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books

**THINGS
WE HIDE
FROM
THE
LIGHT**

LUCY SCORE


HODDER

1

Tiny Little Embers

Nash

The federal agents in my office were lucky for two reasons. First, my left hook wasn't what it had been before getting shot.

And second, I hadn't been able to work my way up into feeling anything, let alone mad enough to make me consider doing something stupid.

"The Bureau understands you have a personal interest in finding Duncan Hugo," Special Agent Sonal Idler said from across my desk where she sat with a ramrod-straight spine. She flicked her gaze to the coffee stain on my shirt.

She was a steely woman in a pantsuit who looked as though she ate procedures for breakfast. The man next to her, Deputy U.S. Marshal Nolan Graham, had a mustache and the look of a man forced into something he really didn't want to do. He also looked like he blamed me for it.

I wanted to work my way up to pissed off. Wanted to feel something other than the great, sucking void that rolled over

me, inevitable as the tide. But there was nothing. Just me and the void.

"But we can't have you and your boys and girls running around mucking up my investigation," Idler continued.

On the other side of the glass, Sergeant Grave Hopper was dumping a pint of sugar into his coffee and glaring daggers at the two feds. Behind him, the rest of the bullpen buzzed with the usual energy of a small-town police department.

Phones rang. Keyboards clicked. Officers served. And the coffee sucked.

Everyone was alive and breathing. Everyone but me.

I was just pretending.

I crossed my arms and ignored the sharp twinge in my shoulder.

"I appreciate the professional courtesy. But what's with the special interest? I'm not the only cop to take a bullet in the line of duty."

"You also weren't the only name on that list," Graham said, speaking up for the first time.

My jaw tightened. The list was where this nightmare had begun.

"But you were the first one targeted," Idler said. "Your name was on that list of LEOs and informants. But this thing is bigger than one shooting. This is the first time we've got something that could stick to Anthony Hugo."

It was the first time I'd heard any kind of emotion in her voice. Special Agent Idler had her own personal agenda, and nailing crime boss Anthony Hugo to the wall was it.

"I need this case to be airtight," she continued. "Which is why we can't have any locals trying to take matters into their own hands. Even if they've got badges. The greater good always comes with a price tag."

I rubbed a hand over my jaw and was surprised to find

more than a five-o'clock shadow there. Shaving hadn't exactly been high on my priority list lately.

She assumed I'd been investigating. Reasonable given the circumstances. But she didn't know my dirty little secret. No one did. I might be healing on the outside. I might put on my uniform and show up at the station every day. But on the inside, there was nothing left. Not even a desire to find the man responsible for this.

"What do you expect my department to do if Duncan Hugo comes back here looking to shoot holes in a few more of its citizens? Look the other way?" I drawled.

The feds shared a look. "I expect you to keep us apprised of any local happenings that might tie in to our case," Idler said firmly. "We've got a few more resources at our disposal than your department. And no personal agendas."

I felt a flicker of something in the nothingness. *Shame.*

I should have a personal agenda. Should be out there hunting down the man myself. If not for me, then for Naomi and Waylay. He'd victimized my brother's fiancée and her niece in another way, by abducting them and terrorizing them over the list that had earned me two bullet holes.

But part of me had died in that ditch that night, and what was left didn't seem like it was worth fighting for.

"Marshal Graham here will be staying close for a while. Keeping an eye on things," Idler continued.

Mustache didn't look any happier about that than I was.

"Any particular kind of things?" I asked.

"All remaining targets on the list are receiving federal protection until we ascertain that the threat is no longer imminent," Idler explained.

Christ. The whole damn town was going to be in an uproar if they found out federal agents were hanging around waiting for someone to break the law. And I didn't have the energy for an uproar.

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“I don’t need protection,” I said. “If Duncan Hugo had two brain cells to rub together, he wouldn’t be hanging around here. He’s long gone.” At least, that was what I told myself late at night when the sleep wouldn’t come.

“All due respect, Chief, you’re the one who got himself shot. You’re lucky you’re still here,” Graham said with a smug twitch of his mustache.

“What about my brother’s fiancée and niece? Hugo kidnapped them. Are they getting protection?”

“We have no reason to believe that Naomi and Waylay Witt are in any danger at this time,” Idler said.

The twinge in my shoulder graduated to a dull throb to match the one in my head. I was low on sleep and patience, and if I didn’t get these two pains in the ass out of my office, I wasn’t confident I could keep things civil.

