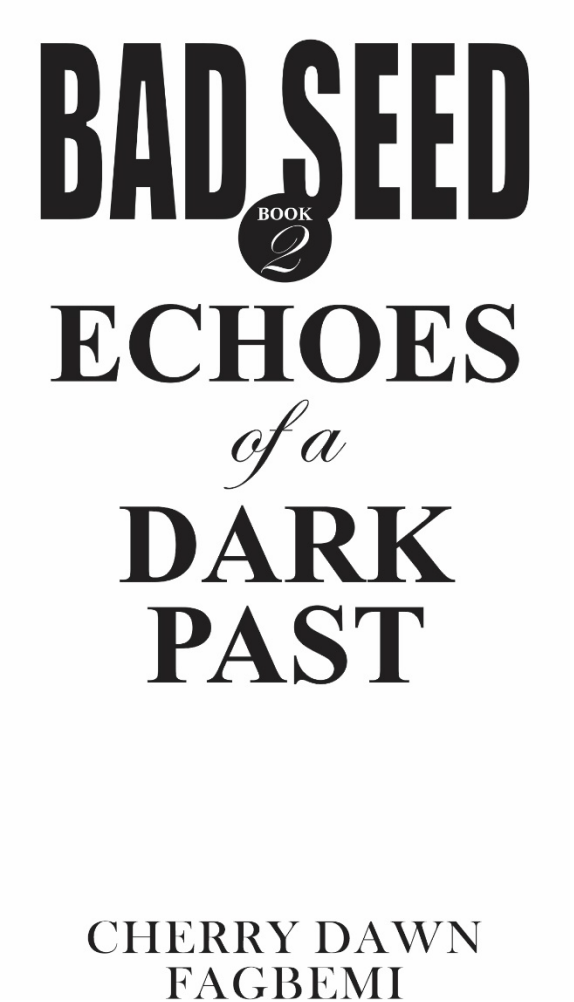
The past doesn't die when it's buried. It echoes until it's faced.



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Prologue
Vivienne's Hideaway

Vivienne

Greenspring, Jamaica

My husband built this retreat as a memorial to me—back when I was supposed to be dead.

Couples come here to rekindle the love they once shared. Warm Jamaican sunshine greets them each morning. Cool Caribbean breezes soothe them at night. A touch of magic lingers in the air, promising to make them fall in love all over again.

Vivienne's Hideaway works for everyone except me. Because when you've been left to die on the side of the road by someone who was supposed to protect you, no romance under the stars can rewrite the ending of that tragedy. No waterfalls can wash away the scars. No ocean is wide enough to silence what lives inside your head. No retreat can fix you when you're as broken as I am.

I've always felt we wouldn't last. He was a rich city boy with bodyguards and chauffeurs. Heck, his

family nearly owned all of Montego Bay, while I was a country girl with my head in the clouds.

He was too handsome, too confident, and too sure I'd smile back. He dressed better than me, smelled better too, and to an eighteen-year-old girl, twenty-two seemed ancient. Every day I showed up for work, there he was, flashing his damn pretty-boy smile at me. He knew what he was doing too. It was only a matter of time before I smiled back. I never understood why he chased me when every girl and their mamas were crushing on him.

With my marriage hanging by a thread, I finally get it. Because I don't smile anymore.

Now it turns out I wasn't the only woman in the picture.

We've lived here with our eight children—none of them ours by blood, all of them by heart. The only child I ever carried is gone. So is the man who took her from me.

But the dead can only hurt you once.

The living keep reopening old wounds.

Like today, when I can't even tell if I should still be in love with my husband.

A week ago, someone sent me another letter. This time, they even sent photographs.

I toss them aside, only to pick them up minutes later.

The woman with her arm draped around Jonathan's shoulder doesn't look familiar. Long hair. About my height. Not enough detail to prove anything. Just enough to make me need answers.

I'm not sure who deserves my anger more. Jonathan for deceiving me. Or me for believing him.

I'm not going to tell him about the letter or show him the pictures just yet. I'm sure he'll deny it, and I'm still trying to figure out who's been sending them. And why now?

I open the envelope, pull out the letter, and cross my legs on my bed. Thank God today is one of those quiet days when I can lock myself in my room and obsess over this letter without interruption.

Vivienne,

I see you haven't taken up my request to meet with me.

