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FIRST EXCERPT:
Ophelia Meets the City

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One August afternoon, in the midst of the hottest years ever recorded, with the nation crashing through wars, the stock market climbing like Icarus toward the sun, and the City funneling its poor people inland as it closed and demolished the last of the projects, Ophelia got off the Red Line elevated train at the Thorndale stop, squinted in the sunlight, and kicked her foot against the platform to free a stone from her sandal.

“Home at last?” she asked herself.

She certainly hoped so. There was so much here, and all of it everywhere: dozens of dark smears from murdered bubble-gum on each sidewalk square, hundreds of quartz-bright sidewalk squares lassoing each block, and thousands of glowing, sweltering blocks throughout the City with its millions of people.

To the west, between the tracks and Broadway, Ophelia made out a video store, a laundromat, and an internet café, all noisy with activity at four in the afternoon. To the east, between the tracks and the lake, she saw a canyon of tenement apartments—mostly brick, fronted with stoic windows, several stories high—going out for three

blocks before the real high rises rose from the beach, blue and white and glass and concrete, almost unimaginably tall. Their heights arrowed sunlight back toward Ophelia, hitting her from all sides. And here, too, she saw people coming and going in the glow of late summer.

“Please,” she said. “Let this be my home.”

But who was going to answer her? Not the smartly dressed Black men talking in low voices, laughing softly, leaning out over the tracks to look for the next train. Not the old Polish woman in the headscarf murmuring her rosary to herself. Not the train attendant patrolling the platform. Or the sun, the steel high-rises, the brick tenements, the video store, or the laundromat.

Since nobody would answer Ophelia, she descended the stairs, passed through the station, and went out into the City.



Five minutes later, Ophelia stood in the lobby of her new apartment building, buzzing for the super to come down and give her the keys. The building stood near the corner of Kenmore and Ardmore, just one block from Sheridan Road and the lake. At eight stories high, it was the tallest of its neighbors, though still dwarfed by the towers just a block away. A white stucco lobby. Moll carpet. Plastic plants standing in shell-shaped alcoves cut into the wall. Nothing fancy, but with a breeze coursing down the hall from an open fire escape, Ophelia's new home felt luxurious.

The super arrived and eyed her new tenant suspiciously. Ophelia wasn't tall, but she was so skinny, especially about her face, that it created an illusion of height. When she looked in the mirror, her prominent cheekbones reminded her sometimes of a skull and sometimes of a praying mantis. Ophelia was white, pale even, with fine brown hair that wisped gently about her shoulders. She generally considered herself a fairly okay-looking person, whatever her other defects might be. Still, she knew wrinkles and exhaustion were about the corners of her eyes. Anyone could see this. Everyone noticed. She was only in her early 20s but seldom got carded for alcohol.

The super frowned but must have decided Ophelia was harmless because the woman hit the button in the wall, and the elevator dinged in reply. The super pulled open the accordion gate, and as they rose through the building, Ophelia watched each

floor sinking out of view. She tried to ignore the stench of stale piss. They got off at the seventh door. The woman fumbled with the keys, swearing under her breath in some Slavic language, and opened the door to Ophelia's apartment.

She'd seen Tasia's pictures, but they didn't do justice to the place. The hallway opened into a long white living room with a white carpet and a bay window looking out to the east. Slivers of blue water peeked in from between the lakeside towers. An arch to the left led into a slender kitchen, all Formica and old appliances, while another hall exited the back of the living room, passing the first bedroom and the bathroom and ending at a second bedroom with plenty of closets and built-in shelves along the way. Ophelia spotted a cockroach crawling across the stovetop and another in the back bedroom. Still, there was something so happy and fierce about the light and the skylike linearity of the lake that hope welled up in her chest anyway. This was fine. No, glorious! She'd deal with the roaches later. Maybe after Tasia arrived.

As Ophelia carried out her inspection, the super stood in the living room with her hands on her hips, waiting, but there wasn't much else for Ophelia to do: everything had already been settled.

