

The book cover features a vibrant, artistic design. At the top, the silhouettes of a man and a woman are shown in profile, facing each other, with a soft, ethereal glow around them. Below them, the title 'Vivien Dean' is written in a classic serif font. The central visual element is a golden spiral that mimics the layout of a piano keyboard, winding inward from the bottom left towards the center. Musical notes are scattered along the spiral and above it. The bottom half of the cover is a solid black field, which makes the large, golden title 'Interlude' stand out prominently. Small, sparkling star-like motifs are scattered around the bottom title.

Vivien  
Dean

Interlude

## INTERLUDE

...Tyrone chuckled. "Kira thinks we're perfect for the club."

"She thinks we're perfect after one show?"

"Nah, this was the fourth one she saw. You never saw her watching before?"

AJ shook his head. Unless they were right up by his piano, he rarely remembered anybody in the audience. All his attention was fixed on Tyrone.

"Anyway, we'd get a three-month probationary contract, twice what we're making now, plus tips. In Vegas. You just know those are going to be sweet."

"But we live *here*, Ty. You really want to up and move like that?"

A frown replaced Tyrone's smile. "What's wrong? This is our dream."

"No, it's your dream. I'm perfectly happy here."

"You call this happy?" He gestured around the dark apartment, the silence echoing back at them. "You live the quietest life of anyone I know. I can't even remember the last time I saw you go out on a date."

"Because it sucks being gay in Reno," AJ countered. He might have had to hide his feelings for Tyrone all this time, but at least he hadn't had to worry about disguising the truth about his sexuality. That had been blurted out the very first time he saw Tyrone kissing a guy. His hopes had soared for

precious seconds until Tyrone laughed it off and explained he was bi. Which in AJ's book meant straight, but horny enough to take it anywhere he could.

Tyrone made a face, brushing him off. "That's no excuse. Plenty of guys come through who look at you twice. You're just too much in love with your piano to notice them checking you out."

*No, I'm just too much in love with you to want anyone else...*

ALSO BY VIVIEN DEAN

*Blood Of Souls*

*Born To Be Wild*

*Bridge Over Troubled Water*

*Crave*

*Ruby Red Rebels*

# INTERLUDE

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BY

VIVIEN DEAN

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INTERLUDE  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*To those amazing guys in Orlando who still make  
me think of them with a smile more than a decade later.*

## *INTERLUDE*

# CHAPTER 1

Though the customers at Heat Wave knew better than to touch, they crowded around the platform like ants on syrup, filling every available seat at the tables, laughing and joking loud enough to make the music harder to hear. It wasn't even ten yet and already the bar was packed. Men, women, a couple in the corner who were too androgynous to tell...everybody was there, which meant the tips would be good that night. They weren't always on Thursdays. AJ Mobley could count on Fridays and Saturdays to bring in a nice chunk of change, but during the week was a crapshoot at best.

He sat at his piano, head bowed, pretending not to notice the fingers pointing at him or the not quite whispers as people



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questioned his presence. The regulars knew the whole story, but Heat Wave got a lot of the tourist trade, too, those who didn't know just what the show entailed. All they knew was what they were sold—two guys, two pianos, the best music in Reno. To a newcomer, the quiet pianist who never made eye contact or smiled was probably just the warm-up for the real deal. AJ was okay with that. Without Tyrone onstage with him, that's really all he was. It was only when the other man came jogging in from behind the bar, his Hollywood smile firmly in place, did AJ come to life.

He launched into a jazzed-up version of "Crazy Little Thing Called Love." Sometimes, this time before the main show was his favorite. He could just play for the sake of playing, get lost in the music and forget about anything and everything else. Playing piano had been the only thing he'd wanted to do since he took his first lesson at the age of four. More often than not, it boggled him that he could actually make a living at this.

The light on the base of his microphone flashed. That was his cue. Nobody but AJ could see it, but as he finished out the final run, he reached up and tilted the stand down for better amplification.

"Welcome to Heat Wave, ladies and gentlemen. Where the beer's cold, the music's hot, and nothing says I love you more than a tip in the tip jar." A chuckle rippled throughout the room. "I'm AJ Mobley, and for the next two hours, I'll be playing some current hits, some golden oldies, and probably a couple songs nobody but a starving music major has ever

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heard of.”

His fingers drifted over the keys, picking out the introduction melody by rote, as he deliberately fixed his attention on the other piano. The audience obeyed his cue and followed his gaze, and seconds passed where the only sound in the bar was his playing.

After thirty seconds, he started the melody over again. One or two of the patrons started to glance back at him in curiosity.

At a minute, AJ cleared his throat. “See, this is the part where my partner introduces himself. But as you can see, he’s not here. I hate to say it, but that’s really not all that unusual. In fact—”

The double doors next to the bar slammed open, loud enough to divert nearly everybody’s attention. Heads turned to watch the lithe man jog and wind his way through the tables, his fingers working hurriedly at his shirt buttons. Enough of them were undone to give everybody a good long look at his sculpted chest, the rich mahogany skin mouth-watering and flawless, and he flashed more than one brilliant smile at customers when he had to squeeze awkwardly between them.

