

Dot:
A Novel in Progress
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Chapter 1

“One dollar and eight cents,” said the young woman behind the counter. She stood behind a large antique cash register that looked difficult to operate, and had a piercing through her left eyebrow.

“Wow, that is one—,” he had to stop to clear his throat, “that is one pricey picture, I don’t know if I can swing it.” His voice crackled from lack of use. The young woman forced out a practiced sound through her nose that sort of resembled a laugh, and held her hand out to take his money. Charlie cleared his throat again and opened his wallet, pulling out a rumpled single and handed it over to the girl. He stood for a moment as he waited for her to put the dollar in the register, looking around at the dark paneled walls hung with rusty metal street signs and old beer advertisements before he looked back at the girl. She was still waiting, his dollar in her hand.

“And the eight cents?” she said.

“Oh God,” Charlie said, startled, before plunging his hand in the pocket of his jeans, pulling out a small handful of loose change. “Sorry, I’m in my own little world.”

“No worries,” she said, her mouth smiling but her eyes joyless as she dropped the dime into the cup in the register, not bothering to give back the two cents change, which Charlie didn’t bother asking for.

The antique shop had two floors and was massive, but it still managed to be cramped and difficult to move around in, packed with shelves upon shelves choked with the refuse of time. It had that distinct, sweet smell of decaying books and dust particles floating lazily through the air, catching in the beams of late afternoon sun that came through high windows in the front of the

building. On the first floor it was mostly clothing, which Charlie browsed half-heartedly, finding only oversized suit jackets and overpriced t-shirts. On the second floor, Charlie picked up countless broken, rusted tin toys and jeweled brooches that reminded him of the ones his great and great great aunts had worn to the various bar mitzvahs and graduation parties he had attended as a kid. He clacked the keys on several old typewriters, smelled old bottles of perfume, and contemplated the viscous liquid inside of a still-sealed glass bottle of Royal Crown soda with a red and yellow label. How quickly would the botulism set in if he were to take a swig of it?

The thought of that mixed with the warm air and the dusty antique smell eventually started to make him feel queasy. He had begun his descent down the creaky wooden steps to the first floor, when a faux-Grecian urn sitting on an end table in a far corner caught his eye. It was an ugly thing with a wide opening and two ear-like handles on either side. If it had been a real antique, it would be called a *Kylix*. Several pairs of terra-cotta men were wrestling around the middle, and he could see from his place at the top of the stairs that slips of paper were piled up inside the vessel. He was too curious not to take a peak.

Hundreds of black and white photographs were haphazardly dumped inside. He picked a handful of them off the top and thumbed through the pile. Some were basic landscape photos that could have been taken anywhere, but many were family photos. One was of a toddler dressed in layers upon layers of frilly lace, standing in front of a lopsided douglas fir that was covered in an outrageous amount of plastic tinsel – *‘Little Bernice, Christmas 1951,’* was written on the back in neat, looping script. Charlie chuckled to himself, supposing that all people named Bernice had to have been babies at some point. Another photo was of a middle-aged man in far too short, high-waisted swim trunks – *‘David at the Beach, Summer 1954’* was written in that same looping script. He wondered who David was to Bernice, if they were even related. Looking at these

smiling people, most, if not all, of them probably long dead, sent a chill down his spine. He put the photos back on top of the pile and dug his hand down to the very bottom, spilling pictures over the sides as he pulled a handful back up.

'The Family at Jones Beach, Summer 1955,' featured a smiling couple lounging on beach towels beside two bronzed tow-headed children who were building a sand castle. *'Lake Carmel, Winter 1960,'* showed a man standing proudly on a frozen lake, and in *'Ada's Wedding, 1948'* a line of bridesmaids in frilly dresses beamed around a short, slender bride, presumably Ada. Some of them were cut with a scalloped edge and had glue on the back as if they were torn from an old scrapbook. Someone made sure to label each of these photos for posterity, and now they sat rotting in an ugly pot being pawed at by dirty hands. Charlie grimaced again at the thought, and dropped them back into the pile methodically until there was only one left in his hands, the back facing up at him – *'Dot, summer 1950.'* He turned the photograph over in his hand.

Charlie's breath hitched as he took in the photo. Looking back up at him was a young woman standing in a brightly lit park, and she was radiant. Dot. Dot was absolutely radiant. Long, dark hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders and her mouth was open in a wide grin. The photograph was captured while she was mid-laugh, and her white teeth stood out from dark painted lips. Charlie found himself drawn in, closely examining the picture and running his thumb over her smiling face. He wondered what color her lipstick or the flowers on her white-collared dress had been. She was bent forward with her hands clutching her stomach and her eyes scrunched, almost closed with her hysterical laughter. He couldn't help the smile that crept to his own face as he imagined what made her laugh so hard, and what her laugh might have sounded like. For a long moment, he forgot the antique shop around him, and it was just Charlie and Dot.

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It was a Tuesday afternoon in late June, and the town was deserted. It figured – Charlie had decided to go for an afternoon stroll to get some much-needed human interaction. He hadn't really prepared himself for the isolation that would come with relocating to a new place so far from home. He had spent months assuring friends and family that he was sure it was what he wanted – to move several hours away from everyone he knew and loved. He needed this, he had said to his sniffing mother from across the kitchen island in his childhood home.

