

Reverie – Part 1:

The Secret

The bell rings through the campus of Bayside High, and our freshman class pours out of the door before being dismissed, as always. People push each other, trying to get through the narrow hallways to the courtyard outside, and beyond that – freedom. Well, freedom for the rest of the day, at least.

I sit alone with my back to the wall in the school practice room as usual, warming up my vocal cords. I glance at the poster on the notice board on the other side of the room which announces the end-of-year inter-school music competition which will be judged by some of the most famous musicians, held in a month. If I manage to win that, there's a chance I'll be selected for national-level singing competitions, and ultimately, a good college that will help me pursue my dreams.

The door swings open, and I stop my vocal warm-up as my best friend and partner-in-crime, Andrea Foster marches in, grinning, waving a piece of paper. Andrea is tall, with dark skin and short, black hair dyed purple at the ends. She has a piercing on her nose, her silver ring glinting in the evening sunlight. She's wearing our school uniform – a white shirt, dark gray pants and a crimson tie – and the corner of a tattoo peaks out from beneath her collar on the side of her neck.

My parents say that I'm crazy for befriending her, because she's wild, unpredictable, bold, and causes way too much trouble for their liking. And that makes me even more determined to stick with her until my last breath.

'Layla! Guess what?' she says, her eyes glinting with excitement. 'We got in!'

I feel like I'm levitating four feet off the ground. We really did it. We passed the auditions for the competition. I smile and wrap her in a fierce hug. 'I'm proud of us.'

Her grin fades as I pull back. 'Yeah, well,' she shrugs, 'the competition has just begun. Six teams have been selected from our school, and over the course of the next month, five of them will be eliminated. Only one of the teams will actually participate.'

'We can do it,' I say with confidence. Because I know we can. I believe it. There's no way I'm gonna let us fall down. Not now. Not ever.

Andie just smiles. We take our bags and walk out of the room, striding down the white hallways with a new air of excitement and giddiness. It takes all my energy to not skip merrily along. Andie is talking about strategies and songs to make sure our team – Team Reverie – can

secure the top spot. She's talking about using my perfect falsetto to our advantage, but I'm too excited to focus. I feel like I'm drifting on cloud nine.

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By the time I reach home on my bicycle, the sun has started to slink towards the western horizon behind the huge pearl-white façade of my family mansion. I park my bike in the garage, which is large enough to fit an apartment, and make my way inside my abode.

After I'm done changing into a light gray hoodie and blue jeans, I settle on the couch in the living room beside my younger brother. Ryan is only younger than me by ten months, so we're in the same grade. We both look completely different. He's an exact copy of our dad – black hair, brown eyes, and skin a few shades paler than mine, while I look just like our mom, with my lush brown hair, emerald eyes, and bronze skin. Well, maybe Ryan isn't an *exact* copy of our father, since he's the gentlest, most caring person I've ever met.

'How was school?' he asks.

I shrug. 'It was okay.' I'm dying to tell him that we passed the audition, but I can't risk it here, where my parents can overhear us. If they find out I chose the music elective instead of science like they were pestering me to... well, I don't need to complete the thought. 'What about you?'

Although we're in the same school, our schedules never overlap. We've both chosen different subjects, after all.

'It was okay, too, I guess,' answers Ryan. He stares off at a random point, probably daydreaming about what he's going to make next in his robotics class. I'm about to go to get a snack when my gaze falls on something white peeking out from underneath my brother's sleeve.

'What's that?' I ask, gently lifting the sleeve. I stare at the bandage wrapped around his arm, blood slowly seeping through the white, staining it deep ruby.

He jerks his arm away. 'Oh... I, uh, got into a fight at school.'

I raise an eyebrow at him in accusation. He *never* gets into fights. He's lying to me.

'It was him, wasn't it?' I ask quietly, my voice so low I can barely hear it. But Ryan seems to get the question. His eyes drift to the floor, and stay glued there. I interpret his silence as confirmation. 'That's it!' I hiss. 'I've taken enough of this! I can't stand it anymore!'

