

GNOSSIENNES

A NOVEL

D . J . B R O O K S

Copyright © 2026 by D.J. Brooks

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

I

I wake early in the Victorian house on Luttrell Street. Sleep arrives in fragments if it arrives at all. Three hours here, ninety minutes there, the rest spent staring at ceiling shadows and listening to the house breathe around me.

The house is dark, not quite night anymore but not yet morning. I lie still, listening to old wood creak, pipes tick as the furnace kicks on in the basement, floorboards complain as the temperature shifts. Houses built in 1887 learn how to speak to themselves.

This house was supposed to be beautiful. That's what I told myself when I bought it, when I was twenty-eight. If I sanded the floors and stripped the crown molding and rebuilt the staircase bannister, maybe I could rebuild myself too. Instead it's a catalog of unfinished intentions: half-painted walls, a bathroom with a new toilet but no new sink, and my mother's Baldwin upright in the living room, untouched for twenty-five years.

I make coffee, shower, dress for work, buckle my service weapon at my hip. Same sequence, every morning. Same weight on my belt announcing what I am before I have to say it.

I stand at the kitchen counter drinking coffee black while the sun comes up. Beyond Harmony's cottage, the Smokies rise blue-gray in the distance. On clear days I can see Mount LeConte from here, but today fog has settled in the valleys. Harmony Carter's studio is already lit. She moved in three years ago from Santa Monica, driving her own U-Haul. Artist. Makes too much soup and keeps leaving it at my door in warm

Tupperware containers. She knows I'm a cop and seems comforted by it. I like her in that careful way you can like someone when you no longer know how to let people close.

Katie Clover was the last person who knew how to reach me.

After June 2000, nobody else really did.

Katie would have liked Harmony. Katie liked everyone, or at least approached people as though they were worth liking. She would have walked over the first day with cookies, asked about the paintings, meant the question, and probably invited Harmony to dinner before the conversation was over. Katie collected people. She made community look effortless.

Katie's been dead for twenty-five years.

The piano sits in the living room like an accusation. Its walnut veneer is the color of old caramel, its ivory keys yellowing with neglect. I pass it twice a day and don't look directly at it. Looking feels like acknowledging, and acknowledging feels like accepting that I chose to stop.

My mother taught me on that piano starting when I was six. Chopin, Debussy, Satie. Hanon exercises before school, scales and arpeggios until my fingers knew what to do without consulting my brain. Then the good stuff in the afternoons: Chopin's Nocturnes, Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, Satie's *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, those strange drifting pieces that seem to exist outside ordinary time.

We were going to Paris together someday, my mother and Katie and me. Three women, three artists, the Musée d'Orsay, the cafés where Satie played, the streets Chopin walked. My mother had wanted that trip her whole life. She kept postponing it because there was never enough money, never enough time, never the right moment. When Katie and I graduated high school, she decided we were finally old enough.

The last time I played was Katie's funeral.

June 18, 2000. Southside Methodist on John Sevier. The church packed with classmates and teachers and track teammates and newspaper staff. People standing along the back wall because there weren't enough

seats. I played Gnossienne No. 1 because it was the piece that held Doug McCoy's death. Doug was Katie's first boyfriend, killed in a swimming accident at Mead's Quarry in 1996 when they were both fifteen. I'd played the same piece at Doug's funeral because Katie asked me to, and afterward she told me it was exactly right, that Satie understood grief in a way other composers didn't. So I'd played it for her after that, whenever she needed to sit with Doug's death instead of outrunning it. I thought maybe it would be big enough to hold hers too.

Katie's mother Martha sobbed in the front row. Her father Tom sat beside her, face like stone. My mother watched from the second row with her music teacher's eye, probably hearing every hesitation grief put into my hands.

I closed the piano after that and never opened it again.

My mother died six months later, of cancer she'd hidden from Katie and me because she didn't want to burden us during senior year. So the Paris trip never happened. Katie murdered in June, my mother gone by winter.

People ask sometimes why I became a detective, why homicide specifically. I lie and say I wanted to help people. The truth is simpler and more selfish: Katie was murdered and Detective Clyde Stannis couldn't solve it. The piano was closed. Paris was gone. Homicide was what remained.

