



## Chapter Thirteen: Into the Dirt

I wasn't surprised to find Jasper awake beside me. Honestly, I figured he would be. He was drawing furiously. It wasn't his usually careful movement and tiny strokes of his pencil. They were quick, angry slashes. The tip dragged hard against the paper. He was taking his frustration out on the tablet.

Quickly, I pushed myself up off my stomach to see what he was doing. He closed the book before I could. "Good morning, darlin. Happy New Year," he attempted to say pleasantly. It wasn't convincing.

"What are you working on?"

"Nothing," he hastily replied, shaking his head as he tried to put it away. It wasn't playfulness or embarrassment. This was something else. I took it from his grip before he could. "Don't. You don't want to see that."

I ran my fingers over the leather cover. "What is it?"

He didn't look at me as he frowned. "Nothing. Nothing you need to worry about. I was just trying to get it out of my head."

That was not how we would operate. I wouldn't allow him to hide anything from me, even if he thought it was for my own good. I opened the book, making him sigh. The first page was of bodies in the woods, all face down in the leaves. Their remains were maimed with rope marks around their feet and ankles. Each corpse was different, yet they were all women: one blond, one with short black hair, and the other long and lighter.

The next was a closeup of my face and shoulders, my head turned to the side. My neck was sliced open, and there was blood coming from my nose and mouth. The necklace that never left my person was in view, pushed into the open wound at parts. My left hand was by my forehead, my ring shining.

I shut it and put it to the side. "I am fine, and I'm right here," I began in a calm voice. I took the pencil from his grip and set it on top of it. "I am happy, I am healthy, and I will be for a very long time. You will always keep me safe because you're my hero." I seized his hands, straddling his waist. He still wasn't looking at me. "They're just nightmares, and they will never become our reality. Royce is dead. And honestly, how likely am I really to come across another serial killer? Like statistically? You undoubtedly know that."

"Less than ten times in your lifetime, but people like me probably skew the numbers." He wove his fingers with mine, palm to palm. "You've already met your quota, and so have I."

"I wonder how many you have," I said thoughtfully.

"Dozens." He snorted as he shook his head. "An unhealthy amount."

Gnawing on my lip, I weighed my words. "I think we both need to go to therapy. Separately and as a couple. Not because we have any relationship problems, but a doctor might be able to give me tips to guide you when you have anxiety."

Jasper smiled a little. "You actually do very well at that already."

"But I can always improve. And if it makes your life even a bit easier, then I want to do it. A lot is changing right now."

"You're right." He nodded his head. "Yeah, we can set that up soon."

"Do you want to get out of going to your parents' place? Maybe feign illness and fuck around all day instead?"

He laughed at my bluntness. "No. I want to go. It'll be good food. I forget where Mama said she was ordering it from. And they'd be disappointed if we didn't come. Dad already got two more kegs for us to try with him."

“Yeah, we can’t disappoint him and not day drink with them,” I joked dryly. He pursed his lips for a moment before pinching my ribs. It made me squeal and laugh. “Oh, no! However will they recover?” I drawled in a southern accent.

“Day drinking wouldn’t be the worst way to spend the holiday. By the fire pit, eating smores, and listening to football. I need to relax. I just want things to be normal for a little while.”

Slowly, I moved my hands over his shoulders. “You’re really done with being a cop, huh? I think it’s starting to sink in for me.”

He looked off for a moment. “I hadn’t been in this last year. That wasn’t what I wanted to do.” He pointed off towards the past, wagging his finger at it in disappointment. “Being stuck in an office all day, repeating myself, or just sitting there in court. I didn’t do any damn good there.” Roughly, he pushed his hair off his forehead. “I could have flown back and forth when I needed to. But I don’t miss this either.” He picked up the book. Jasper ripped both pages out, balled them up in his fist, and threw them into the trash. “Fuck him. I’m glad he’s in hell. Monster.”

My husband was casting out his demons.

“So, why don’t we get cleaned up, and we’ll run to pick up some desserts to take to your parents.”

Pulling me into a kiss, he pressed his hands to my naked back. “Sounds good. In a minute.”

A minute turned into two hours later. We weren’t in a rush, though. I didn’t apply any makeup, throwing my hair up after I blow-dried it. I figured we would be outside a lot of the day, so I put on a heavy knitted sweater and a long sleeve shirt.

He was in a much better mood as we made our way to his car in the garage. The truck was parked beside it, looking like a joke compared to his BMW. When he opened the door for me, he gave me a slow, drawn-out kiss before he allowed me to sit.

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” He asked conversationally as he started the engine and opened the garage door. He backed up carefully. “You know, I’ve been wanting to do some rope play. Maybe I could tie you up and draw you in your new collar. That would be nice,” he said almost to himself. Pausing, he clicked the button to close it behind us.

Softly, I giggled. “Sounds good. We have plenty we haven’t even opened yet. I’ve gotten silk in every possible color-” I stopped when red came into view on the white garage entrance. It was dripping like blood.

Slowly, the message became clear. ‘Hello, Bella.’ It was as tall as I was.

Neither of us said anything for half a second as our mouths hung open.