'Layla,' warns Ryan. 'To mess with him is like to stand on the tracks as the train comes barreling towards you. Besides, I'm not even hurt *that* bad.'

I take a deep breath to calm the anger boiling inside me like hot lava. 'What did you do to anger Dad anyway?'

Ryan winces. 'He, ahh, found out that I've been skipping school.' He blurts the whole thing very fast in a single breath, then looks like he's swallowed something sour.

'You have been *what?*' I look at him in disbelief. My *brother*, who is *such* a goody two-shoes, has been *skipping school?* 'Why?'

Ryan winces again. 'Long story. I'll tell you some other time.'

I eye him suspiciously for a moment, but decide it's probably best not to press him, especially with those puppy-eyes he's giving me. I sigh exasperatedly. 'Fine! But don't go skipping classes again, okay?'

Ryan nods as a bell jingles from the room beyond the one where we're seated. Dinner's ready. Silently, we move towards the dining room together.

The room is big – about the size of a basketball court – with a white marble table in the middle surrounded by red velvet-cushioned chairs. A spread of delicacies has been laid out on the table, my parents already seated on opposite ends. We take our seats as well.

As our dinner is served – cheesy lasagna and garlic bread – I can't help but gaze wearily towards my father. His jet-black hair has been oiled and combed neatly, his brown eyes sharp and alert. Although he and Ryan look very similar, they are like the polar opposites. You never know when his fake calm, smiling demeanor would transform and he would lash out, turning into a monster that shows no mercy. I wince, remembering the various scars hidden beneath the sleeve of my hoodie, and looking at the ones on my brother's hands. Every small disobedience results in pain. It's the only punishment we've ever known; pain and blood and screaming.

I shake off these thoughts and try to focus on the food, which is excellent, but it's hard to enjoy good food when you're surrounded by broken, or tyrannous people. Yep, I really do have the perfect family. The perfect brother, who's always so kind to everyone because he doesn't want then to feel the pain that he feels every day. The perfect mother, who still seems to be recovering from some kind of past trauma which she absolutely refuses to share about, and spends hours crying about. The perfect father, who's gentle and kind in front of our mother, but when she'd gone, shows us – his own kids – his truer, darker side. And the perfect me, who's turned bitter and reckless and desperate to leave as soon as I can.

I realize someone is trying to talk to me and tune back into reality. It's hard to focus when all these thoughts cloud your head.

'Sorry?' I say.

My father sets down his fork and shoots me a smile that has nothing warm about it. 'I asked you how school was today.'

'It was okay,' I shrug.

'Did you learn anything new today?' he asks.

‘Yes,’ I say, then add before I can stop myself; ‘It’s what I go to school to do.’

My father’s smile wavers, and his eyes are shooting daggers at me. I look away, trying to concentrate on my food as I eat it.

‘What about that friend of yours?’ he asks. ‘Are you still talking to her?’

I look up. ‘Andie?’ He nods. ‘Of course I am, she’s my best friend!’

‘I thought your mother and I told you not to even speak to her?’ says my father in an accusatory voice, as if I’ve robbed the bank or something. ‘You know the consequences for disobedience.’

I manage not to flinch, keeping my gaze averted from the bandage on my brother’s bicep. I do know the consequences, and I’m sick of it. But I know better than to try to stand up for myself in front of him. I would try telling my mother about it, if she weren’t so distracted by her own nightmares all the time.

I gaze at her, her chocolate hair unkempt and wild, her eyes looking haunted with dark circles etched beneath them as she eats the food with a grimace on her face, like it tastes worse than cardboard. I am told that she was beautiful once. That she was carefree and easy-going and reckless... that she was a lot like me. But it’s hard to believe she was, when I look at the woman I know. What could have happened to break her? To turn her into such a zombie?

I look away, blinking back the tears that have come into my eyes as I miss the love I never got from my mother because of her condition. I’ve heard people say you can’t miss what you’ve never had, but I find that very untrue.

My father’s words interrupt my thoughts as he turns his attention to my brother. ‘And what about you, my son?’ he asks, his eyebrow slightly raised. ‘What did you learn today?’