Twenty-five years is a long time to carry grief. Long enough that carrying becomes who you are instead of something you're doing.

My phone rings on a Friday afternoon in October.

I'm at my desk at Knoxville Police Department's East District headquarters, reviewing files for a domestic homicide heading to trial in three weeks, when Deputy Chief Abernathy calls. Need to see you, he says. His voice carries that flatness men in authority cultivate when they're about to deliver something they'd rather not, not cold exactly, not warm, a careful blankness, the way you know a car's tires have found ice a half-second before the vehicle begins to drift. I walk down the hall. His

office door is open. He's in uniform, which means brass is watching, which means this is official.

When I sit across from him I have to grip the armrests to keep steady, though I couldn't have said yet why.

"Hawkes," he says. "Katie Clover's case. There's been a development."

The world doesn't tilt. It fractures.

I can't breathe. The office feels like it's shrinking around me.

"What kind of development?"

"DNA. The genealogical analysis came back. We've got family trees, potential suspects. It's not definitive yet, but it's further than we've ever been. DA wants to reopen, assign a task force. I wanted to tell you first."

My vision narrows. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears.

"When?"

"Task force forms Monday." His eyes stay on me. "Megan, I need you to hear what I'm about to say. Really hear it. I know what this case has meant to you. I know you and Katie were close. The DA is going to have serious concerns about your involvement. So am I. Not because I doubt your abilities, you're one of the best detectives I have. But defense attorneys dream about cases like this. One mistake, one moment where grief clouds your judgment, and they'll tear the whole thing apart. Charges dismissed. Killer walks."

"I understand."

But I don't. My mind is stuck on the fact that Katie's case is reopening, that after twenty-five years we might finally know.

There's a knock at the door. Abernathy calls come in, and Luc Phan enters. He's been my partner for three years, my subordinate for two before that, back when I was lead detective on our team. We know each other's rhythms, each other's blind spots.

"Sir," Luc says.

"Katie Clover's case is reopening," Abernathy says. "DNA genealogy. Task force forms Monday. You're lead detective. Megan works it as your partner."

Luc doesn't ask why. He looks at me, and in his face I see not pity but recognition.

"Understood," he says. Then to me: "We'll work it right."

Not I'll. We'll.

"That's exactly right," Abernathy says. "Luc leads on paper. Megan brings everything she knows. And we build something that holds."

I should say something. I should tell Abernathy he's right. But all I can think is that after twenty-five years of waiting, I'm finally going to work Katie's case and I won't even be allowed to lead it.

"I need to know you can handle this," Abernathy says. "Not the work. I know you can do the work. I mean the emotional weight. Every suspect, every piece of evidence, every development is going to hit you harder than it hits anyone else in that room. I need to know you can stay objective. That you can trust the process even when your instincts want to outrun it. Because if I think you're compromised, I pull you. No argument. No appeal."

"I can handle it."

"Can you?" Abernathy leans forward. "Because this is day one and you're already shaking."

He's right. I know he's right. But I can't lose this chance.

"I can handle it," I say. "We'll work it right."

Abernathy studies me for a long moment.

"Task force meets Monday, nine a.m. Detective Phan will be lead. You'll be his partner, same as you've been for three years, just with the roles formally reversed. You stay objective. You work it right. And maybe this time we close it."

I nod. If I speak, I'll break.

Luc holds the door for me as we leave Abernathy's office. In the hallway, away from the Chief's attention, he says quietly, "We'll get him. Whoever did this. We'll get him."

I nod again because it's all I can manage, and walk to my car on legs that don't feel entirely solid.

Katie's case is reopening. After twenty-five years, we have a chance.

Saturday morning I start the engine and drive without conscious destination, but my body knows where it's going before my mind catches up. The streets are quiet enough that I can still see the older city beneath the new one, the mills turned into lofts, warehouses turned into breweries, people making a living from what used to make a living; the old textile district sliding past on my left, brick facades that absorbed a century of river damp and still haven't given it up, morning light hitting them at that low October angle that makes even industrial architecture look like something worth preserving. The University of Tennessee campus opens to my right, that sea of orange and white that defines Knoxville on fall Saturdays when a hundred thousand people pack Neyland Stadium to watch football like it's religion, and from somewhere in the distance I can already hear the faint accumulation of crowd noise that will build all morning until the whole city vibrates with it, with the shared ecstasy of people who have agreed, collectively, that this one thing matters above everything else today.