“Who are you going to talk to in an apartment all by yourself?” she pleaded with him.

“I guess I'll just start talking to myself,” he said, trying to joke with her. He hated to see her get upset, but he couldn't back out now. He was thirty-two, but felt his forties approaching like a freight train.

“And what if you get hurt? Who would you call?” she asked, dabbing under her eyes with a corner of torn paper towel.

“Get hurt? Like if I fall in the shower? Would it make you feel better if I started wearing a Life Alert?”

“It might!” she said. Though she laughed when she said it, Charlie was fairly certain she wasn't really joking.

“Once the school year starts, I'll make friends. I'll settle in, and everything will be normal again, Ma, I promise.”

She meant well, but he needed a fresh start. He needed to find himself or something. In the last year or so, his relationship ended, he was forced out of his job, and he moved back into

his childhood bedroom. The adult life that he knew had imploded. He spent months wallowing, disgusted with himself. His mother and older sister took turns softly knocking on the door, checking in on him and leaving bowls of soup on his nightstand like he was a small child recuperating from chicken pox. Weeks went by, and he heard the whispering phone conversations about him, saw the concerned glances on the rare occasions when he ventured out of the room. He felt like a woodland creature watched from a distance – they were sure if they made any sudden movements, he would scamper away into the dark forest of his bedroom, never to be seen again.

While he spent those months contemplating his next moves, it came as a surprise to his family when he pulled himself up, started showering again, and started applying for new teaching positions. He had applied at any institution with an opening that fit the criteria that it was at least several hours away from the town he grew up in. He was done with being handled like a fragile porcelain figurine, and done with feeling like a burden on those he loved. After several video and phone interviews and many rejections, he had finally gotten a call back from a history professor at a small private college in the northeast.

He had driven in, psyching himself up and listening to his own lectures in the car to prepare. Though he felt himself trembling through his interview with the department heads, he nailed his demo lesson on Alexander the Great. The students had been engaged and he felt himself growing bold and enthusiastic as his confidence in front of the sample classroom grew. When he had gotten the call that the job was his, he was polite and respectful on the phone, but as soon as he hung up, he let out “FUCK YEAH!” that caused his mother to gasp and drop the plate she had been washing in the kitchen downstairs. He had desperately needed this win, and he was ready more than ever to start his new life.

Chapter 2

After he walked the two blocks or so home, huffing and puffing up the hilly sidewalks, Charlie stuck Dot's photograph to his refrigerator with the rubber pineapple magnet that had been left there by the previous resident of apartment 3C. He stood there for a little while, looking down at her with his arms crossed over his stomach, wondering again what made her laugh so hard. Her nose was wrinkled, so she probably snorted when she laughed. It was only fair that someone so beautiful had a goofy laugh. He tried to think of the funniest joke he knew.

“So this guy walks into a bar looking for a job, and he goes up to the manager – ” No, that joke couldn't be the funniest one he knew, the punchline was so stupid that it was usually met with groans. Maybe she would laugh for him though, because it always made him laugh. He would accept a laugh that was polite but loving. He shook his head– he really needed to get out more.

That night was the first time Dot first let herself into his dreams. It was only for a moment or two – Charlie dreamed that he was making breakfast, and Dot was humming beside him, whisking eggs as he poured pancake batter into a frying pan. He woke up the next morning feeling light and well-rested. After that, Dot made herself at home in his subconscious, and was more or less a permanent fixture. The dreams were usually mundane, but Charlie began to look forward to them as he prepared for bed each night. He would be doing something he always did, like sitting at his small Ikea desk in the corner of the living room, typing on his laptop, when Dot's arms would snake around his shoulders and she would kiss him on the ear. Once she pulled him from his chair and made him dance with her in the middle of the living room – he had

woken up the next morning with a smile on his face, but he was almost disappointed to be awake. Trying to go back to sleep to bring the dream back never worked – Dot only showed up when she wanted to.

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“Morning, Dot,” he said to himself as he opened the refrigerator to get out the Tupperware of ground coffee and the quart of half and half. There was no reply, of course, but he could imagine a honeyed voice in his head, always with a lilt of amusement.

“Mornin’ sugar, how’d ya sleep?” she would say. He didn’t reply, but a smile crept onto his face for a second before he screwed up his mouth to chase it away. Voices in his head were really no reason to smile. He shook his head as he shoved the paper filter into the coffee pot followed by two heaping scoops of fragrant grounds, then jammed the power button and leaned his back against the counter to wait for the coffee to begin spluttering into the pot below. It was mid-July, and he had been living in his apartment for about a month, and had been dreaming of Dot every night for over two weeks. The life he was developing with Dot while he slept made him feel more at peace than he had in over a year, but when he allowed himself to think about it, he felt himself grow nervous. Was he growing too attached to Dot? Was he really living his life if he spent his days waiting to get back to sleep so he could see her? This moment of quiet contemplation was interrupted by his phone buzzing on the counter beside him.

