

‘Dance Between Raindrops’: A Conversation with Vivian Stephens

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PART ONE

Julie Moody-Freeman: *I have Vivian Stevens here with me. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview.*

Vivian Stevens: Oh, thank you Julie. I'm very happy to accommodate you.

JMF: *Alright, so I want to start [and] go all the way back to you as a reader. Could you talk a little about when you started reading romance? Who were some of your favorite writers?*

VS: Okay, well, I actually started as a young woman. Probably in my teens because I used to read the fiction in women's magazines, like *Redbook*, *Ladies Home Companions*, *Good Housekeeping*. And my favorite author then was a woman called Faith Baldwin. And I don't know that she ever wrote hardcover books, but she did write for women's magazines in the 40s and early 50s, and then I read all of the girl books that you find in the libraries: *Nancy Drew*; and of course the classics: *Little Women*. And in my late teens I read Zane Grey, of all people, *Girl of the Lonesome Pines* was one of my favorites, *Girl of the Limberlost*. And then in college, for some reason I read Westerns. But I had a girlfriend in high school, and we had a little bet between us as to who could read the most books in the library. So that was really, really fun. And I really didn't start reading romance novels, those little books known as romance novels, until I was in my late thirties, and I just happened to have found the books in Massachusetts taking a class in tapestry weaving. I was in a little town, and I went into the local bookstore. It was a used bookstore. And after looking around, I was leaving, and at the exit door, there was a barrel filled with paperback books. And the books were like ten cents. And on my way out I happened to see one with a ballet dancer on the cover. And as a young person, my sister and I used to take dance lessons. And I was just intrigued, and I bought it, took it home, read it, and then went back the next day and bought three, and the next week I bought five, and I was just intrigued.

These were all Harlequins, but they were from Mills and Boon in England, so all of the characters were British, but I found that the heroines were always in love with foreigners, tall, dark and handsome men, and they were usually Spanish or Egyptian or Italian. And the girls were younger. They were like nineteen, twenty, maybe 21. And by the time they were 23, 24 they were old maids. And the heroes were always very rich, at least 35, so they were very sophisticated worldly men. So that intrigued me. And then I always read the book sections of the papers. At that time, I was living in New York, and I was working for Time and Life Books as a professional researcher and so after reading classic books, I was really intrigued by the little books that you bought in the supermarket and drug stores and those were not always the Harlequins, but they were usually the midlist books of the little books that the publishers published that were not by the main writers. So I was interested in that. Those were my first ones that sort of drew me to what you would now call commercial women's fiction. That was really in the late 70s, early 80s.

JMF: *I see. So how did you get into the romance publishing industry?*

VS: Well, as I said, I fell in love with reading these books, and then one day in summer, I was reading the *New York Times*, and they were talking about a woman named Charlottesville Allen. Now she did not write romances. She wrote women's fictions. And in all of the books that I read, it was the first time I actually picked up the book they were talking about. They were reviewing her latest book that was in paperback. And in the review, they were saying that it was one of the first times that the hero was bald and that the sex was rather explicit. And that had never been done in a paperback before, the masses that was just regular women's fiction. So I was intrigued with that, because I was sort of tuned in without even knowing I was tuned in to what the populace read because I consider myself one of the masses, reading what is available to the masses, and I was intrigued with it and the book was published by Warner Books. And I just decided on a whim that I would like to really work in fiction. I had never done it before, and I thought that the best thing to do would be to just send in an application and be hired as a secretary. And I thought if I'm hired as a secretary to an editor, then I would be able to read the manuscripts when they first came in, I wouldn't have to wait until the book was really published. So that was really my interest, and I actually did it. I didn't know anybody in publishing, so I called Warner Books, and they were at Rockefeller Center, and I lived in Manhattan.

So I called and got the name of the woman in charge of hiring, and I thought I would just send her a letter with a résumé. So I did, and I can't remember whether I got an answer or not. No, no, no, no, I take it back. I did not send it, I thought I would take it by. I was in between jobs because I had worked for Time and Life Books for five years. They had moved the book section to Virginia. And I did not choose to go there. So I was between jobs. And I thought this would be a perfect thing not only to change directions of my interest, but to just try that. So one hot summer day in August, I took myself to Warners and went up to the department and said I was there to drop off my resume and since I had the woman's name, I actually lied. I said that I had a friend who knew her and said that if I was ever in the area, I should stop and say hello. So I left my résumé at the desk and the receptionist was very nice. She said, 'well, she's out for lunch right now, so if you sit down she'll be back soon – you can hand her your résumé yourself'. So I'm sitting there waiting for this lady to show up. And as I'm sitting there I'm thinking "you had to lie, what are you gonna do when you see her face to face?" So I lost my nerve, and I went to the receptionist and I said, 'look, I have another appointment so I'll see her later'. She said, 'she has your résumé now. She's back. And she'll call you in a few minutes'. So I thought, 'well, what the hell'. She did call me in. She was a very nice woman sitting there in her dark glasses with her legs crossed. And the first thing that she said is, 'who do you know that I'm supposed to know?' So I picked a name out of the air, a friend, and she said, 'and how do I know her?' And I said, 'you met her at a cocktail party at Time and Life Books'. And she said, 'probably so. Sit down. How may I help you?' So she was very nice, and she went on to ask me about my background and I told her and I told her why I was there because of Charlottesville Allen's book. She said, 'look, that editor is not going to hire you because we're not hiring now'. And she went on to say, 'well, you have worked as a teacher – why don't you do that?' And I said, 'that door is closed'. And she said, 'why don't you become a writer?' And I said, 'because that's not my aim'. And she said, 'well, if you're really interested in working in this field...' and she picked up a book, and I don't know to this day what book that was, but it listed all of the publishers. And so she started just going down the list, and she started with Avon, then

Bantam and Dell, and when she said Dell I remembered that I used to read those little western books that were published by Dell. And so I remembered that. She wished me luck and I left. And when I went home, I repeated the same thing. I called Dell and asked who was head of personnel, got that woman's name, wrote her up a letter, sent her my résumé, and felt like I had accomplished something.

But what was interesting is that I got a letter back saying that there were no jobs available, but if I was interested to call for an open interview. So I called, got the interview, went on it, and she said, 'I'm intrigued by the résumé and the person who goes with it'. So we talked, and we talked for probably half an hour. And she said, 'what are you interested in?' I didn't know that Dell did all kinds of paperback books. They did puzzle books and baby name books, along with reprints from major houses, because Dell was an imprint of Doubleday books. So they did the reprints of the hardcovers. So I had a second to really tell her if I was intellectually inclined, or that I [was] really interested in commercial fiction, specifically women's fiction. So she said, 'you really like to escape?' and I said, 'yes I do'. So she said, 'I don't have anything for you now, I wouldn't even know where to put you. But I will keep you in mind'. And that was in August. And fast-forward to October, I get a call. And this woman's name was Jean Anderson. I will never forget her. She announced herself, and I kept going, 'who? who?' And she said, 'I'm at Dell, and you were here in August, and I think I have a job that will round out your résumé'. Those were very important words. And the most interesting words. And she said, 'we have an editor that has just come back from England, and she's going to be in charge of some books, but you'll have to interview with her and the Editor-in-Chief'.

