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Opening extract from
The Moment Collector

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A key is buried under the front stairs of 208 Water Street. Scorched on one side, was it in a fire? Who lost it, and when?

For me, it's a clue, a piece of the past. Because the yard of this house is a graveyard of moments, and everything left behind is a reminder: sand paper, a bracelet, a love note, some letters, a match, a movie stub, a postcard. All of Door County is a burial ground. All of the world. And I am here to dig.

It seems that this town has an appetite for the young; it swallows them whole, right into its very dirt.

A key is buried under the front stairs on Water Street. This is my work. This is the one thing I have to do. I am looking for the things that are buried.

ONE

The Larsens first read about the murders on a mid-September evening, Maggie's senior year of high school, the day they moved to Gill Creek. It was the first time it began to feel like something was looming near them, a little bit off on the horizon. It was also the first day Maggie saw Pauline Boden. She was standing at the lake's edge and leaning against a boulder, staring out at the water, thin as a stork.

"Someone your age," her mom crooned, pointing across the vast, overgrown field that separated their house from the lake, to the thin white figure on the bank. Maggie looked to her mom in exasperation – they were both lugging their suitcases across the yard and out of breath but even so, her mom hadn't given up her relentless mission to point out the positives.

Maggie dropped her box of linens in front of the porch stairs and surveyed their new house, thinking her mother had her mission cut out for her.

Her uncle had described the property, which they'd inherited years ago, as "rustic." In pictures, it had looked run-down. In person, it was closer to "ramshackle" or "derelict". They'd never even bothered to come look at it, always planning to sell it when they got around to it – but things had been different then.

Maggie stood with her hands on her hips and tried to catch her breath, sweat dripping down her temples. They'd already hauled a bunch of boxes onto the front porch, but hadn't even started on the furniture in the U-haul yet. They couldn't afford movers, so she tried to look like she didn't mind the work. Now, she pulled out her cell phone to see if she had any texts, but there was no signal. She looked around for some kind of hill where she might do better, but the land was flat and low to the water. She felt a pang for her friends back home.

Mrs. Larsen rested her hands on her hips too, and stared around at the yard. "It'll take some work, but it really is beautiful. Don't you think, Maggles?"

Truthfully, the property *was* beautiful, in a shabby, romantic, old-fashioned way. The house, a yellowing, formerly white Victorian, looked ancient and barely livable. "Built in the late 1886," her dad had said. It slumped on a wide expanse of tall, browning late summer grass that stretched to the shore of Lake Michigan, under an expanse of endless blue sky. The grass was alive with grasshoppers twirling from one landing spot to the next, and already Maggie could hear the crickets coming awake. Crickets were a novelty. She'd only ever lived in Chicago, falling asleep to city sounds almost every night for as long as she could remember.

Making the spot even more serene was the fact that

the adjoining property – the one that must belong to the girl on the beach – was spectacular. You could tell where one lot ended and the other began by the deeply green, manicured lawn that started at the property line. A majestic, gleaming white house stood set back from the road, just at the lake’s edge and about a hundred yards from the Larsens’ new front door, partially obscured by a thin forest of pine trees.

“It’s great,” Maggie said, giving her mom her best can-do attitude smile. This was her permanent facial expression these days, whenever she looked at her parents. She wanted them to know that – whatever problems they were dealing with right now, *she* wasn’t going to be one of them.

“Have you seen your room?” her dad asked, heaving his way up the stairs with a box of books in his arms, his balding head glistening in the sun.

Maggie shook her head. She hadn’t even gone inside yet, dropping boxes on the porch though her parents had gone in several times already. It was her way of putting off the inevitable of a new home and a new life she didn’t want. But now, she smiled as if she were delighted and followed him inside.

The interior was covered with a thin layer of dust, and the floors were slightly bowed in the middle, everything wooden and antique and distressed looking. The kitchen appliances were mustard yellow and seemed to be a combination of a seventies renovation

and even older appliances, as if the seventies had vomited all over the fifties. Little artifacts of previous residents lay scattered here and there: a domino on the kitchen floor, a coupon stuck to the refrigerator by a Mickey Mouse magnet. Maggie continued through the kitchen into the living room, which looked out across a crumbling deck toward the blue shimmer of the lake. Turning left toward another open archway, she walked through a web which she had to pick out of her mouth, then moved on down the hall to the stairs.

She laid her hand on the wobbly bannister and creaked her way up to the second floor. To her left, she found what she instantly knew would be her room: a nook with a slanted ceiling and a large window that looked out on the grass and across it toward the white house, with a small yellowing radiator against one wall. It felt like a hideaway from the world and smelled like trapped summer air, flowery and dusty.