“SON OF A BITCH!” Jasper roared in anger, killing the engine as we sat in the driveway.

I just continued to sit there, dumbfounded. “But why?” I asked loudly. “Just, but- UGH!” I groaned, looking away from the graffiti. It hurt my eyes. Then I realized that the yard and all of our landscaping was destroyed. Someone had shoved firecrackers after cherry bombs into our grass and trees. It was like a mini-battle was fought there. Black scorched the hibiscus that I loved so much. I flew out of the car and shouted, just as he did. Fury and anxiety boiled over the surface, bubbling as it ran down my body in a hot wave. “FUCKING FUCKS! I listened to them destroy our lawn! Goddammit! I thought it was the neighbors! Why didn’t someone call the cops?!”

“Because they probably thought it was the neighbors, too,” he stated with a sigh. “If I weren’t such a chickenshit, I could have at least looked outside to see-”

“No!” I stopped him. “You’re not! You can’t-”

“How can I protect you if I can’t even look-”

I whirled on him. “You are-”

We kept interrupting each other. “I’m doing a pretty shit job of being your bodyguard right now,” he snapped back, waving his hands around.

“Your job is to defend me, not the property! That’s why we have security stuff! Nobody tried to come into the house, so how could we have known? I’ve never spent a New Year or Fourth of July in Texas that I didn’t hear near-constant fireworks. I even remember thinking yesterday that I was surprised I didn’t hear them sooner in the night. Why would we think someone was doing anything wrong? Most people don’t just assume that there is a crime going on.”

“I’m still a federal agent. I’m taught to think like that. There is always something around the corner. And I’m supposed to pay fucking attention to keep my wife safe.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “It’s a good thing I’m quitting because I’m not up for the job anymore.” I wanted to argue, but the person on the other end answered. “Hey, Sam. Someone vandalized the house. I’m about to call 911. You might want to come over here to see this, too.” He paused. “Yeah, it’s... it’s something. You’ll see.” I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but he wasn’t happy. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you soon. See you in an hour.” He brought the cell away from his ear. “Let’s go inside for a minute while I call. And I’ll call my Mom and tell her-” Jasper sucked in a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll let her know what’s going on.” I gripped his hand as we went inside together. Right away, he locked the door. He took every step slowly like he was ready for some to jump out at us at any moment. When we got to our room, he pulled out his service weapon from the gun safe.

“I’m going to check the rest of the house. Stay here until I come back or until the police come.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, almost automatically.

He paused to look at me. Coming to my side, he gave me a quick kiss. He hurried from the room with his phone pressed to his ear. “Hello? Yes, I’m a federal agent. My name is Dr. Jasper Hale, and I’d like to report a crime. My badge number is-” I heard him say as he went down the stairs, talking to the local police department. He might not have been on active duty, but he would use every advantage that he had.

I wasn’t scared like I was before. Just... annoyed and frustrated. What they did was risky and pointless. But it was all repairable. It wasn’t as if I didn’t have the income to have it all fixed within a couple of weeks, if not sooner. It just amazed me no one noticed. If it had been any other day than New Year’s, they would have. It was some smart planning on their part.

Pulling out my phone, I dialed Rosalie’s number first. She would be more reasonable and calmer than my mother-in-law. I didn’t need her panic attack to throw me into one, too. I needed to be calm for Jasper.

“Hey, girl!” She greeted me brightly. She was in a good mood.

“Hey. Um, I don’t think we’ll make it over. Someone vandalized the townhouse.”

She gasped. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. They just fucked with our yard and spray-painted the garage.”

“What did it say?”

“Hello, Bella.”

There was a moment of silence. “So it’s the same person. Did you catch them on camera?”

“I don’t know. We just- just,” I stuttered, the stress starting to get to me. “We were just heading your way. Jasper is still looking around, and he’s talking on the phone.” I sniffled. “I

don't think we'll be making it, but I honestly don't know how long this will take or if he'll be in the mood to. He might need the company. I don't know. Is there any way you can tell your parents?"

"Yes, of course! We're already here. I'll let her know. Keep us updated, okay?"

"I will," I promised before I hung up the phone.

I looked out the window, but I couldn't see anything but the messed up turf. The front door opened and closed, the lock clicking loudly. My husband's footsteps came up the stairs. I knew them well enough just by sound already.

"They did the back and busted out all the security lights, too," he complained as he put his gun away. "Motherfuckers. Police should be here in a minute." He went to get his laptop from where it was charging. "I hope we can see something in the darkness. Hopefully the cameras got something before he did."

I sat down beside him. In seconds, he had the video files for the night before up and running. He started it at sunrise and rewound it quickly. He stopped when the lights blinked on like magic. Slowing it down, he checked the time. It was around eleven. At ten-thirty, a tiny, hooded figure came onto the screen for just a moment with a can of paint, shaking it hastily. They didn't look up at the camera. He went back until they disappeared. He tried all the different angles we had, catching them two more times. Whoever they were, they were very small. Petite. Maybe a teenager or possibly a child. It didn't seem possible. The only glimpse of their face we caught, it was obvious they were wearing a black mask. Not even their eyes were visible. It was so eerie.