Across the river, down Sevier Avenue, left onto Island Home Avenue where the October trees are turning into an East Tennessee gold that happens when Appalachian autumn meets Southern humidity. To the culvert where they found her. I don't decide to go there. I just do.

I spend Saturday at the culvert. Not the whole day, that would be crazy, that would be the kind of thing that gets people asking questions about whether you're handling this well, whether you should be on this case at all — just an hour, maybe two, sitting in my car on Maple-

wood Avenue looking at the drainage opening where Katie's body was found. The same concrete pipe from the 1920s, part of Baker Creek's old drainage system. Three feet wide. It's still there. Most of the neighborhood around it has changed, but the culvert remains.

You'd have to drag a body to get it in there. The opening is low, partially hidden by overgrowth, not the kind of place you'd stumble into accidentally. Someone took time with Katie, arranged her carefully, positioned the shoes five feet away with laces still tied, placed the keys and compass necklace just so, brushed her hair and spread it across the concrete even though it was parted wrong. Made her look peaceful even though she'd been held captive for three days and had known, by the end, exactly what was coming.

The culvert doesn't change. The concrete darkens and lightens with weather, weeds grow and die and grow back, but the opening remains. The pipe. The place itself.

Nobody remembers that a girl's body was found here. Nobody except me, and Martha and Tom Clover, and maybe some of Katie's old classmates who think about her occasionally when something triggers the memory. Everybody else got twenty-five years. We didn't.

I grew up two doors down from here. We ran these streets every day from age fifteen on, when we joined the cross country team at South-Doyle High School and discovered we were good at it. Katie was faster. She had that natural sprint speed, that explosive quality that made coaches fall in love with her. But I had better endurance, could hold a pace longer, could keep going when other people had to walk. Katie got there first. I got there eventually.

Except I didn't know her, not really, not completely, because if I had, I would have known she was pregnant. Would have known something was wrong in those last weeks, in May of 2000 when she got pregnant and didn't tell me. In early June when she must have discovered it and still didn't tell me. I would've protected her. Or tried to.

I sit at the culvert until nausea forces me back to the car. Haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. I tried this morning, managed two bites of toast before my stomach rejected it, that physical revulsion that's been building since Abernathy said Katie's case is reopening. Can't eat. Can't sleep. So much for handling it.

The memory surfaces before I can stop it. It never asks permission.

June 10, 2000.

Katie and I met on her porch. Both wearing running shorts, sports bras, cheap running shoes from Dick's Sporting Goods. Summer evening, heat and humidity thick.

"Race you to the corner," Katie said.

She always said that. I always let her win the sprint.

We started running. Our usual route through Island Home, building to faster pace. Katie talked about her Clemson dorm assignment, about being nervous to start college but excited too.

No mention of pregnancy. No signs of fear.

Then we turned onto a quieter street and underneath the cicadas I heard it. An engine idling. Low. Steady. Hard to place.

Katie didn't seem to hear it. Kept running, light and loose.

At the rise near the bend, I slowed. My shoe, the left one, the lace had come undone.

"Go on," I told Katie. "I'll catch up."

She gave a lazy salute and kept moving.

I bent down. Tied the lace. Pulled the knot tight.

Thirty seconds. Maybe forty-five.

When I straightened up and jogged forward, expecting to see Katie just beyond the curve—

Nothing.

Empty street. That idling engine still somewhere, or maybe gone now, I couldn't tell.

Katie was gone.

I called her name. Once. Twice. Louder, that edge of panic creeping in.

No answer.

I ran forward, heart climbing my throat. Looked down the Skelton Greenway Trail entrance. It was dark, empty. Called her name again, louder now, abandoning any pretense of being calm.

Then I saw it. Something pale on the pavement near the trail crossing.

Katie's hair tie. Blue elastic, plain, the kind you buy in bulk at CVS.

I picked it up. My fingers shook. The elastic was still warm from her hair.

That's when I knew. Not thought she was late, not wondered where she went. KNEW.