It made her think of the Miss Dashwoods in *Sense & Sensibility*, downgrading to a cottage by the sea. She could make the best of it, like they had. And if life ended up being as underwhelming here as she expected it would...well, it was only a year anyway – then graduation, then *real* life. Her best friend Jacie was fond of saying Maggie knew all she knew about life from reading about it rather than living it – Jacie had a habit of telling Maggie what her shortcomings were.

She walked back downstairs and onto the back deck,

where her parents were taking a breather on an ancient porch swing that looked like it would collapse any moment. Her dad had bought a local paper on their way through town, and he handed her the piece he was done with already, which held the front page and the very back. “We’re taking a ten-minute break,” he said. “Absorb some local flavor.” He smiled at her – his apologetic *I’m sorry we’re putting you through this smile*. Maggie took the paper – not because she wanted to read it, but because she wanted to be obliging.

She sat on the top step of the porch and flipped through the back pages first (a habit), reading about a fishing captain who restored old ships, and the latest public appearances of the Princess of the Cherry Festival, and a fender bender in Sturgeon Bay. She and her dad exchanged an amused smile, the paper was so unbelievably quaint.

But on the front page was a story about a teenager who’d died in Whitefish Harbor, four towns over. (Maggie remembered driving past it once they’d arrived on the peninsula). She’d been found drowned in the lake, floating face down, with no signs of struggle, and the police were trying to figure out whether it was a suicide, an accident, or something more sinister.

“Anything interesting, you two?” her mom asked.

“A girl died,” Maggie said to her mom. “Someone my age. They think she may have killed herself.”

Mrs. Larsen put her hand to her throat, looking

slightly sickened. “Oh how awful. Her poor parents.”

Maggie looked up from her paper and saw the skinny girl along the shore finally turning and walking toward her house.

“Probably pretty unheard of in a small town like that,” her dad said. “What a shock.”

“Well,” her mom said after letting out a long sigh. “The sun’ll be down in about an hour. No rest for the wicked. Let’s get the rest of this stuff inside.”

Maggie stood without a complaint. Her mom always said she was the world’s only teenager who never complained about anything.

TWO

Maggie awoke the next morning to the distant sound of hammering in the woods. She sat up, stretched, pressed her face against the window and looked down across the field toward the trees with the sun warming her face, then got out of bed.

Her dad was on the back porch, his hands on his hips, looking around in confusion. It only took a moment to see why. The railings of their crumbling porch were covered in vases of wildflowers and boxes of...Maggie stepped closer to examine one...Earl Grey tea. There had to be at least twenty boxes of tea, covering every available surface of the railing. Running her hands along some of the flowers, she finally came to a white envelope taped to one of the vases. It was a blank card, inside it said *Welcome to Water Street*.

She and her dad exchanged an amused, bewildered smile.

“Friendly,” her dad said.

“And weird,” Maggie added.

There was no indication who’d left the note.

“Well, hopefully they’ll come by again,” her dad said. Then yawned. “What a place,” he said. “We made it through our first night in Port Des Morts.” He widened his eyes in mock spookiness.

An hour south of here, Maggie knew from studying the map they had in the car, the peninsula of Door County forked off from Wisconsin like a hitchhiker's thumb into the lake, isolating itself. The whole county – according to the guide books her dad had piled onto her lap in the car – was full of unspoiled marshes and pebbly beaches, low grey rock cliffs along the slate blue waterline, piney forests, old lighthouses, ancient drive-ins and old-fashioned motels. Below it, the cities left the peninsula alone, outside of the summer months when tourists poured in to rent summer cottages and eat their body weight in fudge and cheese curds. But the most interesting thing she'd read was the reason for the county's name. The French had christened it *Port des Morts, Death's Door*. Because the strait between Door County and the mainland was littered with shipwrecks, supposedly more than in any other section of fresh water in the world. She went on to read that several things made the straits dangerous: hidden underwater shoals, unpredictable winds and storms.

“I like Earl Grey” her dad said, and started gathering up the tea. “It makes me feel British.”

*

That week, when they weren't doing her lessons, Maggie and her Dad tried to get the house into livable order while her mom started her now job at the Gill Creek Community Bank. It was a huge step down from

her executive job at the bank in Chicago, but it had been the best she could find. Maggie would have to find a job too. She'd been painstakingly saving for college since the day her mom had been laid off the first time, three years ago.