Ryan clenches his fists and stares at his plate of half-eaten food. ‘To not sneak out of school,’ he answers, his eye twitching, somehow managing to keep to sarcasm out of his voice. Looking at him trembling, remembering the pain from his beating, I can’t help but feel pity for him. He’s so sweet and kind and lovable... why would anyone even *want* to hurt him?

My father nods. ‘That is correct. The next time I get a call from school that you’ve missed even *one* class, young man, I swear to God, I will *not* let you go so easily again.’

‘*Easily?*’ hisses Ryan before he can stop himself, and winces immediately, looking like he regrets it.

My father straightens his back. ‘You seem eager to want to be disciplined, don’t you?’

I look up at him, the hungry gleam in his eyes – like he wants to see blood – is as prominent as ever. My mother doesn’t seem to notice at all. Instead, she seems to have blanked out completely, her fork halfway to her mouth. I sigh softly, knowing that there is only one way to save my brother from our father’s wrath now. I stand up, pushing the chair backwards as I rise, and glaring at my father with all my might.

‘Stop it!’ I cry, my hands curling around the silk tablecloth. ‘He’ll behave from now on, you don’t have to hurt him for everything he does!’

My father just smiles coldly at me, and I try to stop the shaking of my legs as my knees knock together in fright of the horrors that the man before me holds. I take a deep breath. I can’t believe what I’m about to do, but I can’t see my brother get hurt any more. I can’t see him just quietly bearing the pain that this tyrant brings upon him, acting strong for my sake with a weak smile. I’ve heard his sobs at night through the walls of my room. And I’m sure he’s heard mine.

I stare at my father in the eye, mustering up all the courage that I can, and blurt before I start second-guessing my impulsive self, ‘I take full responsibility for whatever my brother would have done. Just don’t hurt him. *Please.*’

I put as much emotion into the last word as I can, hoping that, for once, my father would actually *listen* to me. But I guess I was hoping for too much, because he just laughs.

‘Well, isn’t that sweet?’ he scoffs, making me curl my fingers around the tablecloth tighter. ‘I’m sorry, Layla, but what your brother has done is unacceptable. He *will* be punished. And so will you, for daring to stand up against me.’

I don’t reply. I just bang the table with my fist so hard it starts throbbing, making my spaced-out mother flinch, and my brother wide-eyed, and walk out of there, storming up the steps, ready to punch the first thing I see.

I slam the door of my room so hard that powder rains from the walls, and start punching the walls, savoring the pain it brings, because nothing can hurt more than what we, the kids, go through every day. Because *everything* we do is wrong. *Everything* we do is ‘unacceptable’. And everything we do deserves nothing but a good punishment.

I scream and curse at the walls, and throw myself onto my bed, too furious with life to cry, too mixed up in the soup of emotions in my head that I start to laugh, maniacally, until my stomach hurts.

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It’s around twelve thirty in the morning when my phone rings. I’ve been tossing and turning, unable to sleep, my pillow stained with salty tears and my legs tangled up in my sheets.

I grope around for my phone, wondering who on Earth would be calling me at this hour. My fingers find my phone buzzing on the bedside table, and I sit up, checking who the call is from. It seems to be from some unknown private number. I pick it up and bring the phone to my ear.

‘Hello?’

A beat passes, and then a voice replies. It's too modulated for me to identify who it belongs to, and it takes a second for me to understand what the person's saying.

'Hello, Layla.'

My heart skips a beat. 'Who is this?'

There's a slight pause before the caller speaks. 'I guess you could call me your Stalker.'

My heart is pounding, and I'm suddenly very wide awake as panic starts to well up in my chest like a balloon. 'What the heck?! Andie, is that you? Is this some sort of prank?'

'You really think this is a prank, Layla Green?' the voice replies, and I feel cold sweat trickle down my neck, feeling uncomfortably like a snake.

'Who the freaking hell is this?' I almost shout into the phone, kicking my sheets off my legs because suddenly, I'm sweating.

'I already told you,' answers the Stalker. 'But enough about me. I need you to do something for me, Layla.'

I freeze. 'What makes you think I'd do anything for you? I'm calling the cops!'

