



DON'T
SAY
A
WORD

AMBER
LYNN
NATUSCH

SILENCE ISN'T GOLDEN—IT'S DEADLY.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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PROLOGUE

When I was eight, I learned what evil was.

Not the generic kind of evil that people use to describe bad things, but real and true evil of the most biblical sense. The kind that defies explanation. The kind that you can never scrub from your mind once you encounter it.

Dad and Gramps had taken me to Matthew's Ice Cream Shop after a baseball game that day. I'd finally won after a six-game losing streak. Dad thought that win was worthy of celebrating, so the three of us crammed into the two-person booth in the back of the shop with an ice cream sundae, equipped with spoons longer than my forearm. I was three bites in when Dad's phone rang. I watched his proud expression fall to one of horror before he masked it with his official FBI face. The one that gave nothing away. But it was too late. I'd already seen the truth behind the lie.

"Where is she?" he'd asked, staring off past where Gramps and I sat. "I understand. I'll be right in." He hung up the phone, then slid out of the booth. "I'm so sorry, Kylene. You and Gramps will have to celebrate without me. It's work . . . I have to go."

He turned to walk away, but Gramps stopped him in his tracks.

"They found that Woodley girl, didn't they, Bruce?"

My father looked over his shoulder to Gramps, his lips pressed into a thin, grim line. He nodded once, and I could feel Gramps go tense beside me. That nod had meant far more to him than it had to me. I mean, finding the girl who had been missing from one town over was a good thing, right? She'd been gone for a long time; shouldn't they have looked happier? Wasn't that something worth celebrating?

I would find out later that it wasn't something to celebrate at all.

Gramps and I watched as my father's pace hastened on his way to the car. I turned to Gramps and started my interrogation. I'd always been my father's daughter.

"Is Daddy going to bring her home? Is that why he had to leave?"

Gramps' expression softened, and he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close to him.

"No, Junebug. That's not why he had to go."

"Then why?"

"Well, I reckon your daddy's gonna go find the person that took that girl away. He's gonna keep him from ever doin' that to anyone else ever again."

"Because Daddy stops the bad guys, right?"

"He sure does, Junebug. He sure does."

"Okay. . . ."

"Now, eat your ice cream before it makes a big ole mess of this table."

He scooped some onto his spoon and took a bite, smiling as he swallowed it. But that smile never reached his eyes, and even at that young age, I knew something was wrong. I sat up on my knees and grabbed his face in my hands. It was then that I saw the unshed tears still welled in the corners of his eyes.

"Gramps, what's wrong?" He forced a laugh and kissed me

on my forehead to dismiss my concerns. But even at eight, I was not so easily derailed. "Tell me why you're sad, Gramps."

When he realized I had no intention of dropping it, he sighed.

"Because every time your father gets one of those calls, it reminds me that there are people in this world—truly evil people that don't belong."

"You see those people, right? In the prison?"

He nodded. "I sure do. And your daddy helps put 'em there."

"Gramps, how do you know someone is a bad guy?"

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

"You don't, Junebug. Ain't no way to know for sure 'til it's too late."

I remember letting those words soak into my mind—trying to give them context when I had none for them. They sank to the bottom of my consciousness until later that night when I sat at the top of the stairs and eavesdropped on my parents' conversation. I heard my father recount the vivid details of what had happened to Sarah Woodley. How she'd been taken after school never to be seen alive again. How her body showed that she'd been tortured and beaten before she died. He used words I didn't recognize at the time. Words I didn't understand fully until I was older.

When I learned them, I remembered what my father said that night and my stomach roiled with realization.

At the tender age of eight, I learned that a monster could be lurking behind every passing smile, every friendly neighbor, every pillar of the community. It cast the world in a much darker light. Made me question everything.

It was those suspicious traits that had made my father an amazing investigator, but even he'd fallen victim to a faceless

evil. And that truth was a wake-up call. It wasn't enough for me to be as smart as my father—I needed to be smarter. If I wasn't, he would rot in prison—or die long before his murder sentence was served.

And I could end up as dead as Sarah Woodley.