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SECOND EXCERPT:
Ophelia Meets the Shark

HOLLYWOOD
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Cascades of shimmering light. Waterfalls of light.

Blue light, purple light, iridescent, black light, effervescent, bubbling through her dreams, like the time she had been among the fireworks with Tasia and then again, the time she had seen the fireworks with her mom and her grandma and her grandpa when she was little, on a sloping green lawn back in Rockville. A drench of honeysuckle. Dragonflies hovering like miniature helicopters. It doesn't have to be a bad life back there, she spoke to herself, hovering above the earth like a still-winged angel. There is beauty and people you love. You could have some of the things you want. You could be happy sometimes.

Ophelia woke in gray light. An hour had passed or two or more. The music upstairs was softer now, a gentler track, a more leisurely rhythm. The bedroom had stopped its carousel, but the headache hadn't. I haven't left, it seemed to say. I'm just getting comfortable. Soon, Ophelia knew, the ache in her temples would spread across her skull. Would squeeze with fingers of pain. She got up, opened the window, and

leaned out to get a look to the west. The sun hadn't set yet. Not quite. But the buildings were tall enough that their shadows stretched long into the east.

Ophelia fished around in her backpack until she found a sandwich bag with some Advil. Popped them and drank deeply from the tap. Wiped her brow. Thought about taking a shower, but she didn't have towels. Something else I forgot, she thought. Fucking idiot. For a minute, she strolled from room to room in the darkening apartment, and then she found herself out in the hall, pushing the button, getting on the elevator, getting off on the first floor, and walking out into the evening.

If the neighborhood had been busy when she'd arrived, it was swarming now. Dozens of sedans squeezed up the one-way streets, each looking for the single spot nobody had noticed, "goddammit" ringing against the fire hydrants that stood proudly upon their yellow-painted curb strips.

Ophelia found herself back up on Thorndale, walking under the El tracks, back to the supermarket, buying herself two tallboys of Steel Reserve. No need to save my money if I'm just heading home anyway, she thought. Am I heading home? I guess so. I'm spending all my money. Then, cradling the precious paper bag against her stomach as if it were an infant, she made her way back under the tracks. She didn't return to the apartment this time but kept on past Kenmore and Sheridan. She kept finding herself. Every moment, Ophelia looked at herself in light of the surroundings she had audaciously tried to claim. This spectacular city. Its density. Its possibility. Who did I think I was? Whatever I thought, I'm obviously the town idiot here.

Now, she found herself standing on the edge of a desolate, shell-crusted beach. The signs called it:

HOLLYWOOD BEACH

She'd come to see the sunset, but Ophelia couldn't spot it anywhere. Then she noticed the towers' long shadows reaching ahead of her and over the water and remembered the obvious: The lake is to the east. She opened one of her tallboys and took a deep drink. Fuck it. She continued onto the beach.

It was larger than Ophelia had expected. Because she'd only caught a few small glimpses between the big buildings, she assumed that each block had its own tiny strip of sand pressed between the heights. Instead, she discovered a broad sandy stretch

running south for many blocks, banked against high-rises, and vanishing into the blue water. A few teenagers and younger kids scrambled over an outcropping of rocks that rose from the shallows, marking the northerly end of the beach. Out in the water, a lifeguard sat in a clunky rowboat, yelling through a megaphone at a handful of swimmers who didn't stay within a stone's throw of the shore. He won't have to worry about me, Ophelia thought. I didn't even pack a swimsuit. Why bother? She couldn't swim. She took another gulp, wondering if the City's cops were as lax about public alcohol as they were in Rockville. It doesn't matter, she thought. They can ticket me if they like. I'll be gone soon. She strained further, wondering if she could see the farther shore of the lake, but there was no way. This lake was huge. One of the hugest in the world. She might as well have been standing at the edge of the ocean.

Ophelia made her way south, sipping as she went, the shadows lengthening over the purpling water, ambered chandeliers winking on in the high-rises, and a small crowd of men in speedos and designer sunglasses clustered in front of her. They were just now starting to pack up for the night, beers and volleyballs, striped blankets and umbrellas, and Ophelia realized that she was the only woman here and that none of the men seemed to be a decade younger or older than her. Is this a gay beach? she wondered. There were a couple gay bars in Rockville, but she hadn't ever heard of a gay beach before. Somewhere behind the buildings, the sun had finally gone down, and the fire of orange overhead became blue bruises. The wind off the water picked up with a rush, scattering sand rippling umbrellas, and the last of the beachgoers turned their backs on the lake, laughing as they went.

Ophelia had reached the end. A rocky break wall rose from the water, with grassy hillocks and small groves of trees replacing the sand, and a few concrete piers thrust out, dividing the choppy waves. The nearest of the piers extended farther than the rest with a steel turret at the end, topped by a winking red beacon. By now, the beach was almost entirely empty. The lifeguard had come ashore and lashed his rowboat to a concrete post.

Ophelia walked onto the pier, sidled around the beacon, and sat with her back against it, her legs hanging out over the lake. She couldn't see the bottom, but the waves were large, forbidding. Ophelia didn't like deep water, and she figured if she fell in here, she was as good as dead. But the cables and concrete reassured her, and she tilted her head back for a long, deep drink.