Mustering as much southern charm as I could, I rose from behind my desk. “Understood. Now, if y’all will excuse me, I have a town to serve.”

The agents got to their feet and we exchanged perfunctory handshakes.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d keep me in the loop. Seein’ as how I’ve got a ‘personal interest’ and all,” I said as they hit the door.

“We’ll be sure to share what we can,” Idler said. “We’ll also be expecting a call from you as soon as you remember anything from the shooting.”

“Will do,” I said through gritted teeth. Between the trifecta of physical wounds, memory loss, and the empty numbness, I was a shadow of the man I’d been.

“Be seein’ you,” Graham said. It sounded like a threat.

I waited until they’d strutted their asses out of my station before snagging my jacket off the coat rack. The hole in my shoulder protested when I shoved my arm into the sleeve. The one in my torso didn’t feel much better.

“You all right, Chief?” Grave asked when I stepped out into the bullpen.

Under normal circumstances, my sergeant would have insisted on a play-by-play of the meeting followed by an hour-long bitch session about jurisdictional bullshit. But since I’d gotten myself shot and almost killed, everyone was doing their damndest to treat me with kid gloves.

Maybe I wasn’t hiding things as well as I thought.

“Fine,” I said, harsher than I’d intended.

“Heading out?” he prodded.

“Yeah.”

The eager new patrol officer popped up out of her chair like it was spring-loaded. “If you want lunch, I can pick something up for you from Dino’s, Chief,” she offered.

Born and raised in Knockemout, Tashi Bannerjee was police academy fresh. Now, her shoes gleamed and her dark hair was scraped back in a regulations-exceeding bun. But four years ago, she’d been ticketed in high school with riding a horse through a fast-food drive-thru. Most of the department had skirted the line of the law at some point in our youth, which made it mean more that we chose to uphold it rather than circumvent it.

“I can get my own damn lunch,” I snapped.

Her face fell for just a second before she recovered, making me feel like I’d just landed a kick to a puppy. *Fuck*. I was turning into my brother.

“Thanks for the offer though,” I added in a slightly less antagonized tone.

Great. Now I had to do something nice. Again. Make yet another I’m-sorry-for-being-an-asshole gesture that I didn’t have the energy for. So far this week, I’d brought in coffee, doughnuts, and—after a particularly embarrassing loss of temper over the thermostat in the bullpen—gas station candy bars.

“I’m heading out to PT. Be back in an hour or so.”

With that, I stepped out into the hall and strode toward the exit like I had business to attend to just in case anyone else had a mind to try to strike up a conversation.

I blanked my mind and tried to focus on what was happening right in front of me.

The full force of northern Virginia fall hit me when I shoved my way through the glass doors of the Knox Morgan Municipal Center. The sun was shining in a sky so blue it hurt the eyes. The trees lining the street were putting on a show as their leaves gave up the green for russets, yellows, and oranges. Pumpkins and hay bales dominated the downtown window displays.

I glanced up at the roar of a bike and watched Harvey Lithgow cruise by. He had devil horns on his helmet and a plastic skeleton lashed upright to the seat behind him.

He raised a hand in greeting before rumbling off down the road doing at least fifteen over the posted speed limit. Always pushing the bounds of the law.

Fall had always been my favorite season. New beginnings. Pretty girls in soft sweaters. Football season. Homecoming. Cold nights made warmer with bourbon and bonfires.

But everything was different now. *I* was different now.

Since I’d lied about physical therapy, I couldn’t very well be seen grabbing lunch downtown, so I headed for home.

I’d make a sandwich I didn’t want to eat, sit in solitude, and try to find a way to make it through the rest of the day without being too much of a dick.

I needed to get my shit together. It wasn’t that fucking hard to push papers and make a few appearances like the useless figurehead I now was.

“Mornin’, chief,” Tallulah St. John, our resident mechanic and co-owner of Café Rev, greeted me as she jaywalked right

in front of me. Her long, black braids were gathered over the shoulder of her coveralls. She had a grocery tote in one hand and a coffee, most likely made by her husband, in the other.

“Mornin’, Tashi.”

Knockemout’s favorite pastime was ignoring the law. Where I stuck to the black and white, sometimes it felt like the rest of the people around me lived entirely in the gray. Founded by lawless rebels, my town had little use for rules and regulations. The previous police chief had been happy to leave citizens to fend for themselves while he shined up his badge as a status symbol and used his position for personal gain for more than twenty years.

