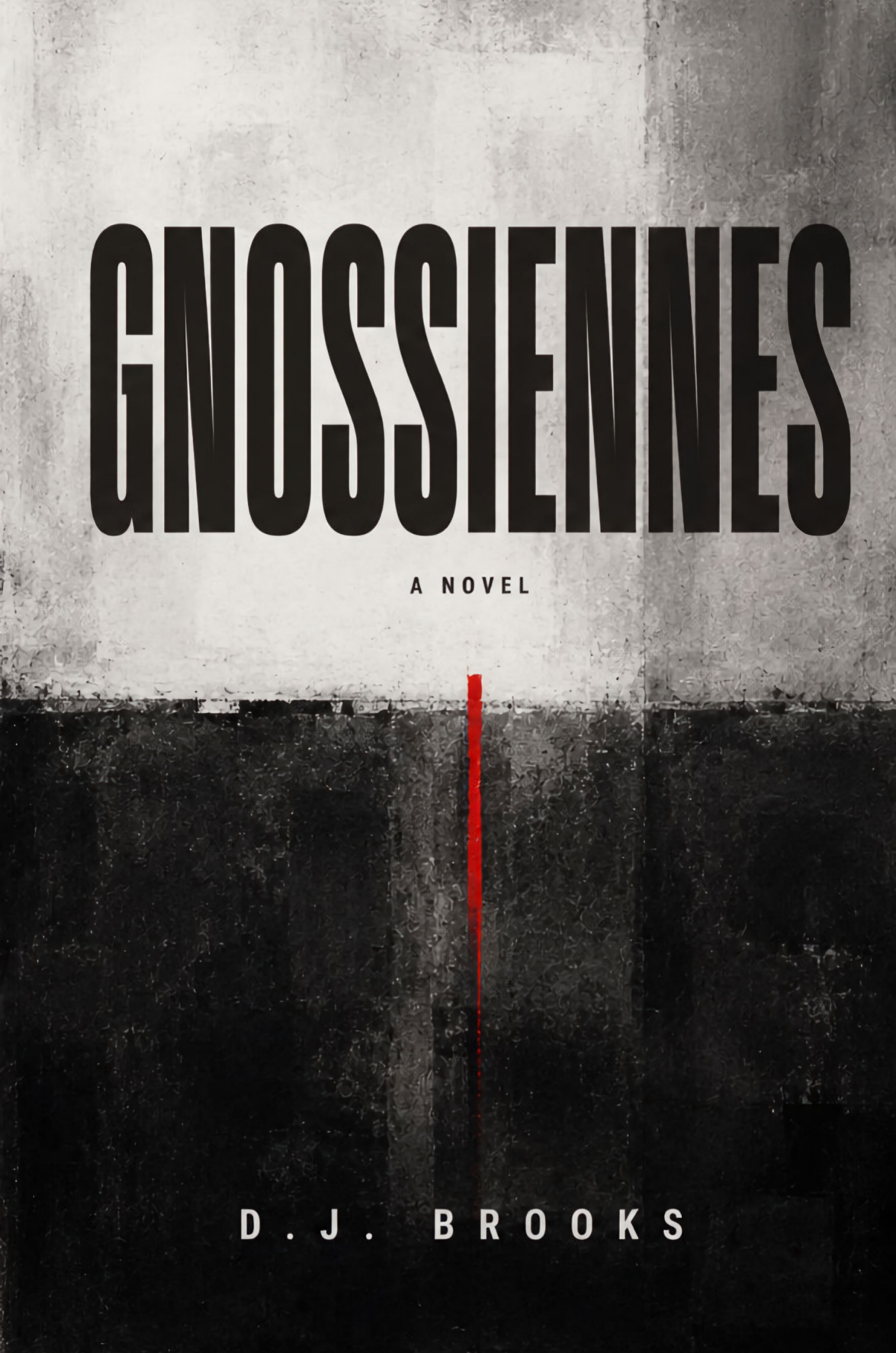
GNOSSIENNES

A NOVEL



D.J. BROOKS

CHAPTER ONE

I wake early in the Victorian house on Luttrell Street. Sleep became something I did badly when I was nineteen, something that 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 in 2010, when I was twenty-eight and thought restoration projects were metaphors for personal transformation. 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.

The machinery for friendship broke in June 2000.