What happened? Ophelia asked herself. What went wrong? Besides Tasia's totally predictable change of heart when she realized she'd be able to make more money doing

something easy and natural. She'd have to uproot everything. That's not a problem for me. There's nothing back there. I was ready to leave. I knew I wouldn't change my mind.

And that reflection went halfway to answering her question: It wasn't a matter of what had gone wrong. Rather, nothing ever seemed to go right, and Ophelia had stupidly imagined that this time might be different. An unpleasant thought. Unpleasant thoughts deserved to be murdered with big gulps. She tilted her head back and took in more Steel Reserve, its buzzing, hoppy bite sizzling and burning deliciously down her throat. She swallowed, crumpled the can, and hurled it into the water.

Ophelia wasn't sure at what point things had been the most fucked. She'd run away a few times as a kid, but back then, she was just aping her parents, who were always running away themselves, leaving her and her brother alone for hours, sometimes days in a row, with peanut butter in the pantry and beer in the fridge. When she was nine, she ran away from her dad again, but he was gone too, and her grandparents got the cops involved. Two weeks, a CPS intervention, and an ankle monitor later, Ophelia was living with her grandparents, and things should have gotten better from there. But the drama never stopped. Another unpleasant thought, so Ophelia cracked open the second tallboy. I have to go back for more, her thoughts slurred. I'll try sipping this time.

She tried to memorize the water before her the way it was now. Mostly dark but not yet entirely stripped of daylight. The windows behind her fired silver bullets of illumination into the choppy waves. Ophelia saw a couple of distant sailboats, and these seemed to be making for the shore. She took a sip. There had been the part where the city was falling apart, and they closed all the high schools except one. There had been her hookup with Andre, the pains that followed, and a supposedly secret trip to a clinic that ended when she discovered her grandparents parked by the curb, glaring at her through the haze of exhaust. Their doors were still open, but the warmth was all gone, so Ophelia had dropped out of school and moved in with some friends up on Olympia Street.

There was plenty of the next few years that she didn't remember. Plenty that she did remember but tried not to think about. Plenty of adrenaline from those days. Alcohol and dopamine were purchased dose-by-dose through barter and charm, and once by pulling hair, screaming, and ripping her friend's back to shreds.

That was one friendship that had died forever and that certainly deserved more than a sip. Ophelia took a long, long pull. The water looked darker now.

But she had seen, some nights, on the couch or on the floor, where her life was heading, in the footsteps of her dad and her brother. Their roads smelled like mildew

and mothballs. Felt haunted like a storm sleeping in her bones, threatening, bringing the ache. So, one day, she enrolled in school again and got her GED. She got a job at a party store and worked at Cherry On Top in the summer. She moved back in with her grandparents, and if the old warmth had left for good, so had the anger. Ophelia's life wasn't happy, but it wasn't miserable. She even got her old bedroom back. She started to reconnect with old friends. The ones she'd left behind. Brit and Lacey and Tasha and Tasia. And that summer, Tasia had said they should move to the City together, and Ophelia had thought, she had dared to believe: I don't know. Maybe? Maybe this time?

But even if she could stay now, she wasn't sure why she should.

The City seemed less magical now that Ophelia knew she wouldn't share it with Tasia.

She lifted the can for another sip, but from the corner of her eye, she saw something moving in the water. She lowered the can. Is it close? she wondered. Is it far out? It was a dark shape but surrounded by luminosity. By many points of scattered, amber light. She climbed shakily to her feet to get a better look.

The thing was enormous and far off, but it was too dark by now for Ophelia to gauge the distance precisely. The water receded, revealing sand and stones just beneath the waves. Out toward the horizon, Ophelia made out an oval shape, dark, with a sail upon its back. For a moment, Ophelia wondered if it could have been a submarine, impossible as that seemed. Then, she realized it was much larger than a submarine and wondered if it could have been a freighter, even though the shape was all wrong.

The shape moved and answered her question for her. The shape surfaced more fully, revealing itself as more of a bullet shape or a torpedo, and it opened its eyes and its mouth. Its eyes glowed like fire and lava, its teeth glinted like sharpened spears, and Ophelia saw the snout, gills, dorsal fin, and tail shimmering and glittering. The truth was obvious, and there was no other way to interpret it: it was a tremendous shark.

The shark seemed to grin where it rested, miles out into the lake, its bright eyes fixed in position as it studied the twinkling City and Ophelia standing paralyzed beneath the winking beacon, on the pier, on the beach.

The creature opened its mouth wide, wider, closed, swiveled a little, and submerged.

Its dorsal fin sank last of all.

Ophelia continued to stand, shivering in the wind. Did that just happen? she wondered. Did I just see that? *A shark in the lake? As large as a mountain?* Did I just –

And then the wake came. Massive waves, six-, eight-, ten-foot high, raged in from where the shark had submerged and roared against the pier. Ophelia screamed, dropped her beer, and ran back toward the shore as fast as she could, her legs soaked, her hair wild, the waves snarling behind her. Once she reached land, she kept running: up the grass and up the beach and between the buildings and across the streets and into the building on Kenmore, where she took the smelly elevator back up to the seventh floor and ran into her curtainless room and knelt down on the floor and wrapped the sleeping bag around her head and tried to shut her eyes against the vision of the monster. But she could still see it, sitting there, staring at the City, staring at her, hiding its intentions, giant and silent and all alone.