He absentmindedly reached for the phone and sighed when he saw the contact photo on the screen.

“Are you awake?” Mara’s voice rang through the phone, energetic as always. He clicked the volume button down a couple times before replying.

“Good morning to you too. Of course I’m awake, it’s –” he pulled the phone away from his ear to glance at the time, “10:00. I’ve been awake for hours.”

“Yeah, sure you have,” she said, knowing her little brother too well. “Maybe you’ve been awake, but how long have you actually been out of bed?” she asked as though she already knew the answer. He tried to think of a reasonable amount of time, but his pause just confirmed what she already suspected. “Are you free today? I was thinking I could come by and see how your place is looking!” He sighed inwardly, glancing around the tiny apartment, his life still mostly packed away in boxes, somehow already beginning to sport a stylish coating of dust. As his older sister, Charlie knew that no story he pulled out of any bodily orifice would convince Mara not to drive the four hours or so it took for her to get to him.

“Uh, I don’t know Mar, I have some stuff I have to get to, I have lesson plans I need to –”

“Oops sorry, wrong answer!” She cut him off. “I’ll be there in like an hour, so put some pants on and think of where you’re going to take me for lunch!”

“Mara!” He began to scold her, but it was too late, she had already hung up.

She got there in record time, dropping to one knee on the sidewalk in front of him, holding aloft a large bottle of wine and head-banging like Wayne and Garth. She was a married nurse practitioner with kids now, but her sense of humor had not matured past high school.

“Mara, why?” he said, taking the bottle of wine from her outstretched hand and shaking his head. It was a cheap, peach flavored white wine.

“Because I wanted to bring you a housewarming present, and Mama likes the cheap stuff!”

“No that part I understand, but why did you come all the way here?” She was one of those people who seemed to never slow down, always juggling a million different responsibilities but always doing it with a smile on her face.

“Is it illegal for me to come see how my baby brother is doing all by his lonesome?” She asked, sticking out her lower lip.

“It is in some states, I think,” he replied.

“Besides, Nora and Sophie started summer camp and I had a couple of days off, I was bored! And I miss you, is that a crime too?”

“That one I’m almost certain is illegal.” Charlie took the bottle from her hand and led her up the stairs to the apartment. He deposited the bottle on the kitchen counter and ushered her out the door once more, not ready for her to inspect his apartment before he had any food in his stomach.

They went to a Mediterranean restaurant in the center of town that Charlie hadn’t tried yet. He hadn’t tried most of the restaurants besides the Chinese takeout place yet. They sat at a small table at the front window of the restaurant, and though it was hot, the summer breeze that filtered through the open door was pleasant. They ordered far too much food, as they usually did when they got together without their mother to tell them there was no need for a second appetizer. Charlie tried to keep the conversation on Mara’s life, knowing that if he asked about his nieces, she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from going on and on about them.

“Nora is loving camp so much it scares me, where did this outdoorsy kid come from?” she said while skewering another falafel ball with her fork and pulling it onto her plate. “She

came home with mud up to her elbows the other day and she was missing a shoe, she said she lost it trying to catch a frog.”

“Remember all the excuses we would make up so we wouldn’t have to do anything when we went to camp?” Charlie said, laughing. “I once tried to forge a note saying I was allergic to algae so I couldn’t go swimming in the lake.”

“And you would have gotten away with it if you hadn’t signed the note ‘From Mom,’” Mara replied, cackling.

When they had finished stuffing themselves with hummus and pita, they argued over who was going to pay the bill for several minutes until Mara threatened Charlie with a steak knife, and he put his hands up in surrender. Finally, they walked back to Charlie’s building and up the three flights to the apartment, after which Mara wandered around the one bedroom, tutting every so often at the sparsely decorated space.

“So you’re going for that minimalist look, I see? And these cardboard end tables? Very shabby-chic,” she said, tapping her hand on the Home Depot box labeled “Tchotchkes” which was pushed up against the futon in the living room.

“I’m taking the unpacking slowly, ok?” Charlie said defensively.

“Yeah, one plate at a time, I guess,” Mara responded before moving across the room to peek inside a mostly empty closet. “So when are you getting around to actually living here?”

“I know, I know! I’m trying, or I’m trying to try,” Charlie replied, trying not to sound so despondent. “It’s just been a little overwhelming.”

“Of course it is, you’re all by yourself! Let me help you get some of this crap unpacked.” She pulled open the flap on an unlabeled box and found a set of scratched up Corelle plates. “Ah, the fine China! Shall I put it in the cupboard?”

“Yes please,” Charlie said, rolling his eyes and starting to feel some of the tension begin to lift from his shoulders. Mara lifted the plates up on one hand and began walking towards the kitchen with them like a butler.

“Ooh! Who’s this fine piece of ass?” she called through the doorway. She came sauntering back out of the kitchen waving the picture of Dot as if it was a pinup cut from a dirty magazine.

“Oh that — it was a dollar at the antique shop down the road,” he said, nervousness beginning to fizz in his stomach for some reason.

“She’s pretty cute,” she said, waving it again before retreating back into the kitchen.. “Kind of creepy that it’s a picture of someone’s grandma but I’m glad you’re buying some art at least.