I’d been chief now for nearly five years. This town was my home, the citizens, my family. Clearly I’d failed to teach them to respect the law. And now it was only a matter of time before they all realized I was no longer capable of protecting them.

My phone pinged in my pocket, and I reached for it with my left hand before remembering I no longer carried it on that side. On a muttered oath, I pulled it free with my right.

Knox: Tell the feds they can kiss your ass, my ass, and the whole damn town’s ass while they’re at it.

Of course my brother knew about the feds. An alert probably went out the second their sedan rolled onto Main Street. But I wasn’t up for a discussion about it. I wasn’t up for anything really.

The phone rang in my hand.

Naomi.

It wasn’t that long ago that I would have been eager as hell to answer that call. I’d had a thing for the new-in-town waitress riding a streak of bad luck. But she’d fallen, inexplicably, for my grumpy-ass brother instead. I’d given up the crush—easier than

I'd thought—but had enjoyed Knox's annoyance every time his soon-to-be wife checked in on me.

Now, though, it felt like one more responsibility that I just couldn't handle.

I sent the call to voicemail as I rounded the corner onto my street.

"Mornin', chief," Neecey called as she hauled the pizza shop's easel sign out the front door. Dino's opened at 11:00 a.m. on the dot seven days a week. Which meant I'd only made it four hours into my workday before I'd had to bail. A new record.

"Morning, Neece," I said without enthusiasm.

I wanted to go home and close the door. To shut out the world and sink into that darkness. I didn't want to stop every six feet to have a conversation.

"Heard that fed with the mustache is stickin' around. Think he'll enjoy his stay at the motel?" she said with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

The woman was a glasses-wearing, gum-chewing gossip who chatted up half the town every shift. But she had a point. Knockemout's motel was a health inspector's wet dream. Violations on every page of the handbook. Someone needed to buy the damn thing and tear it down.

"Sorry, Neece. Gotta take this," I lied, bringing the phone to my ear, pretending like I had a call.

The second she ducked back inside, I stowed the phone and hurried the rest of the way to my apartment entrance.

My relief was short-lived. The door to the stairwell, all carved wood and thick glass, was propped open with a banker box marked *Files* in sharp scrawl.

Still eyeing the box, I stepped inside.

"Son of a damn bitch!" A woman's voice that did not belong to my elderly neighbor echoed from above.

I looked up just as a fancy black backpack rolled down the stairs toward me like a designer tumbleweed. Halfway up the flight, a pair of long, lean legs caught my attention.

They were covered in sleek leggings the color of moss, and the view just kept getting better. The fuzzy gray sweater was cropped and offered a peek at smooth, tan skin over taut muscle while highlighting subtle curves. But it was the face that demanded the most attention. Marble-worthy cheekbones. Big, dark eyes. Full lips pursed in annoyance.

Her hair—so dark it was almost black—was cut in a short, choppy cap and looked like someone had just shoved their fingers through it. My fingers flexed at my sides.

Angelina Solavita, better known as Lina or my brother's ex-girlfriend from a lifetime ago, was a looker. And she was in my stairwell.

This wasn't good.

I bent and picked up the bag at my feet.

"Sorry for hurling my luggage at you," she called as she wrestled a large, wheeled suitcase up the final few steps.

I had no complaints about the view, but I had serious concerns about surviving small talk.

The second floor was home to three apartments: mine, Mrs. Tweedy's, and a vacant space next to mine.

I had my hands full living across the hall from an elderly widow who didn't have much respect for privacy and personal space. I wasn't interested in adding to my distractions at home. Not even when they looked like Lina.

"Moving in?" I called back when she reappeared at the top of the stairs. The words sounded forced, my voice strained.

She flashed me one of those sexy little smiles. "Yeah. What's for dinner?"

I watched her hit the stairs at a jog, descending with speed and grace.

“I think you can do better than what I have to offer.” I hadn’t been to a grocery store in... Okay, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d ventured into Grover’s Groceries to buy food. I’d been living off takeout when I remembered to eat.

Lina stopped on the last step, putting us eye-to-eye, and gave me a slow once-over. The smile became a full-fledged grin. “Don’t sell yourself short, hotshot.”

She’d called me that for the first time a handful of weeks ago when she’d cleaned up the mess I’d made of my stitches saving my brother’s ass. At the time, I should have been thinking about the avalanche of paperwork I was going to have to deal with thanks to an abduction and the ensuing shoot-out. Instead, I’d sat propped against the wall, distracted by Lina’s calm, competent hands, her clean, fresh scent.