So we set up an appointment. And the editor's name was Kate Duffy. And she was young; she was 26. But when we were to have had the interview, someone had robbed her apartment, so she didn't show up. So I interviewed with her secretary that had just been hired out of college. The girl had just finished; she was 23. She didn't know anything about Time and Life Books. She was really not interested, and she was a little arrogant. She just said, 'well, you'll have to talk to Kate.' But in the meantime she gave me a couple of books that were Candlelights. And Dell had published Candlelights from the mid-60s. I had never read a Candlelight. I did not even know that Dell did books that were sort of akin to the Harlequins. So I took the book home and read it. And it was a very sweet book, very American, and [I was] still waiting to hear from Kate. So in the meantime, Kate called me. I had not met her. She called, and she had looked at my résumé and wondered, 'what salary are you looking for?' And I told her. And she said, 'well, you won't get that because that's what I make'. I thought that was quite interesting. So I just picked a number out of the air, and I said, 'do you think I can get this?' and she said, 'probably so'. So a couple of days pass and then I heard from Jean Anderson again and said, 'I heard you've spoken with Kate and that this is a salary you would be agreeable to'. And I said, 'yes'. And she said, 'well, you still have to interview with the Editor-in-Chief'. And a couple of days passed again [and I] never heard from the Editor-in-Chief and then Jean Anderson called and said, 'we'd like to offer you a job!'

JMF: *Wow.*

VS: And the job was Associate Editor. Now I did not even know what that meant because I thought I would just be an assistant or secretary. So I just agreed. So my first day on the job

there was really not an office, and my office turned out to be a storeroom. It was a large storeroom. There were no books. There were no Candlelights. And what they had were just a lot of manuscripts. Manuscripts were just piled on the floor. So Kate said to me, 'you're going to do five books a month'. And I said, 'why five?' And she said, 'I came in May, and May is the fifth month and I just picked the number out of the air'. It was just that serendipitous. So I said okay. So she said, 'out of the five, two are going to be romances, one is going to be Regency, the little Regency books, and then the others the imprints coming from Doubleday that were usually romantic intrigues'. So I said okay. She said, 'Ellen will be your secretary'. Because Julie, I couldn't type, I really couldn't type at all. So I was really happy to have this person who was going to do this. So what I did was just to organize the office the way I wanted it. The first thing that I said to Ellen, who was my assistant, Ellen Edwards, who became a very fine editor in the years to come, 'we have to find hanging folders so that we could put these writers – so that we could separate them,' because everything was just on the floor mixed up. So my first inclination was to read the manuscripts and that's what I started doing. They were just in piles. And most of them came from an agency that was called Donald McCampbell. That was his specialty, to just feed into the industry writers who only wrote light fiction that was called category. And category romances are those little books that have numbers on them. You know, every month the numbers would go up, and of course I started with number 500.

After a couple of months – no, it was perhaps weeks – I didn't know how to buy manuscripts; I didn't know anything. I had never really dealt with agents before. And I was honest enough to tell Kate this. So one day after lunch she said, 'I'm going to buy several books this afternoon'. So I said, 'may I listen to you buy a book?' and she said yes. So I did, and I had a manuscript that I liked. So I went back to my office, and I called Donald McCampbell. I got the agent on the phone and said, 'I would like to buy –' and went on to tell her who and what, and after we finished, I asked, 'have I said everything I'm supposed to say?' and she said yes. And it was just sort of that easy. So in reading all of the manuscripts – and people don't really realize this – and no one really likes to say it – but the romance genre for category books, it really is a formula because it's usually a novel that is about 60,000 words. It's a linear plot. You have limited characters because in a story that brief you cannot really have a lot of people because it will really disturb the reader. And the point of interest is romance. So the books were usually written by teachers who wrote the books in summer when they were on vacation and airline stewardesses who were traveling to foreign lands because the prototype of the novel was usually the Harlequins or the Mills and Boon books. Because a lot of the American readers actually subscribed to the Mills and Boon books that had to be sent over from England. Now commercially when they're done, there's a company in Canada, they were in Canada at the time, who bought the Mills and Boon books and then just changed the names to Harlequin, which was their brand name because Harlequin was really owned by a conglomerate and that was just the publishing arm of the conglomerate. So that was my first experience in buying books and really knowing what the American books were like at the time. And I'm speaking of 1978, 79, and 80.

JMF: *I'm glad you gave me that date because this leads me to something that I saw in the New York Times. In the July 13, 1980 edition of the New York Times Ray Walters wrote, I'm*

quoting him: *'The ethnic romance is the invention of the editor of Candlelight Romances, Vivian Stephens'. So, what made you use the term ethnic romance to refer to books?*

VS: Well, I didn't really coin that phrase. I just accepted it because what had happened is that I had a friend who worked for *Life* magazine, and she was then working for *NewsWeek*. She was going to England for the holidays. She was going to England just before Christmas, and she had come by to have lunch with me at my office at Dell. She didn't have contempt for the books, but she was serious. She was a serious literary person. And so she was asking, 'why don't you come with me to England because we can do this...' I said, 'listen, I just got this job. But while you're in England, why don't you come up with a plot for one of these little books?' And as an aside she said, 'okay, I just might do that'. So she did. And she came back and she had this wonderful story. She had another friend who had worked for a large corporation in New York that had to do with oil. So she drew on characters and information that she knew that Black people did.

So when she turned the book in to me, when she actually wrote it and turned it in, I liked it. And so something said to me I should really speak to my Editor-in-Chief who was a wonderful woman, who I think had been one of the first women to finish, in modern times, she had finished Harvard. And she was Danielle Steel's editor. So I went to her and just said – her name's Linda Grey – I said to her, 'I have a little romance with all Black characters, and I just want to tell you that I have it, and I'm putting it in the line'. And she said, 'well, I'm not the person to speak to. You should speak to the head of sales'. So I went down to [the] sales department, and I said to the guy in charge that I had this book. And because I was the only Black editor they had, I don't know if they were tiptoeing around me, but in those days the *Candlelights* were at the bottom of the barrel. No one paid too much attention to them; I realize that I was really kind of hired to take care of what nobody else wanted to do because the secretaries – they used to do maybe one book, every two months, every three months. When I was hired the secretaries used to have to put the manuscripts through production. And they did very light editing, and it was like a chore. So the last secretary said to me, 'I'm so glad that you were hired because I won't have to do this anymore'. So when I went down to the sales department to say I had this book where all the characters were Black, he just said, 'well, does Harlequin have one?' I said no, and he said, 'then let's do it'.

