

GNOSSIENNES SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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I

I wake early in the Victorian house on Luttrell Street, the way I wake most mornings now, sleep arriving 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, learning its language the way you learn anyone's, by lying still long enough that they forget you're listening.

The house is dark, not quite night anymore but not yet morning, and I lie there and let it talk: old wood creaking somewhere over the kitchen, pipes ticking as the furnace kicks on in the basement, floorboards complaining the way anything complains when it's carried weight since 1887 and nobody's ever once asked if it minds.

This house was supposed to be beautiful. That's what I told myself when I bought it at twenty-eight, certain that if I sanded the floors myself, and stripped the crown molding myself, and rebuilt the staircase bannister with my own two hands, something in me would come back rebuilt too, the way you can't always fix a person but you can at least fix a house and let yourself pretend the metaphor holds. Instead it's a catalog of unfinished intentions: half-painted walls, a bathroom with a new toilet and no new sink, my mother's Baldwin upright sitting in the living room exactly where the movers set it down twenty-five years ago, waiting on a decision I still haven't made.

I make coffee. Shower. Dress for work. Buckle my service weapon at my hip, the same sequence every morning, the same weight settling against my belt and announcing what I am before I've said a word to

anyone, before I've even had the coffee that's supposed to make me feel like a person and not just a badge that happens to be standing upright.

I stand at the kitchen counter drinking it black while the sun comes up, watching the Smokies rise blue-gray beyond Harmony's cottage, Mount Le Conte visible on clear days, though today the fog's settled into the valleys and taken most of the view down with it. Harmony Carter's studio is already lit, that steady glow across fifty feet of yard I've come to read the way other people read a porch light. She moved in three years ago from Santa Monica, driving her own U-Haul, an artist who makes too much soup and keeps leaving it at my door in warm Tupperware containers, who knows I'm a cop and seems comforted by that instead of put off by it, the way most people are. At the window she lifts a hand without looking over, the way she always somehow knows when I'm watching, and I lift mine back before either of us has to turn it into anything more than a wave between two women who live near each other and haven't yet decided what else that means. I like her. In that careful way you can still like someone when you've mostly forgotten how to let anyone get close enough to matter.

Katie Clover was the last person who ever really knew how to reach me. Nobody has since June of 2000.

She would have liked Harmony. Liked everyone, or came close enough to it that the difference never mattered, and she'd have walked over that first week with cookies, asked about the paintings and actually meant the question, probably had Harmony over for dinner before the conversation was even finished. Collected people that way. Made community look effortless, made it look like something you could just decide to have if you were generous enough and paid enough attention, which maybe it is, for people built the way Katie was built.

Katie's been dead for twenty-five years.

The piano sits in the living room like an accusation I never quite finish reading, walnut veneer gone the color of old caramel, ivory keys yellowing under a lid I pass twice a day now without ever quite looking

straight at it, the way you don't look straight at the sun even when you know exactly where it is.

My mother taught me on that piano starting when I was six, Hanon exercises before school, scales and arpeggios drilled into muscle until my fingers knew where to go without consulting my brain first, and then the good stuff in the afternoons, Chopin's Nocturnes and Debussy's *Clair de Lune* and Satie's *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, those strange drifting pieces that never seemed to belong to ordinary time the way the rest of music did, that seemed to exist somewhere just outside the clock the way grief does, though I didn't know that yet, not really, not the way I know it now.

We were going to Paris together someday. My mother and Katie and me, three women, three artists in my mother's telling of it, the Musée d'Orsay and the cafés where Satie played and the streets Chopin walked, and my mother had wanted that trip her whole life and kept postponing it, never enough money on what a public school paid a music teacher, never enough time, never quite the right moment, each excuse reasonable enough on its own and, taken together, just the shape her patience always took, the same patience she brought to teaching, certain there'd be more time later than there ever actually turns out to be. Then Katie and I graduated high school, and she decided, finally, that we were old enough.

The last time I played was Katie's funeral.

At Doug's memorial service I played *Gnossienne No. 1*, the piece that would come to hold his death for both of us before it ever learned to hold hers. Doug was Katie's first boyfriend, killed in a swimming accident at Mead's Quarry in 1996 when she was fifteen, and I played it because she asked me to, because I didn't yet know how to say no to Katie about anything that mattered. Afterward she told me it was exactly right, that Satie understood grief in a way other composers never bothered to, and so I played it for her again after that, every time she

needed somewhere to sit with Doug's death instead of running from it the way everyone kept telling her, gently, uselessly, that she should.

When Katie died four years later, I played it again, thinking maybe, this time, it would be big enough to hold hers too.

It wasn't. Nothing was.

Katie's mother Martha sobbed in the front row. Her father Tom sat beside her with a face like stone, and my own mother watched from the second row with a music teacher's eye, the kind that hears every hesitation grief puts into a hand, and probably heard every one of mine that day, and never once said so.

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

My mother died six months later, of a cancer she'd hidden from both of us because she didn't want to burden Katie and me during our senior year, as if burdens were something you could simply decide not to hand someone, as if grief worked that way, and so the Paris trip never happened at all. Katie murdered in June. My mother gone by winter. Two funerals in one year, and after that I stopped being able to say my own age out loud without doing the math first, without landing, every time, on how much of it had already happened before I turned nineteen.

People ask sometimes why I became a detective, why homicide specifically, and I lie and tell them I wanted to help people, which is true in the way most convenient lies are true, just not true enough to be the whole answer. The real answer is smaller and uglier than that: Katie was murdered and Detective Clyde Stannis never solved 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 it stops being something you're doing and starts being, simply, who you are.