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

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 would have liked Harmony. Katie liked everyone, or at least made them feel as if she did. 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 and everyone else who'd been touched by Katie's light.

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, in January 2001, 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, and I was nineteen years old with a life that no longer made sense.

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: I became a detective because Katie was murdered and Detective Clyde Stannis couldn't solve it. Because if I couldn't be a concert pianist, if I couldn't go to France and become the person my mother thought I could be, then the least I could do was spend my life trying to do for other people what no one had done for Katie.

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 2025.

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 me into his office with a tone that means something is about to change.

I walk down the hall with a sick feeling already spreading through my stomach. My hands are shaking slightly. I notice, try to still them, can't.

When I sit across from Abernathy, I have to grip the armrests to keep steady.

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

The world doesn't tilt. It fractures.

Everything I've built for twenty-five years—the compartments, the walls, the careful distance between Megan the detective and Megan who lost Katie—cracks open at once. 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." He watches me carefully. "Megan, I need you to hear what I'm about to say. Really hear it."

I nod, though I'm not sure I can hear anything except the blood roaring in my ears.

"I know what this case has meant to you," he says. "I know you and Katie were close. But 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. Detective with a personal connection to the victim. Emotional investment. One mistake, one moment where grief clouds your judgment, and they'll tear the whole case 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.

"Do you?" Abernathy leans forward. "Because you look like you're about to pass out."

He's right. My knuckles are white on the armrests. There's sweat on my upper lip. My pulse is hammering in my throat. But I can't acknowl-

edge any of it, because acknowledging it means admitting I could lose my only chance to finally give Katie what she deserves.

"Here's what's going to happen," he says. "You're going to be on the task force. I'm not keeping you off this case. That would be cruel, and it would be stupid. You know it better than anyone alive. That matters."

Something loosens in my chest.

"But Luc Phan is going to be lead detective."

The relief vanishes.

I open my mouth, but Abernathy raises a hand.

"Listen to me. This isn't a demotion. This is about protecting the case. The first thing any halfway decent defense attorney will do is argue the investigation is compromised because the victim's best friend ran it. They'll say you fixated on their client because of personal vendetta, that every piece of evidence is tainted by grief. It won't matter that they're wrong. It will be enough to create doubt."

My throat tightens. "So I work it, but I don't lead it."

"You work it as Luc's partner. You bring your knowledge, your instincts, your understanding of who Katie was and what happened to her. But Luc signs the warrants, runs the briefings, makes the tactical calls. On paper, he's lead. In court, he's our answer to bias."

There's a knock at the door. Abernathy calls, "Come in," and Luc 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's too smart for that. He looks at me, and in his face I see not pity but recognition. He understands exactly what this costs.

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

Not I'll. We'll.

"I know this is the bureaucratic solution to a legal problem," Luc says. "I know why it has to be this way. But I'm not here to sideline you. I'm here to make sure that when we catch whoever did this, the case survives court."

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

I should say something. Should acknowledge that it makes sense, that I understand the legal reasoning, that I'm grateful Abernathy didn't keep me off the task force entirely. 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 work with Luc, trust his judgment, follow procedure 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? 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 again. "I understand the arrangement. I'll work with Luc. I'll follow procedure. I'll build a case that survives court."

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."

Not I'll. We'll.

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. And I'm going to work it as someone's partner instead of as lead, watching Luc sign the warrants and run the briefings while I stand beside him with all my knowledge, all my grief, and all my desperate need to finally give Katie what she deserves.

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday morning I start the engine and drive without conscious destination, but my body knows where it's going before my mind catches up. Down Broadway past the Old City warehouses, past the converted factory buildings that used to make textiles for a city that called itself the Underwear Capital of the World back when manufacturing mattered here. The University of Tennessee campus sprawls 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. On game days you can't move through this city without encountering the faithful, but I'm early enough that the streets are quiet, manageable, just the ordinary Saturday morning traffic of a mid-sized Southern city trying to figure out what it wants to be now that the TVA jobs and the textile mills are history.

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, because I don't know where else to go when the world shifts and you need to stand on ground that's held the weight of terrible things before and survived it.

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 pipe from the 1920s, part of Baker Creek's old system,

three feet wide, that Depression-era construction that's outlasted most of what was built around it

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, knowing what was coming, while we all searched and waited and hoped.

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

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. For most people, for the neighborhood, Katie's death is historical, something that happened in the distant past to people they never knew.