Each morning, she put on an old pair of overalls she'd found at Goodwill and scrubbed one room from top to bottom – spreading suds all over the wooden floors of the kitchen, living room, parlor, hallway, while her dad tinkered at this and that counter or bannister or door that needed fixing, learning to be a handyman as he went, with a big book he'd bought at Lowe's by his side. The house began to reveal itself under its layer of dirt: delicately flowered linoleum from the forties or fifties, pale pastel walls, ancient scratches in the floor. Maggie even found the name "Kitt" carved messily into the back of the medicine cabinet and dated 1890, some little girl determined to leave her mark.

The weather was warm, but the heat of summer was gone, so they left all the doors open, ignoring the few bugs that flew in through the holes in the screen doors. As Maggie worked she could hear the distant lapping of the water on the lakeshore and, sometimes, the distant hammering in the woods. She still hadn't taken the time to walk over to the lake and dip a toe in.

She scrubbed, dusted, and arranged her room bit by bit. The walls were a flaking sprawl of pink flowers,

which she peeled using hot water mixed with fabric softener and a scraper. Once that was done, she painted the walls a pale blue that her dad picked up at Lowe's on sale, which looked much better but also too plain. She dug out her pencils and a piece of loose leaf and sat down to sketch a mural to do on one wall. But after sitting for awhile, tapping her pencil against her teeth, she couldn't think of anything that she was really excited about. She decided to wait for inspiration to strike, if ever. Maggie had used to paint and draw all the time as a kid, before she'd decided it wasn't practical. She'd been good at it, but over her teens it had slipped away.

Once the plain white shelves were immaculately clean, she filled them with photos of her and Jacie, her and her parents, her favorite books (*Jane Eyre*, *The Remains of the Day*, *Beloved*), her dusty sketchbook which she hadn't opened in years, a figurine of a spider on a web that reminded her of *Charlotte's Web* (which had been her favorite when she was a kid). She put a standing lamp in the corner so that it dimly illuminated her bed, and tucked her white coverlet tight around the edges of her mattress the way she liked it. She put her collection of paints and canvas in a low cabinet, at the back, where they were unlikely to see the light of day again.

That evening she finally got to put on her running shoes, pull her long hair into a ponytail, and jog down

Water Street, the one way in and out – which stretched across two miles of mostly empty fields and woods before it hit a main road. It all looked different running than from the car: the dipping valley, the pastures, the shimmer of the line of Lake Michigan to her left, the stand of thick shady pine trees across the fields. From some slight rises along the road she could see the shining tin tops of distantly neighboring farmhouses, but when she pulled out her cell phone there was still no signal. Besides the house next door, there was only one more property, obscured within the woods, marked by a rusted, crooked mailbox with a “No Trespassing” sticker stuck to one side, a “Beware of Dog” sign planted beside it, and a long winding driveway that disappeared into the trees. It had to be the property where the hammering had been coming from, but she didn’t slow down to get a closer look.

Her blood was pumping hard now. Every time she got a glimpse of the sky, it seemed to be doing something different: filling up with white puffy clouds, getting crisscrossed and scarred by the trails of airplanes, greying and seemingly getting lower to the ground. Running, Maggie liked to imagine she was a wolf, strong and fast. It always made her feel less restless, a little less stuck in her own skin. She pushed herself, going harder than usual. At the end of her route, she paused to look at a tall grey silo in a field of high grass, panting and holding her knees, and the sky lit up for a

split second. A late summer storm was coming in, and the silo stood out stark white against the grey night. Maggie turned back. She knew, from the ride in (she hadn't been away from Water Street since), that there was nothing for another mile but wilderness.

Back home, her dad had disappeared into what he deemed the study, no doubt arranging his over-the-top collection of books (he had over a thousand of them, and hadn't been willing to toss even one, much to her mom's despair) in alphabetical order on the sagging built-in shelves. Their obsession with their books was one of the things Maggie and her dad had in common. Also, they looked alike – symmetrical, dark-haired, with dim freckles over their noses – though Maggie, he liked to say, was prettier, curvier, and not as bald. He hadn't had a full-time job in two years, ever since they'd decided to home school her because according to him her classes weren't keeping up with her brain.

The house was silent and dim from the coming storm. Maggie showered, changed, then grabbed a random book from a pile by the study door and took it out onto the back porch to watch the dark clouds blowing in. She'd tried to avoid these moments of sitting still all week; those were the times she found herself getting overwhelmed by homesickness. Now she was thinking that she'd never sleep in her apartment again, never spend Saturday mornings in cafes with Jacie talking over lattes. It was an unsettlingly weightless

feeling, at sixteen, to have everything she'd known her whole life end so abruptly.