It was just like that. And so the public relations department, the PR department of Dell, used to have to send out every month to the major newspapers what was new in that house for that month that they really wanted to promote. So that was the most interesting thing, and I think Ray Walters who wrote the piece [in the *New York Times*], he is the one that made it 'ethnic'. And I don't think it was done on purpose, but it was done to really distinguish that book from the other books to just let people know. And it was new because it was the first time that it had ever been done in commercial publishing for category books in romance.

JMF: *You're talking about Rosalind Welles' Entwined Destinies?*

VS: Yes. It was the first time – and since he was doing the news of Dell for that particular month, then that was perhaps the most leading thing. Because I never spoke to him. I have no idea what he sounds like or what he looks like. So he took everything just from the

public relations department, and I had said to them that I was going to buy other books. And I can't even remember how I got the word out, but I think when Elsie's [Rosalind Welles] book came out in 1980, simply because she had worked for *Life* magazine – and *Life* magazine had a lot of other magazines, you know. They had *People* magazine. They had *Money* magazine [and] *Fortune* magazine. Well, she had a friend who worked at *People*, and *People* magazine reviewed her book in that particular week's issue. And it had a wonderful cover. Since this would be my first book with Black characters, I went to the art department, and I asked to speak to the artist that was assigned to that particular book. Because the *Candlelights* were always freelanced out. They were never considered important enough. And so artists who were in commercial work would call in to really see if there was any freelance work for those little books. And I had no idea how much it paid, but I'm sure it didn't pay the kind of money that the mainstream books were being paid. I did speak to the artist, and I wanted to make sure that the characters did not look like the prototype of what people thought that Black people look like. I didn't want the main character to look like a pimp. And so he said, 'oh okay, alright. I will hire a fashion model'. And he did, and I saw the sketches, and the cover turned out to be wonderful. That was how that started. But the 'ethnic' I realized was the proper word to use because after that I bought a book where the characters were Native American and what I insisted on is that the writers be of that particular ethnic group. Because otherwise I felt that if their story was written by someone who was not of that group, that without, and maybe sometimes knowing it, there would be derogatory terms used or statements used that they didn't realize were not the right thing to say. Because, after all, when you're reading one of these books, to me, and I made this a point, you're never to offend. The books are to make you feel happy and uplifting. To me, the whole genre – they are stories of hope. They are fantasies within the realm of possibility. Fantasies within the realm of reality. So you're not gonna say anything negative about anything, at least under my watch. I have read books later on where I didn't know whether the writer was doing it on purpose, or she just didn't know any better. But in my books, I always I felt because sometimes people can use derogatory terms and you can become so desensitized that you don't catch it right away, but I had readers. I would get so many manuscripts. In the course of anytime that I was working, I never had less than 200 hundred manuscripts in my office. So I had readers. I had five people who just read for me and did little reports on whether the stories stayed within the guidelines of the genre, and I did have a tip sheet that said whatever things should be –

JMF: *Did you create that tip sheet?*

VS: Yes.

JMF: *Ah, do you remember some of the things you had on there?*

VS: Oh sure, sure. The heroine had to be American.

She had to be at least between 21 and 25. She had to have a job. She didn't have to be a virgin. She didn't have to have finished college. But she had to be upwardly mobile. She had to have ambition for herself. And the hero could be of any nationality, preferably American because I'm appealing to an American audience. And he had to be successful,

attractive enough to appeal to the heroine. I said whatever handsome meant that would depend on the writer. But it had to be appealing. They had to be engaged in jobs that were upwardly mobile, because after all you want to inspire the reader. That the books had to be set within the United States or its territories. Because the average American woman in her daydreaming could daydream about going to some place that she could recognize rather than going to Europe, you see, because an American setting would be more accessible to her. I finally said to a writer once where her people were going to go on a little holiday, I said, 'in your town, when you read the society page on Sunday, and you read about where the young marrieds are going on their honeymoon, where are those places closest to you?' And she named a place really within reach of her home. And she said, 'that's where I really wanna go'. I said, 'then that's what you aim for'. I wanted people to aim for things that were accessible to them. On the tip sheet also we talked about locales. We talked about jobs. We talked about how the books had to embrace the five senses. So you're talking about music and food and all of the senses, the five senses. And in doing so, I wanted them to be in touch with things that they could try to identify because this also had to do with their vocabulary, and how the vocabulary had to really be able to express the emotions. And that's the hardest thing for a writer to be able to put into words is to attach words to a feeling.

So we talked about how silk felt, how perfume smelled on the skin. What food was like, what was food like to look at, to really taste. What music was like to hear. And then the main thing is how the characters touched each other. I had a tagline that was always attached to me because I would always say in my workshops that I wanted longing looks. I wanted him to look at her longingly. I wanted tender touches. I wanted him to touch her tenderly. And I wanted hugs and kisses. Because basically when a woman is daydreaming, that's what she's interested in more than the physical act of sex itself. It's the foreplay, it's the after-play. How did the kisses make her feel? And also I insisted that the characters, the hero especially, calls her – the endearments were fine – but he can never just refer to her as 'baby'. I said, 'call her by her name. Say her name tenderly, say it in a whisper'. Because these are the things that women liked, you know? Because what I wanted, and I think this really did happen, you're writing the books because you like the books but also because you want your writing read. So I would always want, and say to the writer when I did workshops, was what you really want is for the reader to finish your book and go, 'ahhh... I want another one'.

And, see, that actually happened. Because in the early 80s women would go to the bookstore, and they wouldn't buy one. They were like me when I first read these books in North Adams Massachusetts. I bought one, and I went back the next day and I bought three. The next week I bought five. So when the books really took off, they always bought all the books. They bought six. So you want her to finish the book and go 'ahhh', because the reader has been rooting for the hero and heroine. Because it's always the pull and push, come here come here, go away go away. It was always a little disagreement. And as an English editor said to me once, 'you know, if they got rid of the disagreement, the books would be five pages long'. So, you know, you had to really draw that out, and the reader is really rooting for them. So at the end, it's that they've really gone the whole distance, and they have won each other.