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

'Why not?' I ask, pulling the collar of my cement-colored hoodie with my clammy hands.

'Because I know something, Layla Green,' answers the Stalker. 'I know something... something about your father that I suspect you would be interested to know. I know his secret, and I need you to be the one to uncover it completely.'

I pause. 'Why can't you just do it yourself?'

The Stalker is silent for so long I think they must've hung up or something, when they answer; 'You'll understand in time. But if you don't want to live under the tyranny of a man who tries to take control for the fear of losing it... if you're sick of dealing with the pain and misery every single day, I suggest you do as you're told.'

I take a shaky breath, not daring to respond.

'I'm not forcing you, Layla,' comes the garbled voice, suddenly much softer. 'I'm not compelling you to do anything. But if you're interested, come to Bayside High by one thirty. If you're not there, I promise I won't bother you again.'

He hangs up before I can say anything, and blocks my number so I can't call him back. I realize I'm hyperventilating and slow down my breathing, somehow managing to calm down by a fraction.

I bury my head in my pillow, my fingers curling around it, my teeth digging into the fabric. I shouldn't go. I should stay here, and try to sleep this through. The Stalker said it was my choice, right? So, I choose to stay back. There's no way I'm listening to some random

stranger and risk getting kidnapped, or worse, murdered in cold blood. Besides, if I do get caught sneaking out, I might end up getting a long 'disciplinary session' which will involve me getting beaten to a pulp.

But wait... didn't the Stalker say that he knew some sort of 'secret' my father was hiding? I turn to lay on my back, staring at the silver shafts of moonlight filtering through the blinders on my window.

Didn't the Stalker say that it was something I would be interested in knowing? And besides, the voice in my head that's been telling me to stay put and be good sounds way too much like my dad.

I stare at the ceiling for a long moment. *What the hell am I doing?* I groan and sit up, punching my poor mattress before standing up, smoothing my long hair and the creases in my gray hoodie. I adjust the jeans on my waist and wear my favorite pair of red Converse, silently cursing myself every single second.

I take a deep breath, and slip through my room door, sliding my phone into my jeans pocket. I tiptoe down the hallway, scared that the loud beating of my agitated heart will wake up every single person in the house.

I dart down the staircase, pass through the living room, and unbolt the front door as silently as I can. I look around. There's no one in sight. That's good. With a shaky hand, I push the door open, letting in a chilly gust of wind that makes me shiver despite my warm choice of clothing.

I step out, silently close the door behind me, and slip on my hood. Then, I look towards the huge iron gate beyond our carefully tended front yard and break into a sprint before I can stop myself.

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I've often had people tell me about how impulsive I am, about how much I get myself into trouble, and about how impossible I am to control, even for myself. Well, I hate to admit it, but I think I agree with them.

By the time I reach my school, I'm breathless, and my cheeks are flushed from so much running. My legs are sore, and my heels feel like lead. I lean against a lamp-post to catch my breath, panting hard, studying the empty school building.

It's weird being here at any time except during the day. Even from outside, I can feel the eerie emptiness of the hallways inside, and the echo of the wind whistling through them makes the whole place feel haunted.

I pull out my phone and look at the time. It's one thirty-two. I stuff it back inside as I see a figure walk towards me.

The figure is tall, wearing a long black coat, black pants, black boots, black gloves, a black hat, and black mask that hides their whole face. Immediately, I tense up, feeling my instincts from my boxing lessons (which I took secretly with Andie) start kicking in.

The figure stops hardly a few inches from me, but I don't move, determined not to show any weakness. They seem to notice how tensed-up I am and chuckle softly.

'I'm not going to hurt you, Layla,' says the Stalker, their voice still heavily modulated. It's probably the mask. They bring a hand to gently touch my cheek. 'You look beautiful. Just like your mother used to.'

My face flushes. I've heard a lot of people say this before, but hearing this creepy slug say it makes me uncomfortable. I scowl and swat their hand away. 'Cut the crap,' I snap. 'Just tell me what to do before I decide this is all a waste of time and I shouldn't have come.'