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 and discovered we were good at it. Katie was faster—she had that natural sprint speed, that explosive quality that made coaches fall in lovewith her. But I had better endurance, could hold a pace longer, could keep going when other people had to walk. Perfect balance, we used to say. Perfect partnership.

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 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. Would have protected her, or tried to, or at least given her someone to tell who wouldn't have killed her for it.

I sit at the culvert until nausea forces me back to the car. Haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon—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. My body knows something terrible is coming even if my mind is still trying to pretend this is manageable, is still trying to maintain the fiction that I can handle this professionally.

The memory surfaces before I can stop it, complete and terrible—

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. Everything normal.

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—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—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 nearest house. Pounded on the door. The woman who answered—Mrs. Henderson—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 Katie.

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

By midnight it was an active missing persons case and on June 15th it became a full-blown homicide investigation after they found her body in the drainage culvert.

I come back to the present slowly, that disorienting moment when memory releases you and you have to reorient to current reality. 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.

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.

The interior scream—the one I've carried for twenty-five years: 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.

I start the engine after the hour becomes two, after sitting in one place too long makes my back hurt and my legs go stiff. 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 like they might dissolve.

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 kept it secret from everyone who loved her.

Sunday is worse. Wake up at 4 AM after maybe ninety minutes of actual sleep, that fractured shallow sleep that doesn't restore anything. 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, in a way I've never managed. 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. I haven't talked to Martha in three months—we check in periodically, that ritual of grief that never quite ends, but we space it out now, give each other room to exist separately from Katie's death.

"Hi, Martha."

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

Of course they know. Of course it's already in the news. The DA's office must have released something, probably on Friday after Abernathy told me, probably a brief statement about cold case initiative and new DNA technology and families finally getting answers.

"Yes. It's true."

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

"Yes."

"Oh, Megan." Not disapproval. Something else. Something like concern mixed with understanding mixed with shared grief. "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 and lose our only chance at answers.

"I'm okay."

"You're not okay. Nobody would be okay with this." Martha's voice is gentle. "Megan, listen to me. You've been holding up under this for twenty-five years. That's long enough. You don't have to be the one who solves this. You don't have to sacrifice yourself for her."

"I'm not sacrificing myself—"

"Aren't you?" A pause. "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 worried about you. I've watched you turn yourself into a monument to Katie instead of being a person who exists separately from her death. And now they're reopening the case and I'm terrified what it's 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. Hang up and stand in my kitchen feeling exposed, feeling seen in a way that's uncomfortable, feeling like Martha just articulated something I've been avoiding acknowledging for years.

Monday morning I'm at KPD early, two and a half hours before the task force officially convenes. Haven't slept—gave up trying around 3 AM, just lay there watching the ceiling and counting heartbeats and thinking about Katie. Haven't eaten—tried, managed half a banana before nausea made continuing impossible. My hands are shaking and there's a tremor in my legs and I feel simultaneously wired and exhausted, a combination that comes from too much adrenaline and not enough sleep.

I sign out Katie's case file from Evidence. Box 00-4782. The clerk brings it out and tries to make conversation about the reopening. I'm not in the mood. Take the box to one of the small rooms off the main evidence area, windowless spaces with fluorescent lights that hum, with metal tables and uncomfortable chairs.

I've read this autopsy report dozens of times. I read it again, and it destroys me all over again.

The clinical language tries to make violence comprehensible by reducing it to measurements and observations. The details I've memorized but can't stop reading: ligature marks on wrists and ankles, dehydration markers, pressure sores indicating she was kept in one position for extended periods. Defensive wounds—skin cells under her fingernails where she'd scratched her attacker, fought back, tried to survive even when survival became impossible. Bruising around the throat consistent with manual strangulation, with someone's hands around her neck squeezing until she couldn't breathe anymore.

Then the line that makes me want to vomit: pregnancy, approximately six weeks gestational age. Fetal DNA collected and preserved.

Six weeks pregnant. Conception in late April or early May 2000, those last weeks of senior year when we were supposed to be celebrating graduation, making plans for college.

I have to put my head between my knees. Breathe through my nose. Count to ten. The nausea passes slowly, reluctantly, leaving behind that hollowed-out feeling.