JMF: *I wanted to ask about feedback from Black readers. Did you get any feedback from Black readers about Entwined Destinies?*

VS: No, I really didn't, other than I got a lot of positive information in the press. I think because the Candlelights were never advertised, the book had to find its own feet. But I never got anything negative about her book at all. And then the next book that I did was Native American. I never got anything negative about that one. And the next one was Hispanic because the writer was a Mexican teacher in San Antonio, and she did a wonderful little book. And I didn't get anything negative. If I did I never knew it. And yet the reason that I know that I didn't is because usually when the books came out – on the Monday morning after the books were out and readers had bought them, I would get phone calls. And see in those days, you could just go through the receptionist, and the person would say, 'I want to speak to the editor of the Candlelights', and she would just put the call through. And so on a Monday morning, I would get calls from readers of what they would want. They would tell me about the book that they had just read over the weekend, and usually they had read it twice. And they wanted to know when that writer was going to have another book out!

JMF: *Wow.*

VS: Or either they would complain about something in the book, but it was never about the characters or anything about the ethnicity of the characters at all.

JMF: *So how do you remember the sales? Once you came to Dell and you sort of transformed Candlelight Ecstasy, what were your sales like?*

VS: Well, when I got there, simply because the books had not been consistently done, the books were so insignificant that there were no numbers. I didn't know anything. I was just left on my own. So one day before Thanksgiving, I knew that because it was going to be a four day holiday – and I was basing it on myself – is that if you didn't have plans or if you were gonna have to take the train and go someplace for your Thanksgiving dinner, you still wanted something to read if you were a reader, and I always put myself in the mind of a reader. So on that particular Wednesday, I took myself to the largest Woolworths in Manhattan which was not too far from my office. And I went at lunch time because I knew that women would probably be buying books, and I just went to really look and that particular store had a whole wall of just paperback books, just rack after rack after rack. The Harlequin salesman had just stocked his bins the day before, so the shelves were full of new books. So I stood there and watched women come in and buy books.

And no one touched my Candlelights. I only had a few out and they were books that I had not bought. There were books that had been bought before I started. So when I didn't see anybody pick up any books. I went over and talked to a couple of women who were in the process of reading the back-cover copy to see what they wanted and these were the Harlequins. I identified myself. I said I was the editor of the Candlelights and [asked] do they ever buy any? Do they ever buy any Candlelight Romances? And several of them shook their heads and just walked away. But there was one woman who bought Regencies, and she said she never bought a Contemporary Candlelight because the heroines were too young and too insipid. She said, 'I can't stand that'. And she was buying Regencies because the Regencies have to stay true to the period, so you cannot really go off kilter with them. I asked her what she did. She worked on Wall Street and then she was in school. She was at

NYU studying Russian, so she was just not an average person. She was buying Regencies for her larder, she said. And I understood that she said, 'I'm not gonna read it right away, but when I need it, I want it there'. So she bought books for her inventory. Because a lot of women read books according to their mood. She was buying books for that. So what I decided to do in doing the tip sheet – and in the long run, I had to do two tip sheets. Actually, I did three [four]: I did one for Regencies; I did one for the Contemporaries; I did one for Intrigues; and then I did one for the Ecstasies as I gradually moved from one category to another. But when I actually decided what I had to do was to let the reader and the writer know that the books had to become more American. And in our culture itself at the time we were going through the women's movement, and the women were vying for better jobs. There were women in New York who were on strike because I remember them being on strike either at *Life* or at *Time*.

And it was the period of the power suits. So I had to really show the culture in the books. So that's why I said in the tip sheet that the women had to be older, they had to be more interesting and that getting the guy, getting the hero, was the icing on the cake. It was not the cake itself. That she was okay. She was alright by herself. She was interesting enough. She was enough. And that the guy just added to it. That was fantasy within the realm of possibility. So I came up with that myself. I didn't ask anybody for help with that. And I knew that women and men went to bed together without the benefit of clergy and that could be in the books also because that was a part of reality. It didn't have to be, and you didn't have to really expand on it because it made it more acceptable to the reader, and it was more reality. So that was how that happened. And those were the two major things is that she'd be an American [and] that the settings be in America and to reflect American life.

JMF: *Yes, and how society was transforming and women's roles in society.*

VS: Exactly. Because women were on the move, and also it was the time of the sexual revolution. So it didn't have to be reflected in great detail, but it could not be ignored in fiction.

JMF: *Can you talk about your role in the founding of RWA?*

VS: It was the tradition at all of the publishing houses that they send someone to conferences that would be writer conferences across the country. Southwestern Writers Conference was a big conference and usually somebody had to go. And so my Editor-in-Chief came to me and said, 'look, you need to go to this,' and I said, 'well, why?' and they said, 'you're here, and these are your books and since you were the last one hired, you have to go'. And the conference was here in Houston – just happened to be in Houston because they're held everywhere. And so I said, 'well, I can go home and visit my parents while I'm at this conference'. So I did come to Houston to do the conference, which was usually about four days. And editors from all over the country came. And [in] the way of editors, everybody was a little smug, a little arrogant, and not happy to be at one of those conferences. And so we were all introduced at the morning assembly. So when it was my time, I didn't know the etiquette. So when it was my time to be introduced, I went to the podium and told them my name, what I did, what I was looking for. I gave them a lot of information. So in the audience were these women who were interested in romance. When

it was time for us to have our individual classes, I had a room full of women who were interested in writing romance novels. So that was the first inkling of the interest, and I was happy about that because I needed a lot of writers since I was doing five books a month. At the end of the conferences, at the banquet when we all were introduced and people were thanking us, the mistress of ceremony was thanking all the editors and they called us by name, and when my name was called, I had this standing ovation. I mean the women were pounding their hands together and their feet together. And it was fun. And afterwards when I went back to New York, I started getting telephone calls: 'Vivian, can you remind us of how many words you're looking for?' and I got a lot of manuscripts from Texas. And so the next year when the conference was given in another city, these women went, and they called me up to say, 'you were not there. We were not able to ask the question we wanted because nobody was really interested'. And after about five calls, from five different people, I said, 'what you people really need is your own conference. You need your own romance conference, and then you can ask all the questions that you want that pertain to the genre that you're writing in'. And this particular person said, 'we're just waiting for you to come and organize us'. And she was calling from Houston. And I said, 'I'm coming to visit my parents at Christmas, and if you can find a few people together, we can meet'. And that was the only thing I was looking for. It's like you have a club in high school. And so they did find a place, and I came, and it was forty women. It was from scratch. I had a temp secretary at the time after we had organized, and I went back and told the PR department, and they said, 'you need a name'. And I had a temp, a guy, and I said, 'I have no idea what to name this group'. And he was a member of the History Writers of America, and he said, 'well, why don't you just call it Romance Writers of America?' And it was just that simple.