The book was a nature book about butterflies and moths. She flipped through the pages, reading snippets and only half paying attention.

Suddenly, a voice to her right startled her. Maggie jerked and turned.

“Sorry, I scared you?”

The girl stood with one foot uncertainly on the bottom stair of the porch, wiry, all gazelle-like limbs and long, unkempt, deep brown hair. She had something – some kind of moving squirming thing – in her hands. A big, rangy, slobbery hound dog was trailing along behind her. It was the girl she'd seen from far away that first day, on the beach.

“Pauline,” she said, stretching out her fisted hands as if to shake Maggie's. Maggie leaned forward in her chair. She turned to her dog. “This is Abe, my soul twin.” She freed one hand again and patted Abe's snout.

Pauline climbed up the stairs now more confidently, and peered into the house curiously. “You know I always think of this as the haunted house. I'm glad you're here, you'll chase the ghosts out,” she said, turning back and coming to sit beside Maggie, without waiting for an invite.

“I mean, it's not like I really think there are ghosts. I'm not stupid. But it's hard not to wonder. I've seen lights on over here sometimes.”

Maggie didn't believe in ghosts. She'd read somewhere that sightings of ghosts were the result of magnetic fields. Or carbon monoxide poisoning in old houses. Pauline jerked open her hands to reveal a duckling.

"I'm taking it to the rescue but I thought you might like to see it. Crazy, a duckling born this time of year. Maybe its mother left it behind." Pauline stroked the duckling's head gently, a little longingly, with her skinny thumbs. "Ducklings are so cute they make my eyes water. Do you ever have that happen?" Maggie shook her head. "Where'd you move from?"

"Chicago," Maggie said, unsure what to make of her new, duckling-loving neighbor who kind of believed in ghosts but not really.

"Moving must suck."

Maggie wasn't really willing to say whether it sucked or not to someone she didn't know, but Pauline didn't wait for an answer anyway.

"It's a small town but it's okay. It's boring but..." Pauline stared around, gestured to the lake. "There's stuff to do on the water. Summer's great except for all the tourists. Winter feels like it will never end. But besides that..."

Pauline turned in her seat, pulled up her knees, and smiled at Maggie. She shifted the duckling to one hand and held out a long thread of her hair against Maggie's with the other. "Almost the same color," she

said. Pauline's was longer and messier, while Maggie's was neatly combed. "Sorry, I don't mean to be overly enthusiastic. I'm just glad you're here. We've never had a neighbor on this side."

Maggie was used to girls like Pauline – strikingly beautiful girls – being a little aloof. Pauline was the opposite, she came across as sweet, eager and a little lonely. She gazed around at the crumbling deck, then smiled brightly at Maggie again.

"Did you get the tea?"

"Yeah, thanks...I've never gotten...tea as a present before."

"My mom's family has a tea company, Tidings Tea. So we get a ton for free." Maggie had seen the brand in grocery stores; she'd seen ads for it on TV. Tidings Tea was a big deal.

"Wow."

Pauline seemed to sense she was overwhelming her, and she sank back, stretched like a cat, and lapsed into silence for a few moments, studying the yard and the lake, and then the house.

Maggie tried to think of something to ask her. Finally, she said the first thing that came to her. "What's all the hammering in the woods?" she asked. "Beyond your house?"

Pauline seemed to puzzle over this for a second, and then her eyes lit up with recognition. "Oh, that's my Liam, our neighbor on the other side, but much further

down Water Street. He's our age. He's building something between our houses, so we can meet there in the winter." She wrapped her arms around her knees and Maggie wondered what 'my Liam' meant. "He knows I hate the winter and he says it's a surprise and I'm not allowed to go back there. You should definitely go back and say hi."

"That's really sweet." Maggie knew guys were always quick to do favors for beautiful girls. Not that she didn't benefit from the rule now and then, but she wasn't nearly Pauline – beautiful. Girls who were Pauline – beautiful, Maggie knew, had the world open up its gates for them wherever they went. Girls like Maggie were noticed once people looked closely, but most people didn't look that close.

"It's just me and Liam. And the adults. You should come canoeing with us this Sunday, before it gets cold. It'll happen faster than you think."

"I can't swim," Maggie said. She didn't add that she hated water in general except as a drink. She'd always had a fear of drowning.