Several months ago, she had told Tasia that she was going to off herself before the end of summer if she didn't get out of Rockville. "Let's move to the City," Tasia had said. "Get jobs. Get a cheap apartment. Hit the beach. Hit the good stuff." The joke came up several times before the friends realized that they took the idea seriously. Even though Tasia'd gotten her Associates from the community college, she seemed stuck in dead-end cashier's jobs and was dying of boredom. Rockville was killing her slowly.

And killing me quickly, Ophelia thought. She'd only been half kidding about surviving the summer. So, before she knew it, the two were creating profiles on Monster.com, Googling neighborhoods, and emailing old friends from high school who had moved to the City. Tasia drove out one weekend, picked up some job applications, toured the apartment on Kenmore, and signed the lease. She'd gotten in on a special promo: no security deposit required. Ophelia had faxed her signature. They were in.

But if Tasia had set the whole thing up, she also needed another week to tie up the last loose ends at Spencer's Gifts. "My manager got caught stealing inventory," she'd said. "They want to promote me. I haven't broken the news to them yet." So, Tasia stayed behind while Ophelia went ahead with her sleeping bag and a backpack full of cleaning supplies. To get the new place ready. To make it homey.

Ophelia thought back to the 4th of July weekend when she'd lain in Tasia's bed with Tasia on top of her and Rockville's fireworks bursting out the windows. The taste

of shandy on Tasia's lips and her sturdy weight pressed down. How all the wretchedness and sorrow of all those years had collapsed that one drunken night. So ... were they friends now? Roommates? Lovers? Friends-with-benefits? With all the planning for their big move, this was one thing they hadn't discussed. Ophelia wasn't sure if it complicated things or simplified them.

"Okay?" asked the super.

"Thanks," said Ophelia. "It's wonderful."

"Okay."

As if on cue, a dull thudding sound—four-to-the-floor with the bass bass bass—started thrumming down from the apartment overhead. The eighth-floor penthouse.

"Uhhhhh," groaned the super. "They never stop."

She let herself out, leaving Ophelia with the music.



It took Ophelia only a short time to unpack. She chose the second bedroom, near the back. It didn't have a view of the lake, but it got more sun, and she could see the long sweep of high-rises following the shore and rising toward their downtown crescendo. Since she didn't have a dresser or bed, Ophelia stacked her clothes in neat piles along the wall, unrolled her sleeping bag in the middle of the floor, and crushed a cockroach with her shoe before it could scurry for cover. Then, with the music still thudding overhead, she shouldered her backpack and left the building.

Ophelia found a supermarket just past the Thorndale stop on the other side of the tracks and spent the next half-hour in a reverie, pushing a shopping cart up and down each aisle and wondering what the next month held in store. I could apply to be a cashier here, she thought. I could apply to be a teller at that bank across the street. I wonder if I could apply to work for the El trains. I'll need to make money somewhere! She didn't worry a whole lot about what she did or didn't need to buy. She had a crisp hundred in her wallet—a parting gift from her grandpa and some keychain pepper spray—but this was just the first of many shopping trips. Right now, she just needed to make it through the next week. She bought some Bisquick, some eggs, and milk. Instant coffee. Bananas and apples. Bread and peanut butter. A dollar box of cookies. A six-

pack of cheap beer. Paper plates and plastic forks. A tall can of Raid. A small pillow. It ate up half of her money, but it was enough. She was halfway home before realizing she had nothing to cook the pancakes in or boil water for coffee. I can go back tomorrow, she thought. The peanut butter and beer will keep me going for tonight.

When Ophelia made it back, the sun was lower in the sky, and shadows covered the streets below. The thudding upstairs continued. She set her keys and phone on the counter, massaged her sore arms, and noticed that she'd missed a call from Tasia.

"Tasia?" she said when her friend answered.

Tasia gasped. "I didn't think you'd call back so quick!" she said.

"Why wouldn't I call back quick? I was carrying groceries. What's up?"