I ran to the Henderson's house. Pounded on the door. Mrs. Henderson answered, looked frightened before she even saw who was knocking.

"Call 911," I said. "Katie's gone. Someone took her."

Police came within fifteen minutes. They searched. Knocked on doors. Asked questions I couldn't answer.

They found nothing. No witnesses. No vehicles. No trace of her.

They took the hair tie, put it in a plastic evidence bag, catalogued it as Item 12.

When I look up, I'm back in the car. The culvert is still here. The street is still here. I'm still here.

Katie is not.

I sit with my hands on the steering wheel, waiting for the shaking to stop. Thirty seconds of tying my shoe. That's all it took for someone to grab Katie and vanish.

I should have tied my shoes before we started running. Should have stayed with her. Should have been better.

Katie ran ahead and I let her.

I let her.

Was it the idling engine I heard? A car waiting? I told police in 2000. They checked vehicle registrations in the area, interviewed neighbors. No one reported seeing a car. No one heard anything.

Just me and my untied shoe and Katie disappearing.

I start the engine after the hour becomes two, after sitting in one place long enough for my back to hurt and my legs to go stiff. I drive home to Luttrell Street through downtown, everything familiar and strange simultaneously. I park in my driveway and sit there for ten minutes trying to remember why I came home, what I'm supposed to do next, how to move from car to house when my legs feel disconnected from the idea.

Saturday night I don't sleep. Lie in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the house settle, thinking about Katie's autopsy report that I've read dozens of times but will have to read again Monday. Thinking about pregnancy. Thinking about who the father was. Thinking about why she never told me.

Sunday is worse. Wake up at 4 AM after maybe ninety minutes of actual sleep. Make coffee with hands that shake, spill grounds on the counter, leave them there because cleaning feels impossible. Stand at the window watching Harmony's lights come on in her studio, watching someone who seems fully present in their work, in their life.

Wondering what that's like.

About 8 AM my phone rings. Consider not answering. Answer anyway because it might be about the case, might be something I need to know.

"Megan? It's Martha."

Katie's mother. We haven't talked in three months.

"Hi, Martha."

"Tom saw the news. About Katie's case reopening. Is it true?"

Of course they know. It's already in the news.

"Yes. It's true."

Silence on the line. Then Martha's voice, careful, controlled: "Are you working it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Megan. How are you holding up?"

I can't answer that honestly. Can't tell Katie's mother that I'm falling apart, that I haven't eaten in two days, that I'm not sleeping, that my hands won't stop shaking. That I'm terrified I'll fuck this up.

"I'm okay."

"You're not okay. Nobody would be okay with this." Martha's voice is gentle. "Megan. Twenty-five years is long enough. Promise me you'll be careful. Not just with the case. With yourself."

"Have you played piano lately?"

The question hits like something physical. "No."

"Have you dated anyone since Jake?"

"No."

"Do you do anything except work Katie's case and other people's murders?"

I don't answer.

"Megan, honey. I'm not criticizing you. I'm terrified what this is going to do to you."

"Martha, I have to go. Task force meets tomorrow and I need to—"

"Be careful." Her voice is firm now. "Promise me you'll be careful. Not just with the case. With yourself. Don't let this destroy you."

I promise even though I'm not sure it's a promise I can keep. Before we hang up, Martha asks if I can come to Seymour that afternoon. Tom wants to see me.

I tell her I'll be there.

Sunday afternoon I drive to Seymour to visit Martha and Tom Clover. The drive takes thirty minutes through streets quiet with stillness, through the South Knoxville that exists when half the city is at church and the other half is sleeping off Saturday's game. Down Chapman Highway and toward Sevierville, past the big-box stores and chain

restaurants that could be anywhere, that make East Tennessee look like everywhere else until you lift your eyes to the mountains and remember where you are.

Martha and Tom moved to Seymour in 2006, six years after Katie died. Sold the Island Home house where Katie grew up, where I spent half my childhood, where we used flashlights through bedroom windows to say goodnight in code we invented. Bought this smaller place, ranch style instead of two-story, the kind of house you buy when you're acknowledging that you don't need four bedrooms anymore because your daughter is dead and won't be coming home for holidays or bringing grandchildren to visit.