And so I told the PR department, because they were going to write a press release. And they just said that I had started this organization. And then the group here in Houston said that they wanted their own conference, and I said, 'just find a place. Remember that you're romance writers, and you want an attractive place, and put the word out'. I didn't know what to expect, I didn't take part in it, in trying to organize it. They did it themselves, and when it became a bigger thing, they would call me like every month to tell me what they had done and how much money was going to cost. I just left it up to them. So when it became a real thing, then people started calling me, saying, 'Vivian, I want to go to this thing'. So the press release that Dell sent out said it was open to all of the houses, that anybody who was interested in writers writing romance, that this was available to them. So it got to the place where the networks, the cameras came from ABC, NBC, CBS. And then newspapers from across the country showed up because 800 women showed up at this conference. It was the beginning, and I did nothing but just people would call me and I would say, 'come'. I encouraged all my writers to come. I'd say, 'it's your organization'. Because Julie, what I wanted them to do, I wanted them to understand how their manuscripts became books. I had also asked the Editor-in-Chief if he would allow someone who did copyediting, someone who did proofreading to come to really talk to the groups to say when you send in your manuscripts and [what] it goes through. I wanted them to understand all of the processes their manuscripts went through after the initial editing.

And, you know, how the books came from your typewriter, because they were using typewriters at the time, from you buying your ream of paper, sitting at your kitchen table typing your story, until when you can go into a bookstore and pick up your book that has a cover and a price on it that says \$1.25, because that's how much the books cost then. And

so that was it. So everybody showed up, and then the other thing is that agents showed up. Because agents wanted 10% or whatever the writer was making, and of course the writers wanted to be professional because most of them were not professional people. But that put them in another whole category. See I didn't realize until a long time later what it did for their own psyche and for their emotional health. It took them from just being someone's mother and someone's wife to their own identity as a writer. So later on in my career, I had women when they would see me, to come up to me. One woman sidled up to me once, and I can't even remember her. But she said, 'you called me one morning when I was desperate. I needed money, and you called with an offer, and I wanted you to know how you saved me that morning'. And I just said, 'you saved yourself. You have a manuscript that I like, and I was happy to buy it from you'.

Then another time I was doing a workshop at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma and a woman that I've bought from at Harlequin came up to me and said, 'oh Vivian, I'm so happy to see you', and at the time I paid \$6000 for a manuscript so she said, 'you'll never know what you did for me. You gave me the courage to leave my husband'. And I thought, 'this is far-reaching'. She said, 'I needed the confidence and I wanted to do it for years, and you gave me the confidence', and I said, 'please don't tell me that'. But it was the confidence that she could write something that would sell under her own name, under her own skin. That would give her the confidence that she could go on with the rest of her life. So you never know what a simple something like a little Candlelight Romance could do for a person.

PART TWO

JMF: *So you moved from Dell, and you went to Harlequin. Can you talk a little about that transition?*

VS: Yes. First of all, what really attracted me – well, it attracted Harlequin to me. Because when I did the books, and I don't think I had done the Ecstasies so I'll have to tell you about the Ecstasies. But when my little Candlelights became popular, I realized that to fill out their inventory Mills and Boon would sometimes buy the rights to my Candlelights. And so I had a writer send in a manuscript that was more sensual than any book that I had ever received in a manuscript. It was so outside the circle, but a part of the circle, that I published it. It was called *Morning Rose, Evening Savage*. And the writer was Joan Hall. And she was from a little town in Pennsylvania. And she was so new at this that she didn't even send a cover letter. And she had wrapped it in butcher's paper with her address on it. And when I wanted to buy it, I didn't have a telephone number. I didn't have anything. We had to go into the garbage to get her wrappings with her return address to send her a note to say to call me. So I bought her book and published it in the Candlelight line to just see if I got a reaction. And it wasn't really a reaction, but her book sold right away because it was so sensual. It wasn't that sexual, but it came to that point. It was like the sexual tension was so great in the book that all of the readers would say, 'her next one has got to be this good'. And so Mills and Boon in England wanted the rights to it. And so one day I just got a note

from the Rights department there at Dell. It said, 'Vivian, you know Mills and Boon is requesting the rights to buy *Morning Rose, Evening Savage*'. I didn't even know that.

I didn't call them. I went down to that department and said, 'this is my competition. They cannot have this'. So Dell refused them. Well, they had never been refused before, so they were a little upset with that. So I got a call from one of the men, one of the editors at Harlequin in Canada asking if I – no, no, no, no, I take it back. I got a call from a headhunter in Chicago saying that an international publisher was interested in me working for them and would I have lunch for them? I said no. I was very satisfied where I was. So they said okay. Next couple of months he called me again. And he said, 'well, would you just have lunch with one of the editors in New York?' and I said, 'I'll have lunch with anybody'. So I had lunch with this guy, and I decided that no, I was not interested. It was in Canada, first of all, and even though I knew Harlequin by then, I liked where I was because no one bothered me. I didn't have any competition with anybody, and I enjoyed being able to shape my line the way I wanted. And so I was not even aware that the books were making that kind of money. I was just happy that I wasn't causing any trouble anywhere – somebody calling me saying, 'Vivian, why would you let this book go out?'

Harlequin showed up. Harlequin England, Mills & Boon, showed up at that first conference at the Woodland here in Texas. And I finally said to the guy, 'why did you come? Why did you jump the pond and come over for this conference?' And he said, 'your books were making so much excitement. We had to find out what you were doing. And we could only do that by coming'. And I think that they were really shocked because you have to remember that basically the romance genre, the category of romances, are basically a British woman's genre because that's where it started. So to have the Americans – to have this whole group of American writers – was probably quite astonishing to Mills & Boon. Because that's what an English editor said to me later on when I went to work for them. The president of Harlequin in Canada is the one who really pursued me, and he said to me, 'you settle for too little money, because we are willing to pay you anything'. And an editor in England said to me, 'when you refused to sell us the rights to your books, we decided if we can get the – your writers were very exciting and they were very different because they were really reflecting American life,' so she said, 'we felt that if we got the editor, we could get the writers'. So that was what they wanted. That was how I got to them because they had never had an American line. So they hired me to really give them an American line of books. So that was how I got there. And of course in the second year that I was there, we met in Greece, all of the Mills & Boon Harlequin editors. Because Harlequins were printed around the world. So they chose to meet in Athens, Greece, and so it was the editor from Turkey, the editor from France, the editor from Germany, the editor from Japan, and everybody wanted inventory because this was a way to really infiltrate their lines with new American voices.