“I’m here, I’m here,” he said, making his way to the other piano. “Don’t start without me.”

AJ rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. “Don’t be late next time.”

“I’m not late. We start at ten.”

“And it’s now five minutes after ten.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Looks like someone left his watch behind again.”

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“Better my watch than my pants.” He slid onto the other piano bench and immediately turned his thousand-watt smile to the audience. Leaning into the microphone, he said, in a low voice meant to give Barry White a run for his money, “Good evening, everyone. I’m Tyrone Dahl.”

“Otherwise known as the man who can never be on time,” AJ added.

Tyrone frowned at him over the pianos. “Never say never, my friend.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“Maybe you’re just early.”

“No, I’m just trying to give these people the show they came to see. Dueling pianos means two of us, remember?” AJ cracked a grin as he switched songs in mid-verse, waiting for the prepared response.

Tyrone pretended to gag. “How many times have I asked you not to pull that ‘Ebony and Ivory’ crap?”

“How many times have I asked you to be on time?”

It was a practiced routine, nearly every word of it scripted. The regulars knew it was put-on, but to the newcomers, their friendly bantering would set the tone for the entire night, the back and forth that made them so popular. AJ wasn’t completely foolish, though. He knew part of it was because of Tyrone himself. The man was beautiful to look at, with warm brown eyes, that wide smile, and a body to kill for. He got propositioned on a nightly basis, and half the time, he accepted. AJ would have been a little jealous if Tyrone acted like an asshole about his appeal. But he just happened to be

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one of those guys people wanted to be around.

AJ included.

Not all of the show was canned. Tyrone was a pro at reading the crowd, and after their set beginning, they simply played it by ear, no pun intended. AJ had learned to pick up his cues with only a glance, while Tyrone always anticipated when AJ would launch into a new direction. It had been like that ever since they'd showed up three years earlier for the audition. Heat Wave's owner put them on stage together, and everything had just clicked. Sometimes it just happened that way. In the movies, they called it chemistry. AJ called it good luck.

Tonight's show was no different. The crowd was younger, and Tyrone kept swinging into Barry Manilow to wind them up, leaving AJ to drag him back to the twenty-first century. By the time midnight rolled around, AJ felt half-drunk on the adrenaline, smiling at Tyrone over the pianos.

"Got your glass slipper?" he said.

Tyrone scowled and swore under his breath. "You have got to be kidding me. It's not midnight already."

"I'm telling you. Watches. Next big thing."

Tyrone winked. "You say that only because you've never agreed to that threesome with me."

The joke was an old one, but it never failed to bring a blush to AJ's cheeks. "Considering how many notches you've got on your bed, I just might be the only person in Reno who *can* say that."

"You just might," Tyrone agreed. "Which makes you one

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of a kind, my friend. One of a kind.”

“I’ll remember that the next time we’re in contract negotiations.” He turned to address the audience, slipping into “Auld Lang Syne” without missing a beat. “That’s the show, folks. Hope you enjoyed it.”

“Of course, they enjoyed it.” Tyrone smiled. “Who wouldn’t want to sit here and watch two fine men like us make fools of ourselves?”

“Or at least one of us,” AJ pretended to mutter. He lifted a hand and waved. “Good night!”

The audience erupted into thunderous applause, the lights that had been dimmed during the act coming back up to full strength. AJ rose and stretched, watching Tyrone as he already started working the crowd. He knew for a fact Tyrone did it for the tips, but seeing him bestow that charm on anybody with a wallet always managed to sting a little.

More than one person stopped him for an autograph on his way to the bar. AJ stopped and did what he had to, but he knew the smile he wore wasn’t nearly as genuine as Tyrone’s. Without the pianos, without Tyrone on the other side, he just wasn’t the same kind of showman. He was okay with that most of the time. It was only in these moments between walking away from the set and getting out of the crowd that he wished it might be a little different.

Janie slid his usual in front of him as soon as he stopped at the corner of the bar. He smiled and downed the beer in long swallows, grateful to quench his dry throat. His hands never gave him problems during a show, but all the talking and the

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occasional singing Tyrone managed to seduce out of him wreaked havoc on his vocal cords.

“Looks like Ty’s got a hot one tonight.”

Janie’s declaration drew AJ’s head up, and he glanced in the direction she nodded. Tyrone had stopped at a small table near the platform, and now he had his arm around a tall, willowy woman who looked like an ex-beauty queen. She matched his five-nine, and the flash of her smile against her dark skin made the two of them look like they belonged on the cover of *Jet* together.

AJ turned away, though the image was already burned onto his brain. “Does Freeman need me for anything tonight? ‘Cause if not, I’m taking off.”

“Not that he said.”

She regarded him through her lashes as she dried the glasses she’d been washing out. Janie wasn’t a pretty girl, but what she lacked in looks, she more than made up for in kindness. At thirty-four, she was the oldest of Heat Wave’s bartenders, and in many ways, the heart and soul of the bar. It hadn’t surprised anyone when she and Freeman, the owner, had gotten engaged earlier that year. It just seemed to fit. The only problem now, Janie was on a kick to see everybody as happy as she was, even if they didn’t want her to butt into their business.