That's how the letter started. Not with "How are you doing?" Not even a good day, Vivienne. Just my name and the acknowledgment that I'd refused to be drawn into whatever this person is trying to drag me into.

But you are living in a fairyland if you think your husband is who you think he is. I've sent pictures that should convince you he isn't a saint.

If you don't believe me, ask him about Chara. If he tells you he doesn't know her, he's lying. I guess old habits die hard.

I know Damien was the devil. I'm sorry for what he did to you. I've known he was dangerous all along.

The offer still stands if you'd like to meet me. I'm looking out for you. But the man you live with has known for a long time that it was Damien who attacked you. In case you're still wondering, I don't have any ulterior motives. I don't want him to break your heart. Again.

Burying your head in the sand won't help you. Wake up before it's too late. The Hastings family isn't one you want to belong to. But I can help you get out only if you want to free yourself.

Like I said. I'm ready to meet you whenever you are.

–Concerned

I carefully fold the letter in half and slide it back into the envelope. I have a feeling whatever's been happening to me over the past months is about to boil over. Otherwise, my hands wouldn't be trembling

like this. I've worked hard to hide it. Not even Jas knows about it.

Jonathan thinks it's under control. My parents think he fixed me. Sean never asks, so I assume he thinks I'm not crazy anymore.

***

Tonight is one of those Caribbean nights when the moon refuses to show, and the voices in my head decide to argue. I don't know why they've come back now. I don't want to tell Jonathan what's happening to me. He'd look at me with pity. I hate that. What he doesn't know won't hurt him. If I keep my mouth shut, he'd believe I'm just going through one of my mood swings.

Right now, my husband is about to learn that his love isn't enough to keep me here. What happened at 101 Valence Avenue never really left me. One question still refuses to die. And all I can think about is whether Jonathan knew exactly what Damien was.

Because if he did…

Then nothing about us was ever real.

Chapter 1
The First Slip

Vivienne

How do I tell the love of my life I want a divorce? Why do I feel like walking away from my family? Unless I'm losing my mind again, none of this makes sense.

If Jonathan were cruel, selfish, or uncaring, leaving would be easy. But Jonathan Hastings is none of those things. That's the problem. Sometimes I wish he were a brute. Then at least I'd be justified. He's an amazing husband. An incredible father. Yet I'm about to break his heart for the second time. Leaving him will devastate me as much as it will break him.

Inside, I'm fragile, like I'll break any minute. Jasmine doesn't understand how I can have such a good life and still feel miserable. She thinks I should

be grateful. She didn't say it in so many words, but the last time I mentioned my husband, she almost bit my head off.

If I tell her I'm planning to leave Jonathan, she'll read me the riot act. That's why I'm not telling her a damn thing. I don't need her to judge me.

"Come to bed, V."

Jonathan has been calling me for the past ten minutes. His voice is steady and patient.

I don't know why he loves me. God, I'll miss him terribly. But I can't tell him the truth about why I'm leaving him.

The house is quiet tonight. The children are asleep. I sit on the porch, staring out across the river. We've sat here a hundred times before, back when our love felt untouched by tragedy. I could tell him anything, and he'd listen as though every word mattered. As if I mattered.

Sometimes I can still hear his laughter and all those promises of forever. But lately, something inside me has shut down without warning, dragging me back into the nightmare I barely survived.

I press my palms against my face and rock gently back and forth, trying to calm myself. If only I could erase the memories. Or forget, the way he seems to. As if Valence Avenue never happened. As if

everything we endured is behind us and all that's left is the version of us that survived.

He's watching me. It's the third time this week he's found me like this. I still haven't explained why I've grown distant. But Jonathan isn't stupid. He knows.

I pull my nightgown tighter and stare into the darkness, listening to the chorus of crickets and other night creatures rustling through the garden.

Living in Greenspring usually quiets the horror inside me. The sunset. The hummingbirds. The endless green hills. It's the reason Jonathan fell in love with this place when I first brought him here.

Being here with him should be enough.

It isn't.

"You need to make an appointment with Dr. Bloomfield," he says.

I don't particularly like seeing Dr. Bloomfield. He thinks I'm not trying hard enough. I see him only because Jonathan asked me to. If nothing else, he deserves the effort.