“Can you please just put that back on the refrigerator?” Charlie said, picturing it slipping off the counter and into some crevice never to be seen again.

They worked for a few hours unpacking the various boxes that littered the apartment, almost coming to blows at one point over how Charlie’s books should be arranged in his Ikea bookshelf. Mara felt that they should have been laid out in an aesthetically pleasing, color-coordinated way rather than alphabetized, and Charlie said that was the worst, most ludicrous thing he had ever heard in his adult life. Finally, they rested on the futon, and Charlie

cracked the screw-top seal on the wine Mara had bought and took a swig from the bottle before passing it to his sister.

“So, have you spoken to Mom lately?” Mara asked after taking a small sip.

“Mom calls me just as much as you do,” he replied, “Maybe slightly more.” Mara let out a laugh and began playing with the cap of the wine bottle, screwing it back and forth.

“You know, I don’t know if I should even bring this up, but Sarah was actually asking about you,” she said, sounding a little sheepish. Charlie heaved a deep sigh before standing up and taking the bottle of wine from her hands.

“I’m just going to put this in the fridge,” he said. “You have a long drive, I wouldn’t want you to get tipsy.”

“I know you don’t want to talk about this, Char,” Mara called after him as he walked into the kitchen. “But I really think we should. You just kind of scared us a little bit last year.” She got up and came to the doorway of the tiny kitchen. Charlie closed the door to the fridge and looked at the photograph of Dot, reaching out to straighten it. Mara had haphazardly placed the pineapple magnet directly in the center, covering up Dot’s face. “I mean, I keep telling everyone that you’re fine, you got a new job and all, which we are all so, so proud of you for – and why would you bother renting a brand new place and moving all of your stuff if you were going to – you know? You are fine, right?” He couldn’t stand it when she strayed from her usual biting wit into sincerity and concern.

“Do you know how much you sound like mom right now? I don’t need to hear this from both of you,” Charlie snapped, sounding much more angry than he intended.

“I know, Char – I just can’t help it,” Mara responded, her voice a little wounded.

“I’m good, I really am. I just need to get adjusted and I’ll be ok.”

“Try to get out there and meet some people, okay? I’ll even come out again and be your wing-woman or something! I don’t want you locking yourself in this place and sleeping for another couple of months.” Charlie took the magnet off of Dot’s picture once more and moved her to the center of the freezer door, so she couldn’t get knocked down or dirty.

“What’s with that picture, Charlie? You haven’t stopped looking at it once. Are you planning on decorating the rest of the apartment with dead people’s belongings too, or just the kitchen?”

“I don’t know, I thought she was pretty,” he said, shaking his head out of the slight daze he had been in. He could feel his ears start to burn again. “She’s so happy, she makes me happy.” His brain wanted to leave it at that, but his mouth had other plans and he found himself telling Mara all about his life with Dot that existed in his dreams. Mara found this screamingly funny.

“Oh my God, you must be losing it!” she said through snorting laughter. “You really need to get out more, Charlie!”

“It’s really not that funny.” Charlie said tersely, rolling his eyes.

“You’re having wet dreams about a dame from the 1950s, Daddy-O!” she shrieked, her snorting starting up again. “And you don’t even have the decency not to make her a walking cliché!”

“Why do I ever tell you anything?”

Chapter 3

The dreams he could explain away – his psyche was just inserting Dot’s face into his dreams because he had started to see it every day. It wasn’t any more concerning than dreaming about a coworker. The changes she had seemingly brought about in the waking world, however, were setting off blaring, red-flashing alarm bells in Charlie’s mind. Shortly after pinning her photo to the refrigerator, Charlie had started waking up to the smell of coffee only to find his hand me down Mr. Coffee sitting empty on the counter. When he had lived with Sarah, he had been the one to wake up early and start the coffee, filling the pot up to the max-fill line so there would be enough for both of them to have a mug and bring a thermos to work.

After several days in a row of smelling coffee, Charlie figured that he had a neighbor that woke up around the same time as he did every day and made themselves particularly strong coffee. However, when the coffee pot started cleaning itself, it gave him pause. There was a permanent brown ring around the four cup mark, the amount Charlie made himself every day as a single man. He had rolled himself out of bed on a morning in early August, picking the granules of sleep from the corners of his eyes as he trudged towards the small kitchen. He turned the sink on and yawned as he reached for the coffee pot, but stopped himself before holding the pot under the running water. He held the pot up to his eyes and looked through the clear glass in wonder.

“I’m either cleaning the kitchen in my sleep, or I have very considerate burglars,” he said aloud, looking around the kitchen as if he was going to find the coffee cleaning bandit ducking into one of his cabinets.

Not only had the inside of the pot been scrubbed clean, but the splotches of dried coffee he never bothered to wipe from the hot plate were gone too. The thin layer of dust had been wiped from the top of the machine, and upon closer inspection, the dull metal sink seemed like it had been wiped down with a rag as well. The only explanation seemed to be that he had somehow forgotten that he had scrubbed down his kitchen at some point, which did nothing to settle the nervous feeling that had begun brewing in his stomach. Putting the coffee pot back in its place, he began slowly wandering around the apartment, trying to notice other things that seemed out of place, or perhaps in place when they hadn't been before.