We told each other everything. That's what I thought, anyway. When we got our periods. When we kissed boys. When Doug McCoy asked Katie out sophomore year and they had sex for the first time in his father's old yellow Mercury. Katie told me the next day and we talked about it for hours.

So why didn't she tell me she was pregnant?

The fetal DNA is in the system. For twenty-five years it's been sitting in storage waiting for technology to catch up to questions we couldn't answer in 2000. Now we have that technology.

Two DNA samples from Katie's body. The defensive wounds and the fetal tissue. Both male. Both from the same person.

Katie was pregnant by whoever killed her.

My phone buzzes with a text from Luc: Task force room, 10 min early if you want to get settled before official start.

I photograph the autopsy report pages with my phone even though I've memorized every word. Put the file back in its box. Sign it back into evidence. Walk to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face, trying to look like someone who's capable of working this case, trying to hide the fact that I'm barely functional.

The task force room is on the second floor, west wing. When I arrive ten minutes early like Luc suggested, he's already there with Sadie Collier—mid-thirties, sharp, works Sex Crimes. She's setting up her own materials, organizing files with the methodical precision of someone who's worked enough sexual assault cases to know that details matter.

"Megan." Sadie looks up, and her expression shifts when she sees me. "Jesus. When's the last time you slept?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You look like you're about to collapse." She exchanges a glance with Luc, that wordless communication between cops who've worked together before. "Have you eaten today?"

"I'm fine," I repeat, but my voice cracks slightly and ruins the effect.

Luc hands me coffee before I can pour it myself—black, the way I take it, because he pays attention to these things. "Drink this. And there's a muffin in my bag if you want it. Sarah made blueberry ones yesterday."

"I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask if you were hungry. I'm telling you to eat something before you pass out." His voice is gentle but firm. "Megan, you can't work this case if you're running on empty. Your body needs fuel. Your brain needs rest. You need to take care of yourself."

"After the meeting."

"Before the meeting." Sadie pulls the muffin from Luc's bag, unwraps it, hands it to me. "Eat. Now. We'll wait."

I take the muffin because arguing feels impossible, because they're both looking at me with a concern that suggests they're ready to drag me to Abernathy if I don't cooperate. Manage three bites. My stomach protests but accepts it, that grudging acceptance of sustenance when the body realizes it needs something even if the mind is too preoccupied to notice hunger.

"Better?" Luc asks.

"Better."

"Liar." But he smiles slightly. "Okay. So. Dr. Trenton is presenting via video. She's got preliminary genealogical results. Abernathy says it's significant. Grant Kessler from Narcotics is joining us too."

Sadie leans against the table, watching me with that evaluating look. "Megan, I know this is Katie's case. I know what that means to you. But I need you to hear this: you don't have to carry this alone. That's why there's a task force. That's why Luc is your partner. That's why I'm here. We're going to work this together, and if it gets to be too much, if you need to step back for any reason, that's okay. Nobody will think less of you."

"I'm not stepping back."

"I'm not saying you should. I'm saying you can. There's a difference." Sadie holds my gaze. "And I'm saying that working yourself into physical collapse isn't going to help Katie. It's just going to make you useless when we actually need you functional."

She's right. I know she's right. But acknowledging it feels like weakness, feels like admitting I'm not strong enough for this.

People filter in. Deputy Chief Abernathy arrives with case files, with his authority that makes everyone straighten slightly. Grant Kessler appears—mid-fifties, neat, unremarkable in that way experienced detectives often are. He nods at me, at Luc, takes a seat across the table.

"Grant," Luc says. "Good to have you on this."

"Happy to help." Grant's voice is measured, professional. "Cold cases are always tough, but twenty-five years is a long time to wait for answers."

Sadie asks about his background in Narcotics, whether he's worked cold cases before. Grant explains he's done a few, mostly drug-related homicides that went cold in the nineties and got reopened when informants came forward years later.

"Different from this," he admits. "But the principles are the same. Follow the evidence. Don't make assumptions. Build the case methodically."

Abernathy calls the meeting to order. Introduces everyone for the record, establishes the formal chain of command—Luc as lead, me as his partner, Sadie handling the sexual assault angle, Grant providing additional investigative support.

Dr. Lisa Trenton joins via video from Nashville. Mid-forties, professional, the kind of sharp that comes from being good at something difficult and knowing it. Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, genealogist, specialist in forensic genealogy.