Jonathan doesn't get scared easily. If he thinks I need another visit, he's terrified. I look up at him. He's leaning against the doorframe. His hands are tucked in his pockets.

Normally, looking into his eyes would be enough to make me forget whatever was troubling me. Tonight is not one of those times.

"Every time I ask what's wrong, you ignore me," he says softly. "We've been doing so well for so long. What's changed?"

Really? What is he talking about? We seem to be living in two different realities. Things haven't been as good as he thinks.

He's still the same decent, handsome man I fell in love with, which makes it even harder to understand why I want to leave.

He reaches for me, a soft smile following. "Come with me," he says.

Before I take his hand, a sob escapes. I didn't expect it tonight, but after how I've been feeling all week, it was bound to happen.

"Take me back to Dallas," I cry, my voice growing louder as he draws closer.

He lifts me off the two-seater verandah chair without warning and carries me inside. He doesn't wait for me to protest. A minute later, I'm on my back in bed, watching my life unravel.

He kisses me, and I let him. He's slow at first, then it picks up. He plants tiny kisses all over my neck and my shoulder before settling on my lips. Maybe he thinks this is all I need to feel better. It has

always worked before. I almost let myself believe it would work now. That he could pull me back the way he used to do.

But it doesn't seem to be working. Something is different tonight, and if I can tell, so can he.

A few months back, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Now, all I do is close my eyes, grab fistfuls of the satin sheet, and wait for it to end.

I told him I'd be happy here, that I just needed him by my side, and that he would be enough.

Sometimes I wonder if finding him again felt more powerful than it truly was.

Time has a way of stripping illusions away.

Years passed, and somewhere along the way, I started questioning everything again: My life, past and present. My choices. And finally, him.

He loosens his embrace. Whatever doubts he had about why I haven't let him touch me for the past three weeks are all gone. I can no longer pretend. He feels the distance, the way my body twitches when he touches me. His hands no longer soothe me. They feel like they are tightening around my throat, pushing me to ask the question I can't seem to get out of my head.

"Did you know?" My voice is gentle, but firm.

Each time I ask, I keep hoping for a different answer. You'd think that after so long, I'd be convinced that he didn't know.

"What are you talking about, V?" His brows knit together. "Did I know what?"

"I know I asked you before, and I'm hoping you'll tell me the truth. I need to know what you knew." My throat is dry. I know what this question will do to him.

Part of me wants to take it back before it's too late.

Because I'm about to ruin him. No matter what his answer, I've already decided to leave him.

Chapter 2
Did You Know

Vivienne

"Did you know about Damien? That he was… the way he was? Your mother did. You must have."

Jonathan shifts off me, sliding to my left.

More than anything, I want him to tell me no, again, that he had no idea that his brother was a monster.

His eyes dim as understanding settles in.

"I'll book the flight in the morning," he says.

"Jonathan, I didn't mean to suggest—"

"Oh, V." He rolls me over on top of him, cutting me off before I can explain. "Why didn't you tell me you weren't okay?" he says.

He presses his lips against my cheek.

I love our life here in Greenspring. The children and I need nothing. Now I'm about to change our family forever.

Jasmine lives just a stone's throw away, and she'd be heartbroken if she knew how much grief I'm carrying. She thinks I hit the jackpot when I married Jonathan. Maybe she's right. But these days, the voices in my head beg to differ. I smile when we're together. I cry when I'm alone. It's happened far more often than I care to admit.

"I can't stop wondering if Damien targeted me to get back at you for something you did to him."

"Don't say that." He quickly brushes away a tear.

"How could you not know Shannon was my daughter?" I ask. The question catches him off guard. Of all the questions I have, this is the one I need answered most.

"Shannon spent years living with Damien and your family. His genes may have been dominant, but I was still there. In her expressions. In her eyes. In her smile. I'm having a hard time believing that you never saw me in her."

He meets my gaze, and the man staring back at me carries more than guilt.

He's broken.

And I'm about to break him even more.

“Whose daughter did Damien tell you Shannon was?” I ask.

“I believed him when he said her mother died during childbirth. I had no reason to doubt him.”

“She was five years old when he took her. Not a newborn, Jonathan. Didn’t that raise any questions?”

“Everything that happened to you, I blame myself for. You know that.”

“So, you didn’t know your brother was a predator. You had no idea he kidnapped my daughter five years after raping me. I’m still struggling to believe that.” I let out a nervous laugh. “Or am I supposed to believe all of this is just a coincidence?”