The Stalker seems to consider this for a moment before nodding. 'Alright, then, if you want to be so straightforward, I'll cut to the chase, then.' He pauses for a beat. 'I need you to infiltrate Green Enterprise.'

My face pales. 'You need me to do *what* now?'

Green Enterprise is my father's real estate company. They make and sell some of the most expensive houses in our country. It's really huge, and the security's really tight. I have no idea how this Stalker guy expects a fourteen-year-old to break into what is probably the most guarded office building in the world.

The Stalker raises their palms. 'Hold on, I haven't told you everything yet. I will cut the electricity and create a distraction so you can slip in unnoticed by the cameras and guards. What I need you to do is go to the top floor. There, in your father's office, is a book case, with a keypad behind it. Punch in the code.' The Stalker thrusts a wad of paper into my palm. 'And make sure to get out unnoticed too, okay? I can give you maybe thirty minutes.'

My heart's beating faster than a cheetah now. 'What do you need from behind that bookcase?'

The Stalker tilts their head. 'Me? Nothing. But you? Well, let's just say this is the exact thing you need to break free of the chains that man has put on you. Any other questions.'

I hesitate for a moment. 'Yeah... uh, if you can do so much just to help me... why not just do this yourself?'

The Stalker hangs their head and sighs. 'As I told you, you'll find out soon enough. I can't risk getting caught. Not now, after everything.'

'And I can?' I ask before I can stop myself.

My personal stalker looks up to meet my eyes. I can see that they are hazel, behind the holes in his mask. 'I promise I'll do everything I can to help if you're caught.'

I stare at the wad of paper in my hand. This is it. If I agree to this, I might end up endangering myself, and my instincts tell me I might also end up losing my life. But playing it

safe has never been my way. I'm curious, and my father says that's a dangerous thing. I stuff the wad of paper in my hoodie's pocket and meet the Stalker's eyes.

'Alright,' I say, once again not believing the stupid decisions I'm making. Oh well, making decisions has never been my strong point. I try to hide the tremor in my hands and grit my teeth. 'If I'm going to do this, I need more details.'

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The Green Enterprise building is probably the tallest one in our city. It's fifty stories tall, with a glass façade that glimmers in the light of the moon and the stars. Its main entrance is heavily guarded by a pair of armed men in Kevlar armor, which I've found kind of strange. I mean, why would my father keep such heavy security for his office? Sure, it's the biggest company of our city, probably even our state or country, but this much security seems unnecessary, doesn't it?

Since the front entrance is guarded, I'm supposed to go through the rear entrance, which leads into the kitchen of the cafeteria on the ground floor. Then, the Stalker will create a sort of distraction, so the guards patrolling the corridors of the ground floor will run towards it, and I will be able to slip into the stairwell unnoticed.

I wait outside the still-lit building, behind a dumpster that smells worse than Ryan's before-brush morning breath which, I assure you, is enough to make strong warriors faint. I shake my head. *Focus, you idiot.*

A second later, all the lights go out. I take a deep breath. The clock has started ticking. There's no turning back now. I dart through the back door and sprint through the empty kitchen and cafeteria. I burst into the hallway and dive behind a vending machine. My breaths shallow I peek around the corner, thankful for the gap between the machine and the wall. It isn't much, but it's enough to stand sandwiched between.

I spot a guard marching down the corridor, cursing the power that went out, when a loud explosion rings through the quiet corridors. I hear screams from the overtime-working employees and the loud swearing of the guard as he runs towards the noise. Once I'm sure he's gone, I slip out from my hiding place and dash towards the stairwell, determined not to mess up and get myself killed.

Climbing up fifty floors of stairs sounds easier than it is... and it doesn't really sound that easy. By the time I'm at the top, I'm wheezing for air, my legs screaming for rest and my lungs burning from the overexertion. But I stand up and keep moving because I've dealt with worse pain without tears in my eyes.

I push the door open by a fraction of an inch to see if anyone's in the hallway. When I find no one there, I slink through and fly to the door that leads to my dad's cabin. I push open the intricately carved mahogany doors and step in.