She explains the process in language that tries to be accessible without being condescending. Take the DNA samples and run them through genealogical databases—GEDmatch, FamilyTreeDNA, 23andMe. Find distant relatives, people who share enough DNA to establish family connections. Then work backward through genealogical records, building trees that branch forward through generations until they arrive at

potential suspects who would have been the right age, in the right place, in June 2000.

"The good news," Dr. Trenton says, "is that we got multiple hits in the databases. Strong matches—second and third cousins. That gives us solid anchor points for building the family trees."

Luc leans forward. "Timeline for results?"

"Two to three weeks for preliminary identification. Could be one name, could be five, depends on how the trees branch. But I'm optimistic we can narrow it down significantly."

Sadie asks about verification protocols. "Once you identify a potential suspect through the family tree, how do we confirm it's actually him and not a cousin or sibling?"

"You'd need a direct DNA sample for confirmation," Dr. Trenton explains. "But the genealogy narrows it down significantly. Instead of searching the entire population, you're looking at maybe five to ten individuals max. Then it's standard police work—alibis, opportunity, motive."

Grant speaks up, his voice carrying an edge I hadn't noticed before. "What about defense challenges to the methodology? This kind of genetic genealogy is still relatively new. Defense attorneys are going to attack it."

Dr. Trenton nods. "They will. But the methodology is sound and it's been upheld in multiple cases now. Golden State Killer set the precedent. As long as we document everything properly, maintain chain of custody, follow the protocols exactly, it'll hold up in court."

"And if our suspect is deceased?" Grant asks. "What then?"

"Then we work with what we have," Abernathy says. "Establish the facts, give the family closure even if we can't prosecute. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First we identify the suspect, then we figure out next steps."

The meeting continues for another forty minutes. Discussion of interview priorities—teachers first, then classmates, anyone who might have noticed behavioral changes in Katie that spring. Discussion of evi-

dence review—everything needs to be reexamined with fresh eyes, with 2025 forensic techniques that didn't exist in 2000.

Luc takes notes efficiently, asks good questions about coordination and logistics. Sadie focuses on the sexual assault angle, the pregnancy, what that tells us about the relationship between Katie and her killer. Grant listens more than he talks, occasionally asking pointed questions that suggest he's thinking several steps ahead.

I sit there trying to focus, trying to contribute, but my mind keeps sliding sideways. Katie was pregnant. Katie was murdered by whoever got her pregnant. Someone she knew well enough to sleep with, trusted enough to be alone with.

The meeting adjourns. Investigation officially begins. We're given access credentials for the case files, told to start reviewing evidence with fresh eyes.

Luc catches my arm as people file out. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just processing."

"You're not processing. You're drowning." His voice is quiet enough that nobody else can hear. "And that's okay. This is Katie. Of course you're drowning. But you need to let me help you swim."

"I don't know how."

"I know. That's why I'm not asking permission." He gathers his materials. "We're going to K Brew. You're going to eat actual food. Then we're going to talk about how we work this case together, how we divide the labor, how we make sure you don't work yourself into a breakdown."

"Luc—"

"Not negotiable." But his voice is kind. "Come on. Coffee and food. Then we figure out next steps."

Sadie appears at my other side. "I'm coming too. You need people around you for this, Megan. Whether you think you do or not."

Grant pauses on his way out, glances back at us. "For what it's worth," he says, "I lost someone too. Long time ago. Different circumstances. But I know what it's like to work a case when it's personal. If you ever need to talk, or just need someone who gets it, I'm around."

He leaves before I can respond.

I follow Luc and Sadie out of the building, legs unsteady, vision slightly blurred from exhaustion. Walk to my car and realize I'm not sure I should be driving, not sure my reflexes are reliable enough.

Luc notices. "Ride with me. We'll get your car later."

I don't argue. Get in his passenger seat and let him drive, let someone else be in control for five minutes, let myself just exist without having to navigate or make decisions or pretend I'm functional.

The task force is formed. The investigation is beginning. Dr. Trenton is working the DNA, building family trees that will lead us somewhere.

Two to three weeks until we have a manageable list of suspects.

I lean my head against the window and close my eyes, just for a moment, just long enough to pretend that I'm okay, that I can handle this, that Katie's case reopening isn't destroying me from the inside out.

But I'm not okay. And everyone can see it. And I have no idea how I'm going to survive the next few weeks.