"I'm bursting! I'm bursting! I can't lie! I can't come to the City with you!"

"What?"

"I was going to turn down the manager job, O, but that was before they made the offer. I didn't know it came with such a huge raise. They're gonna pay me twelve an hour. That's, like, twice what I make now! No way I will get a job in the City that pays that much. And you know how expensive it is there ... have you seen the gas prices yet?! We didn't think this through, O. I can't move now. It would be crazy. I mean, it would be fucking stupid. I mean, I'm gonna get fucking health care!"

"Slow down, Taze. We have been planning this for months!"

"I know, I know, I'm so sorry, it was my mistake too. It was just a dream, you know? It was a silly dream. A summer thing."

"But our names are on the lease!"

"No security deposit, remember? So, we're out that first month, but I'll make that up in like a month. Maybe two. Point is, I'll make it up quick! You could get out. It was my fuckup. I signed the lease. We just walk away. Hey, I'm the manager here now. I can hire you. Think how fun that'll be. We can work at the mall together. Lunch at the food court. You know you love them burritos!"

Ophelia's heart was sinking. It was already in the basement laundry room, and maybe it wouldn't settle until it reached the bottom of the lake.

"I don't know, Taze," she said. "I was ... I was really excited about this. For us. I ... went shopping."

“Oh, shit. How much money do you spend on us, O? It’s okay, I can pay you back. Now I’m, like, rolling in money! Compared to what I have been. You’ll come back to Rockville, right?”

Ophelia looked helplessly out the window. A seagull sailed down the street, caught between cool breezes from the lake and the warmer currents wafting off the brick buildings.

“I don’t know, Taze. I don’t know anything right now. You shocked me. I mean, you surprised me.” She took another long pause. “I have to think about it.”

“I understand. I’m sooo sorry to just drop this. But I’d be crazy not to, you know?”

“I know. I get it.”

“Call me when you make up your mind. I’d love to hook you up.”

Would you love to hook up?! Ophelia cried out in her brain. What does this mean? What did that mean? What does anything mean?

“I will,” she said. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Hey, nothing else, we’re paid up through the end of September. Take a vacation in the City before you come back!”



It wasn’t anything, Ophelia thought. It couldn’t have been much. She was drunk, and I guess I was desperate.

Am desperate.

Ophelia went into the kitchen and took another look at the food she had bought. She probably had enough money left over for a pot and a pan, but she wasn’t sure that would leave enough for public transit, and if she wanted to get a job, she’d need some train fare. She decided that she could boil water for coffee in a pan, leaving her enough to take the train downtown for a week. That’s ridiculous, she thought. Who lives like this? If I go back home, I’ve got a sure thing at the mall. I can go back to Grandpa and Grandma’s. Maybe save up. Maybe try again in a year. Or two. Maybe Tasia and I get a thing going ... if she wasn’t just drunk. If she really meant it. A car on the street below

started honking. The honking continued, and Ophelia realized the driver was waiting for someone to come out of another apartment. She was drunk. She didn't mean it. There's no way I can stay here, and there's nothing for me to go back to there, either.

Between the thudding bass and the car honking, Ophelia was starting to get a headache. She wanted to bang against the ceiling with a broom but didn't have one. She opened a beer with the bathroom towel bar, using the trick her brother had taught her. She shotgunned the beer, then had a second and a third, and then she was halfway done, so she went to the bathroom for a pee and drank the rest of the beers on the toilet. By then, she was getting dizzy, but at least drunkenness was a temporary relief. The honking had finally stopped, but the bass thudded on. Ophelia went into her bedroom and shut the door, thinking it might muffle the sound, but it didn't. An elevated train of alcohol slammed into her skull. She giggled sadly and reeled. Ophelia knew she was just as drunk as she'd been when she'd tumbled into bed with Tasia, but she was all alone this time. The walls and windows swirled around her, the bile danced in her stomach, and her ears popped like fireworks.

“Shut up!” Ophelia said and fell asleep.