He wasn't proud of it, but he would definitely not be considered tidy by any stretch of the word. The first time Sarah had stayed at his apartment, the one that became their apartment, she had refused to shower until he had scrubbed the pink mildew that covered the floor of his shower. His excuse had been that it was a basement apartment, he couldn't stop that from happening, but in reality it had simply never occurred to him to clean the floor of the shower — that was where all of the soap landed when it was rinsed from his body, surely it was some kind of self-cleaning system. The second time, she had come bearing a brand new shower curtain liner so that she wouldn't have to press herself against the wall of the shower to avoid being touched by the slimy one that had been hanging there since Charlie first moved out of his mother's house two years earlier.

As he made his way slowly around the small apartment, Charlie realized that it hadn't just been the kitchen that was wiped spotless. The layer of dust that his sister had scoffed at and Sarah would have referred to as an example of his "Learned incompetence," seemingly disappeared in the night. He wandered into his bedroom in a daze and sat heavily on his bedspread and put his head in his hands, wracking his brain for an explanation. Looking down at

the floor between his legs, there almost seemed to be vacuum tracks in the drab gray carpeting that lined the floor of the room. He leaned back and shook his head in disbelief, when he realized with a start that the bed he had just rolled out of minutes before had been made. He jumped up as if he had been burned and whirled around to look at the bed. The navy blue comforter that he remembered throwing back in a crumpled mess was pulled tight without a wrinkle to be seen, and the pillows that he had left in varying positions were lovingly placed, horizontal and fluffed, atop the bedspread. A cold sweat sprang out on his brow and his chest started fluttering. Was someone in the apartment?

“*Hello?*” he called, feeling stupid as he did so as his voice bounced around the empty room. He stood still next to his bed, listening, but hearing nothing. He leaned over to the nightstand where his phone still sat charging, and clicked Mara’s name in his list of recent calls. He held the phone away from him, half expecting to hear the phone ringing from his closet. On the third ring, Mara picked up.

“Sup, Broseph? I can’t really chat at the mo—”

“Are you...cleaning my apartment?” Charlie cut her off.

“Excuse—” she paused to laugh, “Excuse me?” He could hear beeps and phones ringing and the din of people talking around her in the office.

“My apartment is – you know what, it’s not important. You haven’t been here?” he asked, realizing how insane it would sound to tell her that he believed his apartment had mysteriously become clean without him noticing.

“No Charles, I haven’t driven several hours in the middle of the workweek to secretly visit your apartment,” she said, and Charlie could hear her eyes rolling in her voice. “Is everything ok?”

“Everything’s fine! I’m just messing with you,” he said, attempting to force out a laugh.

“Ok then... are you sure everything is ok?” she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially. Charlie assured her again that he had just been joking, and she immediately brightened and said, “Weird joke, ta-ta!” before hanging up.

Charlie took a deep breath and stood up, looking around again at the still, empty room. There was no sound except for the occasional passing car. His panic was abated, and he went into the kitchen to finish making his coffee, cursing himself for thinking so irrationally. Maybe he was just tidier than he gave himself credit for. As he reached for the coffee pot again, from the corner of his eye he saw the photograph of Dot pull itself free from the magnet, and flutter to the linoleum floor.

Chapter 4

Sarah had been the first girl Charlie ever loved, and he had thought she would be the only one he ever would. When she walked into the coffee shop that fateful evening in March many years ago, it was cinematic. He had been sitting on a loveseat against the wall, looking around nervously at each passing face, searching for the one Mara had described – a cutesy young brunette with an upturned nose, which turned out to describe the majority of the women coming and going from the cafe.

With every new person who met his eager gaze and quickly looked away, Charlie became more and more convinced that Sarah had seen him and hightailed it off the premises. Finally, the bell above the door jingled for a thousandth time, and he looked up just as a gust of wind blew cold damp air into the building and swept the hair over the face of the woman entering. As she smoothed herself out and looked around with the same nervous searching Charlie had just been doing, their eyes locked. Charlie imagined the soft ambient music swelling into a crescendo.

“Charlie?” she had said.

“You must be Sarah!” Charlie replied, almost shouting in the quiet space. He stood up and held out his hand, which she took awkwardly, giving it a brief shake. They both blushed as he stood and moved aside to offer her the couch he had just been sitting on in favor of the hard wooden chair on the other side of the low, scratched coffee table.

“Sorry I’m late, I circled the block like a hundred times looking for parking,” she said, shucking off her jacket and shaking out a cascade of messy curls.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, “I should have picked a place with better parking.”

She laughed and shook her head, “No it’s ok, I’m just the worst at parallel parking.” They sat and chatted for a while, going over the obligatory first date conversations: What do you like to do for fun, what kind of music do you listen to, etcetera. They didn’t have the same answers to any of these questions. While Charlie knew the entire Beatles discography by heart, Sarah was more of a 90s R&B connoisseur. Charlie watched movies religiously, and Sarah much preferred hiking and kayaking in her free time. They liked each other immediately.