Martha opens the door before I knock. She must have been watching for me through the window, waiting, the way people wait when they already know what's coming. She's sixty-four now. Red hair gone mostly gray, Irish copper fading into silver. Thinner than I remember, smaller somehow, as if loss has a physical weight that compresses you over decades.

"Megan." Her voice is careful, controlled, the voice of someone who's learned not to let emotion escape before she's ready. She hugs me and I catch that same perfume she wore twenty-five years ago, something floral, something Katie used to borrow before dances. For a second I'm seventeen again, standing in the Clover kitchen waiting for Katie to come downstairs. I grip Martha harder than I mean to.

"Tom's in the living room. Come in."

The living room stops me the way it always does, the way it's stopped me every time I've visited in the nineteen years since they moved here. It's not a living room in any normal sense, not a place where people live or watch television or read newspapers on Sunday mornings.

Photos of Katie cover every surface. The mantel holds her senior portrait, that professional shot where she's wearing the blue sweater, smiling that Katie smile that made everyone feel included, feel seen. End tables display candid shots: Katie and me at Norris Lake, maybe age nine,

gap-toothed and sunburned, arms around each other like we'd never let go. Katie at the piano during that brief period in middle school when she thought she might want to learn, before she discovered she preferred words to notes, journalism to music.

The walls hold Katie's track medals in shadow boxes and her journalism awards: East Tennessee Young Journalist, Best Feature Story, Editor of the Year. Her letter jacket hangs on the wall in a display case like something archaeological, something that needs protecting from air and touch and time.

Tom stands when I enter. Sixty-six now, gray in his face that wasn't there last time I visited three months ago, a grayness that comes from sickness or exhaustion or decades of carrying weight that humans aren't designed to carry. He moves like everything hurts, slow and careful, someone who's learned that sudden movements cost more than they're worth.

"Megan." His voice is flat, neutral, that tone he's used with me since Katie died. But something in his eyes, his expression is different.

"Hi, Tom."

"Sit down."

Martha brings sweet tea, that Southern ritual, that automatic hospitality that functions independent of emotional state or circumstance. I sit on the couch across from Tom's chair. Martha sits beside me, close enough that our shoulders almost touch.

Tom leans forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped together in the pose of someone gathering courage. He looks at me directly for the first time since I arrived, and his eyes are wet.

"Megan, there's something I need to say. Been meaning to say for years, twenty-five years, actually, but time ain't never seemed right. Maybe there's never a right moment for this kind of thing. I don't know if this is going to come out like I mean."

I wait. The house is silent around us except for the soft tick of a clock somewhere, counting seconds that feel longer than they should.

“At the funeral. In the parking lot afterward, when people were leaving and you were standing by your mother’s car looking like you’d been drained and filled with something that hurt, I said something to you about stopping to tie your shoe. About how if you hadn’t stopped, maybe Katie’d still be alive. Maybe you could’ve prevented it. Maybe it was your fault.”

The memory surfaces complete and terrible, Tom’s face in the parking lot, ravaged by grief, voice shaking with anger and desperation and something that looked like hatred but was probably just pain looking for a target. The words landing like blows: You stopped to tie your shoe. You let her go ahead alone. If you’d been with her—

“I’ve regretted those words every day for twenty-five years,” Tom continues. “Every single day. They’re the worst thing I’ve ever said to another human being. The meanest. The most unfair.”

Martha reaches for his hand but doesn’t interrupt.

“I was drowning in grief,” Tom says. “Our daughter, our only child, our Katie, was murdered, and I needed someone to blame. Needed it to make sense somehow. Couldn’t accept something that terrible happening like that. And you were there, alive, and Katie wasn’t. I couldn’t make sense of those facts. Couldn’t understand why you were alive and she wasn’t. So I said something unspeakable. I blamed you for being human. For having a shoelace come untied. For stopping to tie it like any normal person would.”

“Tom —” I start, but he raises a hand.

“No. Let me finish. I’ve heard this in my head for years and if I stop now I won’t get it out.” He takes a shaky breath. “You stopped to tie your shoe. That’s what people do when their shoelaces come untied. It ain’t some flaw in who you are. It ain’t you making a mistake. It’s just, just you being human and that’s all it was. And I made you feel guilty for it on top of everything else you were feeling.”