So they would tell me, and they used translators that they used at the UN, and they would say to me, 'Vivian, don't buy a book that's too American because we don't have the language to translate that'. For example, they gave me baseball. Like, if you have a book where the hero is a baseball player, and the metaphors are baseball based, we don't have that kind of language. So keep in mind that you're buying books where the plots are more universal, and the hero and the heroine have problems that are more universal because then it's easier for us to translate. And they have to be American, of course, because everybody relates to the culture of America, the music, the dance, the food, that kind of

thing. That was really how I got to Harlequin is that they did make me an offer that I couldn't refuse money-wise. But also, I wanted to work for a house that did what I did best.

JMF: *Now while you were there, and I spoke to Sandra Kitt, that's why I'm familiar with this. She told me when you were at Harlequin, you bought her books Rites of Spring, Adam and Eva and Color of Love.*

VS: Yes I did.

JMF: *What made you want to publish these books?*

VS: Well, she wrote the genre quite well, and I didn't really have in mind, like, I'm going to do Black books. My thing was to really represent the whole culture. Now I know that that sounds not quite right but I never really – being a Black woman myself, an Afro-American – I never really... and Julie, this is going to sound really quite strange. Racism is still a mystery to me; it doesn't make any sense. And my sister said to me, 'it is not logical, so you can't really make any sense out of that'. So since romance is romance, I didn't particularly care what color they were, but I wanted each group because in America, and as I did in my tip sheet for African American writers, I said everybody, every group, because America is made up of all groups from some other place except the Native Americans. I said we all partake of everybody's little particulars. Because as Trevor Noah says in his comedy – he does something that I think is great. He talks about the spices. You know about white people and spices coming from Africa. I said food; it's very little food that is American. So there are people who like Mexican food, Italian food, soul food, but romance is romance. It's not such a thing as Black love, white love. To me, love is love, but you bring to it your own eccentricities. I had a tag that when I left Harlequin, I worked for myself, I incorporated myself. And what I wanted to do was to – and I did have twelve writers, twelve African American writers – I wanted to do an all-Black line that I would sell to Avon, or Harlequin, or Silhouette, any of those. And I had come up with my own tagline. If I could remember I would recite it to you. I never had a chance to really express it. But this is the essence of it: that the American writer offered to the genre a new voice, a new attitude, a new rhythm to a familiar plot, thereby attracting a new audience and generating new money. You see – because again, the African American writer who is going to come to this genre, you're going to bring your own particulars, so you are going to bring a new attitude. Your voice is going to be different, and the rhythm is going to be different. And that's going to attract a new audience. It can be an African American audience, or it can be people who just like the rhythm and the attitude of Black writers and their words. So that's going to generate new money.

JMF: *So this is your motto? You have left Harlequin. You're trying to start this line. This is your motto. What happens when you take it to the publishing industry?*

VS: Well, I actually took it to Waldenbooks, and the guy in charge of buying books said he liked it. He said, 'but you are going to have to talk to the woman who would be in charge,' who was a Black woman who said, 'well, how will you make any money out of it?' I said, 'well, I'm sure that that could be arranged because you see, what I would bring would be

the writers, and they would underwrite everything, including paying me a salary'. Well, she didn't like it, so she would not accept it. And he left it. The white guy who was in charge said it would be up to her, and she said no. So then I took it to the president of Avon Books, and she said, 'Vivian, it would be fine, but you know what you have to do. If you become a name yourself outside of publishing that would get the attention of the powers that be. I don't have the power', even though she was the president, but she was a woman. She said, 'if you became a great model or the first Black model to do something,' so that didn't work. So then I took my idea to Dell and at the time there was a new Editor-in-Chief of Dell, and she was very nice. She did grant me the interview and when I walked in, she just said, 'oh, a legend in your own time'. So when I presented my deal to her, she said it sounds interesting but I would have to present it to a white male who said no.

And after that, she didn't even take my call. She wrote me a letter. She said, 'I'm sure that this will happen for you somewhere. I'm sorry it's not here'. So even though I had made money...

JMF: *I was just about to say that yes!*

VS: It didn't work, and I really don't know why. I have a friend who said, 'you could've made all kinds of money for them'. Because I had the attention of the media. Even though they laughed, I had been on the *Ted Koppel Show*. I had been on *20/20*. I had worked all of the places you have to work. I had been covered by all of the major newspapers, and I had made money for Dell. I had made money for Dell two separate ways. I don't know if I have told you this, but the books were so attractive. And because they were aimed at women, other companies that wanted to get in on women and their buying power used the books as a way of doing this, and one of the ways was they would buy the books if they were trying to promote, like, a new cake of soap. If you've paid any attention you've seen these in stores from time to time, it used to be. I have not seen it recently. But they used to shrink wrap, like, if you buy a new cake of soap, one of the gifts would be, like, a book. And they would shrink wrap them together.

Well, in my case, a man from sales came to me and he said, 'there's a cigarette company in Kentucky that is making a cigarette that is aimed for women. And they want to know if you have any books where the heroine is smoking. And instead of just saying "smoking a cigarette" to just change "smoking a cigarette" to the name of the cigarette that this company is going to promote'. And I said, 'well, the first thing that I have to do is contact...' I don't know offhand, because by that time I had 500 books. And so I said, 'I can't remember offhand, but let me talk to my editor'. And I'm still working with one editor and Ellen had a wonderful memory.

JMF: *And this is when you were at Dell?*

VS: Yes, I'm backtracking. This is when I'm at Dell, because you see, not only was Harlequin interested in me because I had refused them the books, but everybody saw how much money Dell was making and how much publicity that the books got without me having a campaign.

JMF: *One of the things I wanted to ask you about is when – and I’m going to fast forward to when you’re not at Dell anymore, you’re not at Harlequin – you’re marketing this line, they won’t purchase it. Are you now in the late 80s, early 90s? Is this like before Kensington comes out with its line?*

VS: Yes, this is probably late 80s, early 90s. Because I had already taught for two years. I actually had a class once a month teaching African American writers how to write romances. I had twelve of those and out of the twelve, nine of them were published by Kensington. And see, that was after I tried to really do my own line.

JMF: *Do you remember some of the writers you were teaching?*

VS: Oh yes, yes! Well, there’s two who are still writing: Shirley Hailstock [and] Rochelle Alers. Yes, because Rochelle Alers is the person who got me the venue because I traveled from Manhattan to Long Island, and she knew the person in the local library, so I taught the class in the local library once a month. And then in New York, I used the library there at 111th street, and I had a few writers there. I’m trying to think if I had anybody there that – yes. There’s one writer who I cannot think of her name right now, but she went on to publish at Kensington Intrigues. So most of my Black writers, those got published, but no one would buy me. It would be like the Vivian Stephens line. Waldenbooks I tried, Avon I tried, Dell I tried. Nobody picked me up.