In about a month, Sarah had moved her toothbrush next to Charlie’s in the blue plastic cup that stood at the corner of his bathroom counter. In eight months, the rest of her belongings followed suit, along with her cat, a portly olive-colored tabby named Diana – or Lady Di when she was feeling fancy. His bachelor’s apartment was suddenly filled with life and color. He didn’t mourn the loss of the Blink 182 poster that hung above the couch, and the Fargo poster above the TV stand looked so much more mature in its new simple black frame. Not only did his couch gain several eclectic decorative pillows, but the right back cushion gained a permanent Diana-shaped divot.

Each morning at 6am, Charlie woke to the sound of his alarm and Di’s nervous pawing at their bedroom door. He pulled himself from the warmth of their duvet and followed the bouncing cat into the kitchen – without fail, Sarah always rolled into the warm spot he left on the mattress the moment he got out of bed. The cat stretched her paws up Charlie’s leg and scolded him the few agonizing moments he started the coffee pot before filling her bowl and giving her fresh water. Before taking his shower, he would give Sarah a few gentle shakes to rouse her, and a few more when he was clean and dripping water.

He taught World History I at 8:00 on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and he liked to be in his office by 7:30 the latest. He liked to catch up on grading and sit in peaceful silence for a few minutes before he had to turn on the charm to make communications majors take interest in Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan. He knew that they were taking this class for their required history credit, but that didn't mean he wanted them playing games on their computers and zoning out for the few hours he had them every week. Sarah didn't have to be in her office until 9:00, and without his proddings Charlie was sure she would be rolling in at 9:20 every morning.

Sarah would arrive home shortly before Charlie most days, greeting him with a "Hello, handsome!" from the couch as he came through the front door, and Charlie would call back "Hello, stranger!" Neither of them could remember where this greeting came from, but it made them giggle every time. Though neither of them were cooks, they would either cobble together a meal or they would order food in, sitting side by side on the couch to eat together every night. They learned one another's favorite meals, and often didn't have to ask what the other wanted from any restaurant they were ordering from. He thrived on the domesticity and routine they had built together. Any deviance from this routine made him feel hollow and off throughout his day.

Chapter 5

As Charlie mounted the last flight of steps to his floor, he commended himself for how little he was huffing and puffing. The first few months he had lived in this building, he would have to stop to catch his breath when he reached the final landing, and he would curse himself for how out of shape he had become. After four months or so of climbing up and down four floors every day, he was finally taking note of how much easier it was. As he turned the corner from the stairwell into his hallway, Ruth was standing in the doorway of her apartment waiting for him. There were three apartments on this floor, and though he hadn't really gotten to know the family living in 3A, Ruth Fischer in 3B had made her presence known almost immediately.

The day he had moved in, she had whipped open her door and shouted "Some people are trying to sleep here!" as he and Mara had been trying to wrestle a bookshelf through his apartment door. It had been 3:00 in the afternoon, and she was wearing dirty purple slippers and a light blue house dress that accentuated the blue-green veins in her bare legs. Her hair was a rusty orange color that was anything but natural, and she always had a lit cigarette hanging out of her mouth even though the apartment listing had claimed it was a smoke-free property. Ruth had been living in 3B since 1972 though, and she would be in her goddamn grave before some hoity-toity hippie apartment manager would be telling her what she could do in her own apartment. Charlie really couldn't argue with that logic. Though Mara had, of course, been able to charm her immediately, she was always less than impressed with Charlie.

"You better get that cat of yours under control, it's been banging around in there all goddamn day,"

“Hi Ruth, I’m really sorry about that,” Charlie said, pressing his mouth into a tight line in an attempt to look apologetic. He looked down as he moved past her, making sure to hold his briefcase out in front of him so he wouldn’t brush her as he went to his door.

“I’m not tellin’ anyone your business, but if you don’t want the super to start knockin’ on your door, I’d put that thing in a cage – I don’t trust those ones down there,” she said, lowering her sandpapery voice and gesturing with her head towards apartment 3A at the opposite end of the hall. She waved her hand for Charlie to lean in, which he did. He grimaced at the smell of stale tobacco and minestrone that wafted from her. “They’re spies – they don’t open their door for nobody, they don’t wanna say ‘Hi, how are ya,’ but they’re watching and they report everything to the super.” Charlie glanced down the hallway as she said this, and thought he saw a shadow move under the door of 3A. “So much for being neighborly,” she said, giving Charlie a playful nudge on the shoulder with the hand that held her cigarette and letting loose a loud crack of laughter like a dry limb snapping off of an old tree.

“Thanks for the heads up, I’ll try to get things under control,” Charlie said, reaching out to open his apartment door one more time.

“Hey lemme ask, what the hell is that thing even doing in there? I swear I thought I heard it vacuuming or something today,” she said with another bark of laughter.

“Oh uh... sometimes I leave the TV on, you know – so the cat doesn’t get lonely during the day,” he said, before turning back towards his apartment door. Ruth made a face like she was contemplating his answer, and Charlie took the opportunity to let himself into his apartment.