“You flirting with me?” I hadn’t meant to blurt it out, but I was hanging on by sheer will.

At least I hadn’t told her I liked the smell of her laundry detergent.

She arched an eyebrow. “You’re my handsome new neighbor, the chief of police, and my college boyfriend’s brother.”

She leaned in an inch closer, and a single spark of something warm stirred in my belly. I wanted to cling to it, to cup it in my hands until it thawed my icy blood.

“I *really* love bad ideas. Don’t you?” Her smile was dangerous now.

Old Me would have turned on the charm. Would have enjoyed a good flirt. Would have appreciated the mutual attraction. But I wasn’t that man anymore.

I held up her bag by the strap. Her fingers got tangled around mine when she reached for it. Our gazes met and held. That spark multiplied into a dozen tiny little embers, almost enough for me to remember what it was like to feel something.

Almost.

She was watching me intently. Those whiskey-brown eyes peered into me like I was an open book.

I extricated my fingers from hers. “What did you say you do for a living?” I asked. She’d mentioned it in passing, called it boring, and changed the subject. But she had eyes that missed nothing, and I was curious what job would let her hang out in Nowhere, Virginia, for weeks at a time.

“Insurance,” she said, slinging the backpack over one shoulder.

Neither one of us retreated. Me because those embers were the only good thing I’d felt in weeks.

“What kind of insurance?”

“Why? Are you in the market for a new policy?” she teased as she started to pull away.

But I wanted her to stay close. Needed her to fan those weak sparks to see if there was anything inside me worth burning.

“Want me to grab that?” I offered, hooking my thumb at the box of files against the door.

The smile disappeared. “I’ve got it,” she said briskly, making a move to step past me.

I blocked her. “Mrs. Tweedy would have my hide if she found out I made you haul that box up those stairs,” I insisted.

“Mrs. Tweedy?”

I pointed up. “2C. She’s out with her weight-lifting group. But you’ll meet her soon enough. She’ll make sure of it.”

“If she’s out, she won’t know that you didn’t aggravate your bullet wounds by insisting on lugging a box up a flight of stairs,” Lina pointed out. “How are they healing?”

“Fine,” I lied.

She hummed and raised that eyebrow again. “Really?”

She didn’t believe me. But my craving for those tiny slivers of feeling was so strong, so desperate, I didn’t care.

“Right as rain,” I insisted.

I heard a low ringtone and saw the flash of annoyance as Lina retrieved her phone from some hidden pocket in the waistband of her leggings. It was only a glimpse, but I caught “Mom” on the screen before she hit Ignore. It looked like we both were avoiding family.

I took a chance and used the distraction to retrieve the box, making a point to use my left arm. My shoulder throbbed, and a cold bead of sweat worked its way down my back. But as soon as I locked eyes with her again, the sparks came back.

I didn’t know what this was, only that I needed it.

“I see the Morgan stubbornness is just as strong in you as it is in your brother,” she observed, tucking the phone back into her pocket. She gave me another assessing look before turning and starting up the stairs.

“Speaking of Knox,” I said, fighting to keep my voice sounding natural, “I take it you’re in 2B?” My brother owned the building, which included the bar and barbershop on the first floor.

“I am now. I was staying at the motel,” she said.

I sent up a prayer of thanks that she was taking the stairs slower than she had on the way down.

“Can’t believe you lasted that long there.”

“This morning, I saw a rat get into a slap fight with a roach the size of a rat. Last straw,” she said.

“Coulda stayed with Knox and Naomi,” I said, forcing the words out before I was too out of breath to speak. I was out of condition, and her shapely ass in those leggings wasn’t helping my cardiovascular endurance.

“I like my own space,” she said.

We made it to the top of the stairs, and I followed her to the open door next to mine as a river of icy sweat snaked down my back. I really needed to get back to the gym. If I was going to be a walking corpse for the rest of my life, I should at least be one who could handle a conversation on a flight of stairs.

Lina dropped her backpack inside before turning to take the box from me.

Once again, our fingers touched.

Once again, I felt something. And it wasn’t just the ache in my shoulder, the emptiness in my chest.

“Thanks for the help,” she said, taking the box from me.

“If you need anything, I’m right next door,” I said.

Those lips curved ever so slightly. “Good to know. See you around, hotshot.”

I stood rooted to the spot even after she shut the door, waiting until every single one of those embers went cold.