JMF: *Right, like maybe you were cutting into their money with your own line.*

VS: But it would’ve given them the most money. That’s what I couldn’t understand because one of the words was – someone asked me, ‘why did Harlequin [fire you]?’ Harlequin didn’t fire me. They just told me to leave. Because when I went to draw unemployment, the unemployment person said, ‘but you were not fired’. And I said, ‘why would I walk away from a job paying this much money?’ So I called them [Harlequin] up and asked them, ‘do you want to talk to me or do you want to talk to my lawyers?’ So I got unemployment. When they asked me to leave, the president of the company David Galloway wrote me a letter, but I cannot remember what the letter said. So when people have interviewed me, I said to them to call him in Canada and ask him why. They asked me to leave before I was able to edit the first hundred books that I had done because I wanted to know. I was pushing the culture forward because I was buying books where the hero was sometimes suffering from Agent Orange, because I was trying to really keep up with the heroes, and at the time the hero, one hero, I said he doesn’t have to have full hair. He can be bald because bald is still attractive. So I was trying to incorporate everybody. The only thing that I insisted on is that they were not fat, that the characters would be healthy and have good jobs. But I was trying not to ignore things that were normal to people. They had gone to war. Jayne Castle’s books, one of the first books that I did for the Ecstasies, her book was the one where the hero had only one arm. He had a hook for an arm. He had been in service. He lost it, but he was still attractive and viable. And most of all appealed to the heroine.

But no, no one picked me up [the Vivian Stephens line]. Someone said the books [at Dell and Harlequin] are now being known as Vivian’s books. Everybody knows that Vivian Stephens does not own Harlequin or Dell. And I was not even aware of my influence. I knew

that I had started something, and other houses picked up on it because when I did the Ecstasies where the books were a little more sensual, all of the houses – because when I left, five houses had romance lines. When I started nobody did. But you see, it was a money-making thing. And they didn't have to pay the writers that kind of money, and the books didn't cost that much to make. So it was like found money. I was going to tell you about the cigarette thing is that it went on. We did find some books. The people from the tobacco company came down and looked at the covers and found some writers who said it was okay because they were paid some money. Dell made \$25,000 just out of the blue from that, and then the same guy who was in sales called me to say, 'do you have any books where anybody is eating peanut butter?' Because one of the peanut butter companies wanted to really get in on that. So you see, the books in celebrating the five senses, there would be fast food companies, there would be fragrance companies, soap companies, cigarette companies, [and] wine companies. It was all kinds of ways that they could have made money just off of these little books.

The other interesting thing is because I was in such close contact with my writers that I didn't really do revision letters, I would talk revisions over the phone as I'm talking to you. I would be going over a manuscript, and I would call for an appointment and say block out forty-five minutes because I want to talk to you about your work. I would say turn to page forty-five, and we would go over stuff. I would say, 'do you really want to say this?' or I would say, 'this does not read right, and I don't think this is what you would want to convey,' and they would usually get it. I had excellent rapport with my writers, but after I was let go, no writer wrote to me. No writer called me. No writer did anything. And I was disappointed in that until an editor said to me, 'Vivian, they could not take the chance because to align themselves with you when Harlequin had let you go, that would endanger them'. I had not thought of that and because it was so new to a white woman who was writing, who has found a career where she has not had that before, because I didn't realize until much later that people say to me, 'but Vivian' you established an industry that had not existed before and that even though the Candlelights, these little category romances, that was a stepping stone,' – and I realize it now because I see some of my writers, writers that I found – that was a stepping stone for them to move up. There are writers now like Barbara Delinsky that I found, like Sandra Brown that started with writing romance, to catapult them into what they would consider real publishing.

JMF: *You worked with both of them?*

VS: I found them, yes. They were un-agented when I found them. I actually almost taught them how to really – not to write because I cannot give you an imagination – but I would like to think that I helped them shape their voice, but they didn't stay with me long enough, you see. And I actually had no ambition. I had not thought – because as I told you I had prayed for this job. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but when I found that I really liked it, I prayed and asked God to really direct me to something that I would enjoy that I could do well, and he did, so I was really just kind of happy with that. Now, other people throughout my life had said, 'but Vivian, you are a very good writer'. I had never wanted that. I had never really seen myself as a writer because I am a horrible speller, so I never saw myself as a writer.

JMF: *But it turns out that you wrote Final Summer with Angela Dews and then your most recent, I think it's your most recent, Final Act, written as The Sedema Group. You wrote that.*

VS: Yes, yes that's true. It's true, and I wrote other things. I've written reviews.

JMF: *Can you talk a little about your novel Final Act, written as part of The Sedema Group?*

VS: Yes, it's called *Second Act*.

JMF: *Yes, I'm sorry, Second Act, yes!*

VS: So it's called *Second Act*. My sister Barbara actually wrote romances for Silhouette and for two other houses, because in the boom of the romance novel there was a Black woman, and I can't remember where she was, but she started her own little publishing house, and she did Black romances and Barbara wrote for her.

JMF: *I wonder if it's the Odyssey.*

VS: Yes, I think so! I cannot think of her name. Patricia comes to mind, her last name was Peoples.

JMF: *Yes, Leticia Peoples.*

VS: Right. Well, my sister Barbara wrote for her and then she wrote for somebody else. Oh, she wrote for Doubleday. There was a Black editor at Doubleday when I was at Dell, and she did the hardcover. After my books came out, she was able to talk her boss into letting her do Black, well, ethnic books, because I just would tell her the names of the ethnic writers that I had, and she would contact them. My sister Barbara was her first one who did a Black book for her in hardcover, and then she took my Native American writer and did her book. I don't know whether, and – oh yes, she did Valerie Flourney, because Valerie Flourney is a Black writer and Valerie Flourney had been one of my readers, but she's most famous for writing children's books, but she wrote a hardcover and you probably have that. But back to me and my two sisters doing *Second Act*. We decided since we are in our eighties and my two sisters were school teachers – my sister Barbara has a Masters in Reading from Harvard – so since we were not doing anything, and we were used to being involved, we decided that we would write romances since everyone was retired and there were women around us who were retired, and we were taking part in exercise classes and water aerobics and going to the Y where there were large groups of women who were very vital and very few men. This was very interesting to see these women flirting with these few men, and I said, 'that's the next thing'. Women still at sixty-two, you just don't die and at seventy-two and at eighty-two, because these people are still getting married. They're in nursing homes where they still have romances. Then I had read where the sexual transmitted diseases were greater in the nursing homes than in the general public. So I said, 'we have got to do these romances,' because she was sexual from birth until death, so that's why we decided to do these stories. We've only done one. Barbara has written some more, and I have started about six [romance with older people] because I was looking at

the symphony once. It was a symphony on TV, and most of the people, men and women, had gray hair, and I thought, 'oh my God'. I have a cousin who was first chair in the symphony, and she's seventy-nine, and I called her, and I said, 'why aren't you playing?' She lives in Galveston, Texas, and I said, 'why aren't you playing?' She said, 'oh, they've called me once or twice, but I really don't want to do that'. And she does other stuff, and [she said], 'I'm looking for a companion'. And the guy that she likes – there were too many women after him. It was just really funny, so I know there is a need for romances with older people. Hopefully that will catch on, but as my friend Veronica said, 'you know it won't catch on until enough books are done'. She said, 'people pay attention to what's already there, not to the idea. You have to make the idea come to life'. So that's where I'm at now. The other thing is my blog. But my blog is for older people, and one of the things I want to include in the blog are reviews of fiction that has, at the center, characters who are older because there are not enough books, even in hardcover, that really uses older people as sensual characters, and yet older people have a life.