The tears come before I can stop them. Martha’s arm goes around my shoulders.

“Katie’s death wasn’t your fault, Megan” Tom says, and his voice breaks completely now. “It was never your fault. You were eighteen years old. You were jogging with your best friend on a Saturday evening like you’d done hundreds of times. And it was something evil decided to hurt her. Something evil had been planning it all along. And well, you, you just happened to stop to tie your shoe. That’s all. That’s the only difference between you and Katie. A shoelace.”

He’s crying openly now, not trying to hide it or control it.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so deeply sorry. For those words. For making you hold them over these years and wondering if I was right, if it was your fault, if you could’ve saved her. I was wrong. I was cruel. And I’ve wanted to apologize for twenty-five years but I was too ashamed to face you, too scared to face my meanness.”

The apology lands like something physical, something I’ve been bracing against for so long that its absence creates a vacuum. I’ve carried Tom’s words for twenty-five years like a stone in my chest. And now he’s trying to lift that weight and I don’t know how to let him, don’t know how to reorganize myself around its absence.

“I forgave you years ago,” I manage, though my voice is wrecked. “I understood. You were grieving.”

“That’s kind of you,” Tom says. “Too generous. Grief don’t excuse cruelty. Explains it, maybe. But don’t make it right.”

Martha speaks now, her voice soft but steady. “We’ve talked about you a lot over the years, Megan. Tom and I. About what you’ve done with your life. About becoming a detective.”

Tom nods, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “At first, I’ll be honest, it bothered me. Felt like you were turning Katie’s death into your career. Like you were using Katie’s tragedy for your own purposes, building your life on her grave. I resented it. Resented you for it.”

“Tom,” Martha says gently.

“No, she deserves to know the truth,” Tom says. “Megan, I was angry at you for a long time. Not just about the shoe, but about everything.

About surviving when Katie didn't. About becoming a cop, about making a life out of what took hers. About existing in the world when my daughter was dead in the ground. It felt wrong somehow. Felt like theft, like you'd stolen Katie's future and were living it yourself."

The words hurt. I understand them. Have suspected them for years. Understanding doesn't make them hurt less.

"But that was grief talking," Martha continues. "That was Tom trying to find someone to blame because blaming Katie's actual killer wasn't enough. The killer was faceless and you were real and present and there, and grief needs targets, needs focus, needs somewhere to direct all that rage and loss. It took years, mind you. But eventually, we understood."

Tom's voice steadies slightly. "You honored Katie. That's what we came to understand. That's what Martha helped me see when I was still too angry to see it myself."

"We're proud of you," Martha says simply. "We should have told you that years ago. Should have told you when you graduated from the academy, when you made detective, when you started working homicide. You took something unbearable and you made it purposeful."

I can't speak. Can't make words form through the tightness in my throat, through hearing things I didn't know I needed to hear until they were said.

"So when Mr. Abernathy called and told us you'd be working Katie's case," Tom continues, "when Martha talked to you yesterday and you said it was true, my first thought wasn't concern about whether you'd see the facts clearly, or whether your emotions would get the better of you. My first thought was: thank God. Thank God it's Megan. Thank God Katie has someone who loves her working this case."

The tears come harder now. Martha pulls me closer and I let her, let myself be held by Katie's mother the way I haven't been held in years, maybe decades. Tom stands and comes to sit on my other side.

We sit like that for a while, held together by Katie's absence and by something else too, something I don't quite have a name for.

When I can speak again, when my voice works properly and my breathing steadies, I ask them what they remember about Katie in the months before she died. Not as a detective asking questions, though I am that too, but as someone who needs to understand, who's been haunted by gaps in knowledge for twenty-five years.

"Spring 2000," I say. "April, May. Those last weeks. Do you remember anything different about her? Any changes in behavior or mood?"

Martha thinks, her face taking on that distant expression that comes from reaching back through twenty-five years of memory. "She seemed normal mostly. Happy about Clemson, about college, about starting fresh somewhere new. But quieter maybe in May? Less talkative at dinner. I thought she was just nervous about leaving home. Seniors get like that sometimes, excited and terrified simultaneously, ready to leave and afraid of leaving all at once."

