggling from the third row. *So embarrassing*. Sally shuffled off the side of the stage like a sick thing looking for a place to die.

* * *

‘Hey, Sally!’ She was already halfway down the corridor when she heard her name. The exit was in sight – so close to freedom and yet so far. It was at times like these that Sally wished she could freeze time to make faster getaways.

Sally really, really didn’t want to talk to Melody Vine. She *couldn’t* talk to Melody Vine.

She turned to face them. Melody, Eleanor and Keira. Sometimes known as Melanora. They were so easy to hate because they were three perfect mirrors reflecting her own imperfections. It brought little relief to bitch and call them shallow or stupid; Sally was self-aware enough to know that her resentment was, at least in part, jealousy.

Six slender legs carried three Bikram yoga bodies holding three immaculately coiffed heads. Keira was known for her magnificent trademark afro and mischievous smile. With her display boobs and long blonde hair, Eleanor could probably run the school if she weren’t so vacant. But of them all, Melody was the most radiant with her faux-wholesome Disney Channel loveliness: her button nose and anime eyes; her butterscotch tan and parted-pout lips. She smiled at Sally, and Sally couldn’t help but adore her for a split second, hypnotised by the gleam of her teeth. *How easy life would be*, Sally thought, *if I looked like them*. The mesmerism lasted for a second until Sally reminded herself that Melody was Satan’s school representative on Earth.

‘Sally, wait up,’ Melody said.

Sally’s tongue turned to clay and she suddenly felt way too hot. ‘Hi,’ she managed, as they fell into step alongside her. Eleanor and Keira tapped away on their phones, barely bothering to make eye contact with her. They were much too

busy with their followers and infinite friends.

‘I just wanted to say . . .’ Melody paused to sweep a glossy chestnut wave over her shoulder. There had once been a fairly convincing rumour that Melody Vine’s hair had its own insurance policy. ‘. . . you were amazing in there.’

This always happened after Sally sang. People felt they were paying her a compliment by saying, ‘Good for you – you have one redeeming feature after all!’

‘Thanks. You too.’ Sally couldn’t look her directly in the eye. Although they were roughly the same height, Melody seemed so much bigger.

‘Do you think you’ll go for Audrey?’ Melody’s breeziness was a ploy. This was a clear warning as far as Sally was concerned.

‘No,’ she replied, looking at her toes. She tried to laugh it off, but instead giggled like a psycho. ‘I’d be too scared.’ Sally wanted to cry. *‘I’d be too scared?’ Could you be more of a loser?*

Sally glanced up to see relief flash across Melody’s face. She wondered, momentarily, if Melody was threatened. By *her*.

‘You’re *probably* right.’ Melody nodded. ‘Being the romantic lead is about so much more than just the voice. You really need to be a triple threat. That’s what my agent always says.’

Sally suspected she was only a single threat – if that. Singing, fine, the dancing and acting . . . not so much. Students at Saxton Vale High School heard about Melody’s agent a lot, although as far as anyone knew the only thing she’d done to date was an advert for *The Sofa Emporium*. She’d played the coveted role of Smiling Girl with iPod on Sofa.

Sally reached the double doors at the end of the corridor and pushed down on the exit bar. A blast of cool, late afternoon

air hit her. Between the last little winter nip in the air and being around Melody, Sally was suddenly wide awake, as alert as a deer in hunting season. As the auditions had run on for a couple of hours after school, the peachy sun was already melting behind the towering conifers lining the school grounds.

Sally kept her head down as they walked down the flagstone path, but Melody continued to blather on. 'You know, when my sister did *Little Shop of Horrors* a few years back, she was Mr Mushnik. You'd be perfect for that.'

Sally was speechless. A little, fat, male character? That was next-level bitchy, even for Melody.

'I'm not saying that to be a bitch,' Melody gasped, as if she'd *ever* be a bitch. 'It's actually a great part and you get a solo.'

Out of the corner of her eye, Sally saw Eleanor and Keira share a sly look.

'Cool costume too. She had to wear a moustache.'

Eleanor and Keira could barely conceal their giggles. Melody wasn't stupid. With her wide eyes and friendly tone, you'd never be able to accuse her of nastiness, but she knew that, and relied on it. No one at Saxton Vale had ever been able to bring her down; she was Teflon – nothing stuck.