JMF: *Right. And that's a bit of what you have. Jill, I think in Second Act is in her 50s, and I think Justin is in his 60s.*

VS: Right. The original one. This is just to give you a little bit about it because this I think is the second draft of that book. But the first book that went out, I had Jill at 62.

JMF: Yes. I did see that in one summary, but then when I read the book, she was in her 50s, and I'm like, 'oh! Wait a minute. What's going on?'

VS: Well, I'm going to tell you what happened. The book didn't sell as fast as we thought it was going to, so Barbara found an editor, once again, a white editor. See, because the characters at sixty, the three of us edited that ourselves. But when she found the other editor, the editor said that the people were too old. And they changed a lot, but the first time the book went out, it was exactly as I wanted it, and the way I wanted it to be. And we can't find a way how to take this one down and put the other one back up. But the first one, Jill was sixty-two, and the guy was sixty-five, and we had made him that because – do you know the French company Hermès?

JMF: *No.*

VS: That does the Hermès scarves, the scarves are really beautiful?

JMF: *Oh yes!*

VS: Did you know that one of the designers for the scarves is a Black guy?

JMF: *No.*

VS: He has done thirty-two designs, and I read about him. And that's why in the story the guy not only does art, but his art is then translated into textiles. And so it's taken from a Black guy. My thing is Black people do so many things, and I call them Black people who

dance between the raindrops. I mean it's just like you with your job. It's not necessarily what is called a Black job. You understand what I'm saying?

JMF: *Yes, yes.*

VS: So these are people who, you know, when white people find out they go, 'oh', because it's not necessarily a Black job. So when you think of Hermès, you never think of anybody Black. But this guy is a painter and got his job because someone knew him, and he knew someone at Neiman Marcus. And they said to this French guy, 'you should meet him,' and that was years ago. So he's been written up in several magazines, and I just thought, 'let's make our character based on a real person'. So those are the kind of stories I have in mind for Black older characters. I have one of my characters that I have not done the book, but I've done the outline. She plays in the symphony. And I have cousins who play the flute and the violin. I have another one who is an herbalist, and she grows certain things that are just sold to companies that make toothpaste and different things. And then I have another one where she is a caterer, and she only does hors-d'oeuvres for supper clubs. And that's where she meets the hero who has a radio show where he is a therapist, and so I've kind of patented him after Dr Phil that you see on TV. But he also is a humorist, so he's done a book on why people laugh. So it's research that I have to do. But you know, those are fun things. And I just think it would be fun for women to read them.

JMF: *Yes, they are fun. So my last question, then, is what are your hopes for the romance genre and for Black romance?*

VS: Well, my hope is that it will continue – because it's going to be an ebb and flow, because a lot of the books are for romance in general. I think it will keep up with the culture, but it has to attract women who are in touch with the culture. And who are in touch with words, and right now I don't know that there are that many women who are in love with words to really write romances. So I look for the genre to continue, and the language will now include more people of color. When I say more people of color, I mean everybody. It won't just be African Americans. It'll be Native Americans, it'll be Hispanics, it'll be Asians, simply because there will not be a choice because that's how the world is going.

JMF: *Yes!*

VS: And romance is universal. Relationships are universal. So the people in control will be pleasantly surprised because people of color will no longer fit their mythology. See, think about it. The mythology of an African American now to the people who control, which I would say are all white men. You don't really know how they think of us, but it's not like them. They don't think of us as they think of themselves, and that is slowly changing. And it's slowly changing because of technology, because young people, from millennials on down, they could get in touch with their counterparts in the matter of seconds with their phones. So what's happening in Chicago can be transmitted to someone in Dubai in a matter of seconds.

JMF: *Of course. Yes.*

VS: And everybody sort of likes the American culture of all kinds of entertainment, but that is becoming world-wide now. So the cultures are almost merging.

JMF: *And the different voices are being heard. You have no choice but to...*

VS: Exactly!

JMF: *Are you saying that the industry has to catch up with that?*

VS: Oh yes! It's going to have to. I understand that books during the month of April [2020], dropped sixty-eight percent.

JMF: *Really?*

VS: Because people were watching Netflix.

JMF: *Well true, I was one of them.*

VS: Right, right. Me too! I take my iPad to bed with me. But after a while, I'd watch so many I thought, 'I really do want to read'. See, it always goes back to that even though I am re-reading books that I've read maybe two or three times.

JMF: *Right, and I was telling you that I am almost done with Second Act, and what was going through my mind: remember that they were on the horse and they were riding and he takes them on a little tour? It's like Thanksgiving Day or something like that, and I thought to myself, you know, you are depicting something. I could imagine someone reading it and thinking, 'Blacks don't ride horses'. But you're depicting the reality, and the reality is yes, Blacks do ride horses. They are and were cowboys!*

VS: Exactly!

JMF: *That's what I love about it. Yes!*

VS: Oh, I thank you for that so much because my sister Christina has a young friend who works in the hospital, and she's a pharmacist. Julie, she read the book and where we set the book is not too far. I guess it's a hundred miles away from Houston. This lady drove to the place, went through all of the little places we talked about, all of the little art shops, ate in the restaurants, chose the same foods, and she called her up and said, "when is your next book coming out? I've already been to those places'. So I said, 'I am so grateful that you've said this. I'm going to call them up after this conversation and tell them that we're on the right track'.

JMF: *Right, exactly.*

VS: And that is what I'm talking about and that's what I mean when I say that there are Black people who kinda dance between the raindrops, because it's not common knowledge, you know. And for Black people it's very normal, the stuff that we do.

JMF: *Yes. That's right.*

VS: I really did enjoy working with those romances, and I enjoyed working with the writers, whether they looked me up after I was let go or not. I was happy with what I did, and I'm happy with my contribution.

JMF: *Yep, and all that wisdom there. Yes, well, I've taken a whole lot of your time. I'm so appreciative of it. It's been so much fun!*

VS: It has been for me too!