Tom nods slowly. "She spent more time at school those last months. Late afternoons, evenings. Said it was newspaper stuff, you know. Layout nights, editing sessions. Or track practice running long. I didn't think much of it at the time. Katie was always busy, always had seventeen things happening simultaneously. That was just who she was."

"The pregnancy," I say carefully. "When did you find out?"

Martha's face shifts, with pain that comes from remembering the moment everything changed. "The autopsy. Detective Stannis told us June sixteenth. We had no idea. None. Our eighteen-year-old daughter was six weeks pregnant and we didn't know. What does that say about us as parents?"

"What does it say about me as her best friend?" I counter.

Tom's voice gets harder. "Detective Stannis asked us if Katie was seeing anyone. We said no. He asked you the same thing. You said no. But someone got her pregnant. Someone she never told any of us about."

The room settles into heavy silence. Twenty-five years later, none of us understood how that was possible.

Martha pulls herself back from wherever memory has taken her. “She was still seeing her counselor in those last months. He helped her work through Doug’s death, and she kept seeing him all through high school. She mentioned him in May, said the sessions were helping her process leaving for college, the transition to adulthood.”

The information stops me cold. Four years of counseling. Katie had been seeing Mr. K for four years, all the way through senior year, right up until she died. I hadn’t known that. Hadn’t known she was still going to sessions, still working through things with a counselor when I thought she’d moved past Doug’s death years ago.

“Four years?” I say. “She was still in counseling senior year?”

“The sessions continued right through May,” Martha says. “Maybe even June. I’m not certain. But definitely May. She told me he was helping her think through college decisions, leaving home. She said he really understood what she was feeling.”

Tom nods. “She mentioned him several times those last weeks. Said the counseling was useful, that it helped to have someone to talk to who wasn’t family or friends, somebody who wasn’t already worried about her.”

Four years. Katie kept seeing her grief counselor for four years after Doug’s accident, kept going to sessions every week or every other week, kept working through something with Mr. K all the way through her senior year. And I never knew. Never asked. Never thought to wonder if she was still processing Doug’s death all those years later, in those final months before someone murdered her.

What else didn’t I know about Katie’s last year? What else was she keeping private, keeping separate from me, from everyone who thought they knew her?

We talk for another hour about Katie, about her journalism ambitions, about her track times, the summer plans she’d been making before she died. About all the futures she could have had if someone hadn’t taken them away. Martha shows me Katie’s journalism portfolio, articles

she wrote senior year about school funding and the achievement gap. Evidence that Katie was thinking about injustice, about systems that failed people, about using words to expose problems.

If Katie had lived, she might have been the kind of journalist who broke important stories, who held powerful people accountable, who gave voice to the vulnerable. Instead she died at eighteen with her killer's DNA under her fingernails, and her journalism portfolio sits in a photo album in her parents' living room, another artifact of a life that stopped.

When I stand to leave, Martha walks me to the door. Tom stays in the living room, exhausted by confession.

"Megan," Martha says quietly, one hand on the doorframe. "Yesterday on the phone I said I wasn't sure I wanted to know who killed her. That maybe wondering was better than knowing."

"I remember."

Her eyes meet mine, and something in them has hardened, has shifted from uncertainty to determination. "I was wrong. I do want to know. Not for closure, I don't believe in closure, don't believe grief ever closes. But because Katie was keeping secrets in those last weeks. Someone made her feel like she couldn't tell her own mother she was pregnant. Someone made her so scared that she hid something that enormous, that life-changing. And I need to understand who had that power over my daughter. Who made her afraid."

Her voice drops lower, takes on an edge I've never heard before. "Find him, Megan. Whoever did this. And when you do, when you know for certain, tell me everything. Don't protect me from it. Don't soften it. I need to know the truth, even if the truth destroys me. Especially if it destroys me. I owe Katie that much."

I promise I will.

I drive home through Sunday afternoon quiet, through streets empty of traffic, through the Knoxville that exists in the lull between church services and afternoon football. Think about Katie seeing Sherman Kessler through May 2000. Four years of counseling. Think about her

getting pregnant in late April or early May. Think about the timeline, about what I didn't know, about the gaps in my understanding of Katie's final year.

Tomorrow is Monday. Tomorrow the real investigation work begins. Tomorrow I start.