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 Bill Abernathy calls. Need to see you, he says,

and his voice carries the flatness men in authority cultivate for exactly this purpose, for delivering something they'd rather not deliver, not cold exactly, not warm either, just a careful blankness, the same feeling you get in a car a half second before you realize the tires have found ice and the whole vehicle has already, quietly, stopped being entirely yours to steer.

I walk down the hall to find his office door standing open, and he's in uniform, which means brass is watching somewhere, which means whatever this is, it's official. When I sit across from him I have to grip the armrests just to keep steady, though I couldn't have told you yet, sitting there, exactly why.

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

The world doesn't tilt so much as it simply comes apart at a seam I didn't know was there. I can't breathe. The office feels smaller than it did thirty seconds ago, the walls somehow closer, the air somehow thinner, though nothing in the room has actually moved.

"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."

"When?"

"Task force forms Monday." His eyes stay on me, steady, the way they do when he's about to say something he's rehearsed. "Grant Kessler's coming over from Narcotics. Sadie Collier, Sex Crimes. You'll all report through Luc." He pauses. "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, not really. My mind is already somewhere past understanding, stuck on the single fact that Katie's case is reopening, that after twenty-five years we might, finally, actually know.

There's a knock at the door, and Abernathy calls come in. Luc Phan, my partner for three years now, my subordinate for two years before that, back when I was lead detective on our team. We know each other's rhythms by now, 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 there's not pity, not exactly, something closer to recognition, like a man clocking weather he's seen before.

"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 a case that holds."

I should say something. Should tell Abernathy he's right. But all I can actually think, sitting there with my hands gripping the armrests, is that after twenty-five years of waiting I'm finally going to work Katie's case, and I won't even be the one 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, the way you know things in your body before you'd ever admit them out loud. But I can't lose this chance, not this one, not after everything it's already cost me just to still be sitting in this room.

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

Abernathy studies me for a long moment, the kind of look that weighs something and doesn't tell you the result.

"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, and in the hallway, away from anyone's attention but his own, 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 I walk to my car on legs that don't feel entirely like mine, the parking lot swimming a little at the edges, the whole ordinary Friday afternoon going on around me as if nothing in it had just changed.

Katie's case is reopening.

After twenty-five years, we finally 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 Maplewood

Avenue looking at the drainage opening where Katie's body was found. The same concrete channel from the 1920s, part of Baker Creek's old drainage system. Twelve feet wide, four feet in height. 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 as well as I thought, 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, lightning bugs abound, 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.

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 got a call from Mr. Abernathy. About Katie's case reopening. Is it true?"

"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. On the back of Tom's chair, folded the way it's probably been folded for twenty-five years, sits the Clemson sweatshirt Katie brought home from the campus visit that spring, before she'd even accepted, back when the acceptance still felt like something worth celebrating instead of something that never got to happen.

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 spent holding up what no person was built to bear. 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." Serious tone. "Please."

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. “The meanest thing I’ve ever said to another human being.”

Martha reaches for his hand but doesn’t interrupt.

“I was drowning in grief,” Tom says. “Needed someone to blame. Couldn’t accept something that terrible happening like that, couldn’t understand why you were alive and she wasn’t. So I blamed you for being human. For having a shoelace come untied.”

“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’s just you being human, 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, jogging with your best friend on a Saturday evening like you’d done hundreds of times. Something evil decided to hurt her. Something evil

had been planning it all along. And 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. I was wrong. I was cruel. And I've wanted to apologize for twenty-five years but I was too ashamed to face you."

The apology lands like something physical, something I've been bracing against for so long that its absence creates a vacuum. I've held Tom's words for twenty-five years like a stone in my chest. And now he's trying to lift that weight off me 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. 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. About surviving when Katie didn't. About making a life out of what took hers. 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. "Blaming Katie's actual killer wasn't enough. The killer was faceless and you were real and

present and there, and grief needs somewhere to direct all that rage and loss. It took years. But eventually, we understood.”

Tom’s voice steadies slightly. “You honored Katie. That’s what we came to understand.”

“We’re proud of you,” Martha says simply. “We should have told you that years ago. 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, “my first thought wasn’t concern about 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.”

Tom nods slowly. “She spent more time at school those last months. Late afternoons, evenings. Said it was newspaper stuff, layout nights, editing sessions. Or track practice running long. I didn’t think much of it at the time. Katie was always busy. That was just who she was.”

Martha gets up without a word and comes back with a manila folder, worn soft at the corners. “Her last big piece for the paper. About the funding gap between South-Doyle and the county schools on the other side of town. She was so proud of this one.” She hands it to me like she’s handing over something fragile. The byline reads Katherine Clover, Senior Staff Writer. I read the first paragraph and hear Katie’s voice in it exactly, that same insistence on fairness, on naming things plainly.

“The pregnancy,” I say carefully, handing the folder back. “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. Our eighteen-year-old daughter was six weeks pregnant and we didn’t know.”

“What does that 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 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.

“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 really understood what she was feeling.”

Tom nods. “She mentioned him several times those last weeks. Said it was useful, having someone to talk to who wasn’t family or friends.” He shakes his head slowly. “Funny how one family can change the whole direction of another and never know it.”

Neither of us says anything else about it. The moment passes.

Four years. Katie kept seeing her grief counselor for four years after Doug’s accident, 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 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.

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 Katie was keeping secrets in those last weeks. Someone made her feel like she couldn’t tell her own mother she was pregnant. 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, 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 I never knew about. Think about everything else she must have carried alone in those last weeks, the gaps in my understanding of her final year opening wider with every mile.

Twenty-five years of believing I’d known her completely, and here’s a whole version of her I never got to meet. A best friend who kept a six-week secret from me.

I wonder now how much of Katie I actually had, and how much I only ever got to borrow