There was a knock on the door. Standing, he hurried to go answer it. "It's a woman, and they look drunk," he mumbled in thought, taking his laptop with him. "Small, I'd estimate shorter than you. Five-foot one, less than a hundred pounds. They're wearing a lot of layers to hide their features. Groupie?" He questioned before throwing open the entrance.

It was the same cop as before. It must have been his regular beat. His partner was already starting to take pictures of the bitch's handiwork. "So, they're back," the officer began. "May I come in?"

"I'm going to start some coffee," I informed the men before turning to go into the kitchen. I knew I wasn't needed yet, and caffeine and some calories would probably help me from freaking out as much. We hadn't eaten because we were saving room for the big lunch Caroline was bragging about ordering. It was all the traditional good luck food, ham, black-eyed peas, greens, cornbread, and so much more.

I pulled out a doughnut from a box we got a couple of days before and ate it in two bites. Shoving it in my cheeks like a hamster, I chewed as I made a large pot for everyone.

When Sam arrived, he blinked for several seconds as he looked over the grass and garage. He put his hands on his waist. He was in red flannel, ragged jeans, and was wearing a cowboy hat and boots. "Dadgum. What did they do? Stomp m80s into the dirt every two inches and blow the entire thing to kingdom come?"

"The whole fucking thing. Front and back," Jasper replied with a frown. "It's exactly what they did."

"Were you not home last night?"

He shook his head. "Oh, no. We were." His tone was almost sarcastic and very biting.

"We thought it was the neighbors, and we were doing other things. It was around midnight. It literally got louder at the stroke of—" I stopped. "They did that on purpose, too. If not to fool us, the neighbors. They planned it perfectly. I should have known they would cause trouble today."

Our friend put his hand on my shoulder. "I am so sorry they're coming after you like this. I promise I will do my best to find out who did this."

"We don't have much to go on, but we've got a little security footage," Jasper informed him. "But it's a start."

"And a damn good one." He clapped his buddy on the back. "Let's go look at that. I've got some guys coming to take pictures and make a report. It looks like we're not exactly done with this case yet."

"It's definitely not Royce, though. It's a woman."

Sam stopped in surprise. "Oh! That's interesting," he smirked. "I can't wait to see this footage. That chick has got some money to blow and time to waste if she did this."

"Actually, we should see if there are any recent reports of firework theft," he added.

"Excellent idea."

They set up in the living room. I made them each a mug of coffee. Both of them were bent in close to the screen. Jasper's eyes were squinting, so I brought him his glasses.

"Thank you, darlin," he cooed, rubbing my back as he put them on. His gaze never left the laptop.

I leaned against the couch and watched them silently study the footage. There were several officers roaming my property, and a couple of cars parked outside. Some of our neighbors came out to get a look. Not that I blamed them. I would have been curious, too. The cops would have to interview them.

“It’s the same jacket as the jogger in the video from last time. Black with dark gray bands over the arms. Looks like a Nike swoosh on the breast,” Sam declared after about a minute. He paused it and pointed at each thing.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I’ll go to the office and check, but I’m pretty positive. Damn. I was going to grill out today, too.”

“I’m sorry. Look, it can wait-” Jasper began, but he cut him off.

“Hell no! Someone is doing some stupid shit to my friends, and I don’t like it. I will find out who, and I’m going to put a stop to it. I just gotta call Emily and let her know what’s going on. We can do it tomorrow. She’ll understand.” He pulled out his phone and paused. “Hey, if you have nothing going on, would you like to come over and join us? I miss having you around.”

My husband looked at me for reassurance, and I smiled. “Yeah. That would be great. I can’t wait to meet your wife,” I answered for us.

Four hours later, everyone was gone again, and it left only the destruction behind. Jasper texted his parents to let them know all the details. We plopped down on our rarely used couch at the same time. It had seen more action in the past day than it ever had. Slowly, we looked at each other and frowned. He took my hand and brought it to his lips to kiss.

We stayed there silently for twenty minutes, just holding hands. I jumped when there was a knock on the door.

He stood to get it. I anxiously watched from the sofa. He peeked through the crack, then scoffed a little as he opened it wider. His mother, father, grandmother, sister, and brother-in-law were all standing on the other side with trays of food.

“We waited for you to eat,” his mom told him, holding up the three foil packages. It seemed heavy, the weight bowing the bottom of the pan. “I’m going to take these to the kitchen and get them heated up!” She didn’t wait for him to say anything, rushing to put it down. Everyone followed her inside in a line. Even his grandmother was clutching a bag.

She patted his arm. “Hey, baby. Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine,” he said in a small voice. He hugged her tightly. She rubbed a soothing circle on his back.

“I don’t know who’s bothering you, but they’re real bastards.” He snorted and nodded in agreement. She went to put her sack down in the kitchen, too.

Pushing off the couch, I rushed to my husband. He turned his face away, hastily wiping his cheeks. I brought him into an embrace, putting my arms around his waist. “See? Everything will be okay.”

Smiling genuinely, he closed his eyes as he rested his forehead against mine. A fat tear rolled down his cheek. “Yes, it is.”