“Have a nice evening, Ruth!”

He opened the door just enough for him to squeeze through, and quickly shut it behind him. He looked around the small entrance – there was no sign of her, but there were lines in the gray carpet that looked like those left behind by a lawn mower. He shucked off his sport coat and hung it on the hook next to the door before toeing off his brown leather boots. He walked down the short hallway into the living room and saw the vacuum standing in the center between the couch and the television, its cord snaking across the carpet but unplugged from the wall socket.

He felt her presence before he actually saw her. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood up and prickled, and he suddenly felt colder.

“You’re late, sugar, I’ve been missing you all day,” she said. While cold air came off of her in waves, her voice always sounded warm and slightly sultry.

“Hi, Dot,” Charlie said, turning around to face her. She looked just as she did in the picture, though her face was neutral. Her skin was pale and slightly translucent – she was a distinct presence in front of him, but he could still see the shape of the lamp against the wall behind her. She was wispy at her edges, and her white pumps made no indents in the carpet beneath her. “My class ran a little late tonight, I’m sorry.”

“Every day I cook and I clean for you, the least you could do is come home on time!” She said, raising her voice slightly. When she did this, Charlie felt the tendrils of cold reaching out further and stepped back from her slightly.

“You don’t have to do those things, Dot, I wish you wouldn’t honestly, my neighbors are starting to ask questions.”

“And why should I be kept a secret?” Though they were speaking at a normal volume, Charlie wondered if Ruth could hear the two of them talking. Charlie could certainly hear her at 10 P.M. watching reruns of Judge Judy every night.

“Because you’re —“ Charlie stopped himself. Because she was a... whatever she was? A ghost or a spirit, if there was any difference between the two. Did Charlie even know what she was? While he didn’t think that she would try to harm him in any way, the fact that she could manipulate the vacuum cleaner and turn on the stove made him question what else she was capable of doing. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, lowering his voice to a more soothing tone and stepping towards her again. “I won’t be late again.” She stood her ground a moment, her face hard, before she seemed to relax and smiled at him.

“That’s what I like to hear, sugar.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, and Charlie closed his eyes and tried not to flinch at the stabbing cold that accompanied it. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone. He didn’t know where she went when he didn’t see her, if she just ceased to exist, or if she was always somewhere, watching him.

Chapter 6

“Yes, Alexander was pretty much a big toddler – or at least that’s what some historians choose to believe.” Charlie’s joke was met with yawns and some tired laughs from those sitting closest to the front of the lecture hall. It was his last class of the day, and he could always tell the point at which he was starting to lose the room. While the classroom was fairly small, it had more than twice the amount of desks shoved into it than students. It was an elective history course that didn’t start until 5:00 P.M., and as a brand new professor, Charlie had only been able to entice thirteen students to take the class. Several of these students seemed to consider at least one of the two classes a week optional, so the room always felt fairly empty.

“While he made his way down the Levant, most of these Persian-ruled cities surrendered to Alex pretty quickly, except for tiny little Tyre right over here,” Charlie said, pointing to the map projected on the wall with the end of a dry-erase marker “Tyre was essentially thumbing their noses at the Macedonians army, thinking they were safe from foot soldiers who couldn’t possibly make it over this one kilometer stretch of sea, which –” Charlie was cut off by a soft knock at the door.

“Come in!” he called through the closed door, pausing his lecture to turn towards the door and reprimand whichever student decided to come with less than ten minutes left, but the door remained closed. “Anyway,” he continued, “this made Alexander so incensed, that–” There was another soft knock at the door. Some of the students craned their necks to see if they could see someone standing in the narrow pane in the door. Charlie sighed deeply and looked at the ceiling in frustration, before turning and striding the few steps to the door and whipping it open.

There was no one in the brightly lit hallway beyond the door. He leaned out of the doorway and looked to either side, but only saw a couple of people milling about at the very end of the hall where there was a small lobby filled with vending machines.

“So the Tyrians basically thought they were untouchable because they were a little more than half a mile from the shore, and in the 6th century –” There was another knock. “Ok,” Charlie said, flippantly throwing the marker he had been holding onto the desk to his right and whipping open the door again. As he expected, there was no one there once again, and the class laughed aloud as Charlie called down the hallway “Come up with a better prank!” which probably confused the classes behind the other closed doors that lined the hallway. Charlie returned to his place at the front of the classroom, determined to at least finish his train of thought before the end of class. He opened his mouth with a bemused smile, but any thoughts about the siege of Tyre quickly left his head when he made eye contact with a familiar face at the very back of the classroom. Charlie jolted backwards and bumped his hip on the metal lip underneath the whiteboard. Dot sat smiling at a desk like an eager pupil, her hands clasped in front of her on top of the small wooden desk.

“Professor?” a young man two rows back asked, looking at him with concern. Charlie opened and closed his mouth like a trout, trying to make a sound before his brain caught back up with him. He glanced back to where Dot had been sitting, but she was already gone. The girl with the high blonde ponytail that had been sitting next to her shivered and pulled her olive green knit cardigan more tightly around her, but did not look up or notice the new student that had just been beside her seconds before.