"We won't swim," Pauline reassured her, as if the trip were already decided. She asked if Maggie had read about the girl they found in the lake.

"Yeah," Maggie said. "Sad."

"Scary," Pauline said, low. She pushed her wild hair back over her shoulders from where it had crept against the sides of her face. "They haven't found who did it."

“I thought it was an accident.”

Pauline simply shook her head. “They said that at first. But no. My cousin in Sturgeon Bay knows a cop. They just haven’t released it in the papers yet.”

Maggie felt a chill run down through her feet. “That’s horrible.”

Suddenly Abe planted his paws on the swing and licked the duckling.

Pauline let out a laugh – so surprising and screechy it could scrape paint off a car. That was the first moment Maggie started to like Pauline – the moment she heard her rough, husky laughter that wasn’t beautiful at all.

“Well,” Pauline said, standing, peering up at the sky as the first drops fell. “I’m gonna take this little guy to the vet before it pours. Come over anytime. And welcome to the neighborhood, blah blah blah.”

“Okay, thanks,” Maggie said, standing.

Pauline waved over her shoulder as she walked down the stairs. Rather than taking the driveway to the road she waded straight toward her house through the tall grass, parting it as she went and leaving a river of flinging grasshoppers and Abe bounding behind her.

*

That night, as heavy rain streaked the windows and thunder clouds settled over the house, Maggie was exploring the small, empty back parlor for remnants of past residents (all she found was a matchbox) when she

stepped on a rotten plank and broke through a hole in the floor. For a terrifying moment, one leg dangled in the air into the cellar below the house, the cool stale air running up her legs. Catching her breath, she yanked her leg out and found her dad in his study, sitting cross-legged on the floor arranging his shelves.

“My foot broke through the floor. I almost died,” she teased. But she was shaken.

“So you’re saying you want to be able to walk around your own house without feeling that your life’s endangered.” He nodded, his glasses glinting in the lamplight. “Okay, I can do that, but it seems a little demanding.” Maggie smirked at him.

He promised to go into town and buy some supplies the next morning to fix the floor. Then he stood, put his hands on her cheeks and rubbed them hard, something he’d done ever since she was little. It was his weird dad way of showing affection.

Maggie crawled into bed that night feeling more at home than she had the night before. Knowing one person made more of a difference than she would have guessed. She liked Pauline; liked her from the very start. It usually took her longer to form an opinion on people.

Unable to sleep, she peered out into the dark yard. Across the field, yellow light from the white house’s windows shone through the rain, giving off a comforting sense of safety, and the feeling that someone else was

out there in the world besides just her and her parents.

Maggie dreamt about the lake that night, black and shining in the dark, with winged ghosts or angels spreading their wings on its surface. Open and closed, open and closed, like the wings of moths.



I'm part of this house, and the residents can hear me in their sleep. I rattle the dishes and creak along the floors in the dark. I turn the lights on downstairs, though they're sure they turned them off when they went to bed. I watch a leg crash through the ceiling into the darkness and I reach out to touch it. But I have no hands, no arms, nothing I can see. I wonder if I ever did.

All I know for sure is that I'm timeless: I drift in and out of the past as easily as if I were walking from one room to another. Moments reach out and pull me in. Without meaning to, I've visited centuries in this very same spot: as far back as the early people, and the bustling arrival of Europeans, the construction of towns. I've watched the building of ships in the harbor. I see things in colors that couldn't possibly be. (The past has a shimmer. Different moments and feelings are colored differently) and I can hear the motion of stars above the house. This is what a haunting is like for the one who haunts – it's like being everywhere and nowhere at

once. Time layers on itself, present and past. But this is what time keeps bringing me back to: this house, this peninsula, these people, this girl. It seems I am stuck to Door County, and pinned to Water Street. I can move over other towns, but I end up back here – as if a magnet's pulled me home. And I don't know why.

I search my soul for what I know about ghosts, though I can't remember where I learned it or who I was when I did. They come back for revenge, or they linger to protect someone, or they stay because of some unfinished business. And I wonder, if I'm a ghost, which kind of ghost am I?

Every day I wait for heaven to open its pearly gates, or a great white light to swallow me. But nothing yet. It makes me think – or maybe only hope – that there's something I am here to do.

I've been noticing moths lately. They seem to congregate wherever I am, alighting on my invisible frame. Outside the cellar window, I watch the souls of owls and trees and spiders for some sign to tell me where to go, another soul like me to tell me what to do. The house breathes while the town is dark, but there is no one here to answer me. I'm the definition of alone.