By this time they'd reached the road. A couple of buses were stationary in the bay, but the school was now a ghost town. Melody and her friends seemed to be heading in the same direction as her and Sally hugged her books to her chest a little tighter, as if they were armour. Surely they wouldn't stick with her the whole way home? Sally started to think of pretend reasons why she might have to duck back into the school.

‘Anyway, Sally,’ Melody said by way of conclusion, ‘good luck when they announce the cast list. I’m sure you’ll do . . .’

She stopped rambling, her sentence hanging. Sally dragged her eyes off the pavement to see what had halted her mid-speech. Concern creased Melody’s pretty features – something had spooked her. Sally looked over the road at whatever she was gawping at.

‘Ew. How gross is that?’ muttered Eleanor, her nose turned up.

There was a man, a tramp by the look of him. He staggered down the opposite side of the street and, as he zigzagged into the pool of a pink streetlamp, Sally got a better view. He was in a real state. It was hard to tell how old he was; he was so covered in grime and his beard was so unkempt he could be anything from thirty to sixty.

He had no arms. The left had been amputated almost at the shoulder, while the right ended at the elbow. As he ambled along, empty sleeves swung around him like an untied straitjacket. Sally felt a tug on her heartstrings – she always felt so guilty and impotent when she saw homeless people. She often gave them whatever coins were in her pocket, but always felt bad for not being able to do more.

He came closer and Sally heard him babbling, ranting and wailing. It sounded like gibberish, and, as much as she felt sorry for him, it was also unsettling. It was bad enough being with these girls but something worse, something dark and heavy, twisted in Sally’s stomach. She wished she were anywhere but here.

He saw them.

‘Oh God, he’s coming this way,’ Melody said. ‘Keep walking.’

For the first time Sally was glad she was with them. There's safety in numbers. The little group set off at a pace away from the school, their backs turned to the homeless guy.

'Is he following us?' Keira whispered.

Sally resolved to keep calm. Homeless people are harmless.

'Hey!' He shouted over the road at them. 'Help me!'

'Just keep going,' Melody ordered. Sally obeyed without question.

'Pretty girls!' he sobbed. 'You can help me, pretty girls. Wait . . . wait for me. I don't wanna hurt you.'

Melody took charge. She whirled around to face him. Sally followed suit, hovering at Melody's shoulder like her other sidekicks did. The man had wobbled into the road, heading right for them. 'Just leave us alone, paedo!' Melody demanded. 'We haven't got any money, OK?'

His face contorted as if he was in great pain. Head back, he howled at the faint moon – a true lunatic. 'Please.' He bounced up and down at the knees, the way that tantruming toddlers do. 'Please get it out of me.'

'Melody?' Eleanor said. 'Maybe we should call the police.'

'Don't get your phone out!' Melody scolded.

What's he gonna do? Snatch it? He hasn't got any hands. Sally kept the thought to herself.

The tramp looked straight at Sally, and she flinched. Up close, he didn't seem so benign any more. Even from the middle of the road, she could see his eyes were arctic blue, and burned in the centre of his filthy face. They pierced her. 'You. You'll help me. You're a good girl.' He smiled to reveal yellow, spongy teeth.

Sally said nothing, cowering behind Melody.

He continued ranting. 'It never stops . . . never. It's . . . it's *inside* me. Get it out. GET IT OUT!' He charged for them, running the rest of the way across the street. The others shrieked, but Sally couldn't take her eyes away from his. Those eyes . . . they were like black ice and she was frozen to the spot.

Sally heard the horn, but didn't understand what was happening until it was too late. Brakes screamed and tyres screeched. The car slammed into the tramp's legs and he crashed over the bonnet, cracking the windscreen before tumbling onto the road. He landed with a damp thud.

Melody collided with Sally as she staggered onto the school lawn in her haste to get out of the way. Sally heard shouting and wailing, and honestly, it might have been her. In the midst of all the chaos she couldn't make sense of anything.

The car came to a standstill and the man lay still alongside it, not moving – not moving *at all*. His head was black and wet with blood, a puddle fanning out across the tarmac.

Sally realised she was gripping Melody Vine's hand.