To call my dad's office a cabin would be like to call Mount Everest a hill. It's enormous, with a forty-foot-high ceiling adorned with ornate oak carvings, huge polished oak pillars carved out in the shape of dragons, and a crimson carpet that muffles my footsteps. A fancy mahogany table sits at the far end of the thirty-foot oval-shaped room. A bookcase of ebony stands behind it, holding about two hundred books on business, nonfiction, and healthy lifestyles.

There's not a single camera in sight, which I find strange. If my dad has gone through the trouble of setting up so much security to hide this secret of his, shouldn't his own office be the most heavily guarded? Shouldn't it have the greatest number of cameras?

A shiver runs down my spine and goosebumps erupt on my arms as a chilling possibility starts to claw its way into my brain. Maybe it's because his secret is so bad that he doesn't want anyone to find out, and maybe that's why there are no cameras here... to make sure not even the cameras record it.

I try to keep my rising sense of panic at bay as I pad over to the bookshelf on the carpet, the moonlight through the huge French windows on my left illuminating everything in a ghostly silver glow.

With a trembling hand, I take out a plain black-covered book, like the Stalker had instructed, and find the keypad right where he said it would be. I gently set the book on the table behind me and take out the crumpled paper from my pocket. I punch in the six-digit code, my heart rate increasing with every shaky breath I intake.

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I set the book back, and brace myself for a massive explosion. But, thankfully, it doesn't come. The bookcase slides open with a soft grinding noise, revealing the room behind it. I step through onto a pressure plate, triggering the door to slide back shut.

The room I'm in isn't very small, but it still makes me feel claustrophobic. The walls are white-tiled and barely ten feet tall. The floor is made of oak planks which aren't nearly as polished as the wooden furniture in the room outside.

White fluorescent lights shine at full brightness, taking me a moment to adjust to it. On the side of the room, there's a sofa set, for some reason. On the wall behind me is another keypad in which I'd have to enter the code again to exit. The room's unremarkable and I start to think I've been trolled by this Stalker guy when I spot... *it*.

It's in a glass jar which appears to be vacuum-sealed, because there's no way that *thing* would've survived in it if it weren't, looking at its condition. It's on a white pedestal at the far end, and just looking at it makes me want to throw up my wonderful lasagna dinner and...

Don't think about it! I internally scream at myself, somehow managing to control my vomit as I stare at the content of the jar, slowly stepping towards it as if in a trance, which I probably am in.

I'm probably dreaming. This is just a nightmare. There's no way my dad would actually store a human finger like that, right?

I swallow the bitter taste of bile as I look at the finger, covered with dried blood, probably years ago, the skin all shriveled up, the bones visible.

My heart's never been this fast, my breathing's never been this ragged, and I've never felt this panicky before. My whole body is trembling like I'm experiencing an internal earthquake, and perspiration has soaked through my clothing.

I try to clench my hands to stop the shaking, but it's no good. I'm too shocked to even curl my twitching fingers, much less clench them.

Once I get over my initial shock of seeing the finger, a few things become clear to me.

One: the lights are on. This room must have a backup generator or something.

Two: there's a name tag on the jar. I step closer to read it.

Joe Troye.

I frown. That name looks vaguely familiar, but I can't seem to place it exactly. I'm about to take a picture of it when I hear a soft grinding noise. Quickly, I dive behind the couches, watching in horror as the all-too-familiar figure of my father steps in, smirking at the jar with the finger.

I try to shrink in my hiding place, praying hard. *Please don't let him see me. Please don't let him see me.*

I peek out from around the azure sofa, watching in horror as my father walks up to the glass jar and gently runs a finger down the side, chuckling softly to himself. I try hard not to make a sound as another possibility surfaces in the murky soup of terror and confusion in my head. Whoever this Joe Troye is... my father didn't *murder* him and take this finger as a trophy, did he?

Dread seems to curl up around me and threatens to choke me. No, no, no. I'm overthinking. But then again, as I look at how he smirks at the jar, I'm filled with doubt.

What if I'm not overthinking?

What if he really *is* a murderer?

To be continued in Part 2...