“I begged you to tell me who attacked you. You refused. You drove me out of your hospital room. Then you left me.

More than a decade later, you showed up at Shannon’s funeral and told the world she was your daughter.”

“I need some time away,” I tell him. “That’s the only way I’ll get better.”

“I’m coming with you. Jasmine can take care of the kids while we’re gone,” he says. His eyes never leave mine.

That’s how I know he sees it.

I slide off the bed, walk to the half-open door, and push it shut. One look at his face tells me he knows this isn't like my last trip to visit my parents.

"I'm thinking of something more permanent, Jonathan." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize I can't take them back. He already knows I'm ending our marriage.

He walks over, rubs my arms, then kisses my forehead. "What's really going on, V?"

"Shannon," I say, quickly turning away before he can see the lie on my face. It's not just grief. It's more than that.

I collapse onto the bed, hands in my lap, and fidget.

"I'm having nightmares, Jonathan." My voice cracks. "Every night I close my eyes, I see the casket, my baby lying inside it. Her life snuffed out before she had… she didn't stand a chance with him."

I wipe my eyes before the tears can fall. "I didn't search hard enough. Not long enough. If I had—"

He cuts me off. "But we buried her in Arizona, sweetheart. Not Dallas."

"I want to see Dr. Walsh. She's in Dallas," I say.

"No, V." He chokes up. "I didn't know Damien was such a monster. I don't know how many times I'm going to tell you that. You no longer have a reason to be afraid of him. He's dead."

The disappointment in his voice breaks my heart. But not as much as I'm breaking him.

He brushes the hair from my face and lifts my chin with two fingers. "How long has this been happening?" he squeaks out. "How often does it happen?"

Honestly, the pain never really left. It just waited beneath the surface.

He sits beside me and wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on top of my head. And all I can think of is what Dr. Walsh told me years ago.

"Augusta Ranch is the perfect place for you to get well."

If I tell Jonathan I want to go there, he'll advise against it. But this time, he can't fix what's broken. Not in me. Certainly not in us.

He kisses me again, slowly at first, then more intensely and desperately.

This time, I kiss him back. I tighten my grip. I pull his shirt over his head. Then wrap my legs around him.

"Don't leave me, V," he mutters against my lips. "It feels like you're ending us."

He's still kissing me, like he doesn't know how to stop. His grip tightens. Not too much. Just enough to hold me in place. Like if he lets go… I'll dissolve.

As his lips move across my face, I'm reminded of the time we found each other again. It was the best and worst day of my life. I was hurting then, barely holding myself together. All I wanted was for the pain to stop. And it did. He made it disappear, just like he's trying to do now.

I force myself to pull away. I press my hand against his chest and push him, harder than I mean to.

He doesn't move. He just looks at me. If I let him make love to me now, I won't be able to walk away. He knows it too.

For years, I believed Jonathan was the one who got away, the best thing that happened to me before the worst.

He may still love me, but do I still love him?

If I do, why am I breaking him?

Chapter 3
Says the Spider to the Fly

Dr. Walsh

"I'm sending a file over to the ranch," I say into the phone. "Looks like we'll have a new resident soon. One you'll appreciate." I pause, letting it sink in. "Make sure you call me when she gets there."

"So, I take it you've talked with her?"

"Yes, and she has finally agreed to come. She's having problems again."

"After all this time?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll send a photograph, so you'll know it's her when she shows up. It's a little old, but it will work."

"And the brother? What about him? What if he shows up with her?"

“He doesn’t know she’s coming. She didn’t tell him. In fact, she doesn’t want anyone to know where she’s going. I suggested that ‘precaution.’”

The voice on the other end sighs. With pleasure. “So, this is really going to happen? After all these years? You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this.”

“Unless—”

“Unless what?”

“Unless the husband decides to come with her. Men like him, with so much power and money, might not want their wife to travel alone.”

The breathing on the other end of the line grows heavier.

“Then we’ll have worked this hard for nothing?”

“If this plan fails, there’s always another one.” I let out a shallow breath. “I never fail.”

I end the call and stare at the photograph. I made him a promise years ago. I run my thumb over the picture and lean back in my chair.

Five years.

Finally. She’s coming back. I smile.