“You guys can head out,” he finally said, running his hands through his hair. “Just read and be prepared for discussions next week. Have a good weekend guys.” He quickly grabbed his

books and his briefcase off of the desk and was through the door before any of the students had the chance to ask any questions. He power-walked down the hallway, not wanting to arouse too much suspicion, and frantically pressed the door-closed button on the elevator.

He arrived at his office, his hands trembled and he cursed to himself as he struggled with his key in the lock that he still hadn't gotten the hang of. His breath was coming in short, rapid bursts as he finally got the door to open and he nearly fell over himself trying to get into the office and slam the door shut before any possible passers-by could glimpse inside. His office was the size of a broom closet, and very well could have been one at some point. He had learned from the other members of the history department that it had belonged to the reclusive professor he had replaced, who over a thirty year career had filled the office with old newspapers, stacks of yellowing textbooks, notebooks, and many other forms of professorial detritus. The last thing Charlie wanted was to become the crazy person who came to take the place of the resident loony.

He stood in the dim office for a moment before he flipped the light switch next to the door, illuminating the bare bulb in the ceiling. At the back of the office there was a small window that overlooked the quad at the center of campus, which was cast in deep orange as the sun had begun to set. His desk had been against the left hand wall but was now pushed so that it was directly under the window so that back would be to the door when he sat there. His desk lamp had been pulled across the desk when it was moved, and now sat precariously on the corner of the desk with the cord stretched tight from where it was still plugged into the wall.

"Dot?" he said quietly to the empty room. There was no answer. He walked towards the window and saw that her photograph was lying at the center of the desk with the small red pin he had poked through the top still attached, and he wasn't surprised.

“Hi, sugar,” she said, close behind him, making him jump. He whipped around, facing her. “Are you upset with me?”

Charlie had brought the photograph to his office and tacked it to the corkboard above his desk. It was as if he had invited her to come to his place of work and complicate things further for him. He had arrived home one evening shortly after his conversation with Ruth about his “cat” and found a note attached to the door with a piece of scotch tape. The note was warning him that he would be receiving a random visit from the landlord to ensure that there were no animals or extra tenants living in apartment 3C that Charlie was not paying for. He had torn the letter from the door and shot an accusatory glance at the ever-fastened door of apartment 3A. He panicked, immediately picturing Dot appearing and trying to play the gracious host to the landlord and getting Charlie thrown out of his apartment. It occurred to him then that Dot never followed Charlie out of the apartment, and that perhaps Dot could only go wherever her photograph was. If Dot was attached to the photo and never left the apartment, Charlie hoped that the same rules would apply to his locked office door.

“You can’t do this, Dot, not here,” he said, his voice a harsh whisper.

“Do what, darling? I was just paying you a visit– I like seeing you at work.” She smiled at him and her pale eyes seemed to sparkle with affection.

“Well don’t, don’t pay me a visit!” Charlie was growing angry. “Don’t move my furniture around, don’t go waltzing around the building, and don’t just fucking appear in my classes!”

How had his life come to this? He had a normal life with friends, a social life, and now he was arguing with a translucent woman from a photograph.

Perhaps sensing Charlie's anger, Dot began to get angry as well. Charlie could feel the room growing colder, cold enough for tiny goosebumps to sprout across his arms under his long-sleeved button down shirt. Charlie blinked and suddenly she was right in his face and he stumbled backwards against the desk, causing the lamp to tumble to the floor and its bulb to shatter. "All I do is help you, and this is how you repay me?" Her voice seemed to echo around the room. A row of books came tumbling down from the bookshelf against the wall to Charlie's right.

"Dot, I—" Charlie's mouth was dry – he felt genuinely afraid of her for the first time. "I'm sorry, I just—"

"You're not sorry, you're just like everyone else!" she yelled, before disappearing, causing the lightbulb above Charlie's head to pop. Charlie slumped back into his desk chair, his heart hammering against his chest. What in God's name had just happened?

Charlie collected himself for a moment, before there was a soft knock at the door. He stared at the door for a moment, waiting, before he heard a key in the lock. He jumped from his chair to open the door .

"Everything okay in there?" It was one of the evening janitors, Jim. "Thought I heard a commotion."

"Oh hi, yeah," Charlie looked over his shoulder into the tiny disheveled office. "The bulb blew and I ended up knocking right into the bookshelf in the dark," he said with a nervous chuckle.

“Sheesh, it’s goddamn freezing in there,” Jim said, rubbing his hands on his arms for emphasis. “There’s gotta be something wrong with the thermostat for this floor.” Charlie agreed, and Jim left to go to the basement and check the temperature controls.

Charlie slowly put his office back together, feeling drained. He picked up his broken lamp and the shards of glass he could find and threw them in the plastic waste paper basket under his desk, and placed the textbooks that had fallen back in their respective spots on the shelf. Dot never reappeared that night, and the whole building felt ominously quiet. He finally grabbed his coat from the hook behind his door, and stood looking at the photograph still sitting face up on the desk. He debated leaving it there before finally going back over and picking it up, slipping it in his pants pocket before leaving the office and locking the door.