Like now.

“Go tell Tyrone you two need to work on the show,” she suggested kindly. “You know if you ask, he’ll drop the arm candy.”

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"I'm not asking." He caught the light in her eye. "And you're not either."

"But you want to."

"I also want to not look like a desperate fool, so let it go."

She sighed. "You should tell him how you feel. You're not doing yourself any favors keeping this all bottled up."

Only Janie knew about AJ's feelings for his partner. He had never confessed them to her. He had never confessed them to anybody. Terror welled in his throat every time he even considered the possibility of sharing them with Tyrone. The one time AJ had come close to spilling the truth, he'd ended up hunched over the toilet, puking his guts out because Tyrone had made a comment about how lucky he was he found a guy he could actually be friends with on the job.

"I'm doing the show a favor by keeping my mouth shut," he said. "If I say something, and things don't work out, the show goes down the drain. I don't need that, and neither does Freeman."

With a shake of her head, Janie dropped her towel onto a rack and moved away to go help another customer. "You're shooting yourself in the foot, you know."

"Maybe, but it's my foot to shoot."

Though the last thing he wanted to do was stick around, AJ lingered at the corner of the bar, unable to walk away while Tyrone was still in the room. The man had a way of commanding attention, even when all he did was stand there. AJ had lost a lot of hours trying to figure out Tyrone's appeal, but in the end, he always came back to the same answer.

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No matter who he was talking to, who he was dealing with, Tyrone always made that person feel like the most important person in the world. It was a gift. People loved him.

Including AJ.

When Tyrone caught his eye, he nearly ran. He wanted to. Tyrone still had his arm around the beautiful woman, and now he was leading her straight to AJ. The last thing AJ wanted was to play nice with one of Tyrone's groupies, but this was part of the job. This was the public face he had to wear after the show. If he hadn't wanted to get caught out, he should have left when he had the chance.

"I knew you wouldn't desert me, man." Tyrone still wore that smile. The knot in AJ's stomach burned, even if it didn't unfurl. "Come out for a late supper with Kira and me. There's some things we need to discuss."

Kira. Now he had a name for his nightmare. Just what he wanted.

AJ shook his head. "I'm late, actually." He jerked a thumb toward the employee doors behind him. "I shouldn't have stuck around this long."

"Late for what? A date?"

"Yeah," he lied. "So you two have fun without me."

Kira reached out a thin, elegant arm in order to rest her hand atop AJ's. Her fingers were icy. AJ had to struggle not to snatch his hand away.

"It'll be better if you're there," she said. "It was a fantastic show. I was hoping we could talk about it."

"I'm sorry, I just can't." Using the excuse to bolster his



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resolve, AJ backed up and nearly tripped over a stool. Only Tyrone's hand shooting out to grab his elbow kept him from falling. "Thanks," he muttered, but when he tried to pull away, Tyrone refused to let him go. "What?"

Glancing back at Kira, Tyrone let her go to step closer to AJ, leading him a few feet away in order to have some privacy. "Do you really have a date, or are you ducking out on me again?" Tyrone asked. "Because I think Kira's our ticket, if you know what I mean. She scouts for half the casinos in Vegas."

AJ's gaze widened, his eyes snapping over Tyrone's shoulder to look at Kira. They joked about this all the time, but Tyrone was the one who wanted the glory. AJ just wanted to make enough money to work on his music on the side. The Heat Wave gig did that for them.

"If she's serious, you don't need me around," AJ argued. "I'm not good at the hard sell. That's your department."

"It's not a hard sell. She liked the *show*, man. You're half the reason we've got the goods. You gotta be there."

"I'll screw it up."

"You won't."

"You know how I get in front of strangers."

Tyrone sighed. "And I know how you are with me. And with Janie. And I know you could be like that with everybody if you'd just give yourself half a chance."

His velvet voice soothed like nothing else could, and for a split second, AJ actually believed him. It was Tyrone's magic, after all. But then reality came crashing back, and he

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remembered those silent minutes before Tyrone ever hit the stage, time he wished he could spend elsewhere and not under the scrutiny of hundreds of strangers.

"I'll just get in the way," he said. "If we stand any chance at all, it'll be because you convince her we're the next coming, not because I sat there like a lump, trying to figure out what to say to her."

For long seconds, Tyrone just looked at him. No recrimination in his eyes. No disappointment. AJ wished like hell he knew what was going through the other man's head, because then maybe he wouldn't feel like such a bumbling idiot next to him.

"All right," Tyrone conceded. "We'll do it your way. But I think you're making a mistake. You can do this, AJ. Everybody knows that. I just gotta work on convincing you of the same thing."

He clapped AJ on the shoulder and let him go, retreating to Kira with an apologetic smile and a ready excuse. AJ didn't hear it. He didn't want to. He wanted to get out of Heat Wave and hide until the show the next night.

## CHAPTER 2

When his intercom buzzed at four-thirty, AJ ignored it. That was one of the downfalls to living in an apartment building with front door security. When people came stumbling home after a night on the town, they didn't really care who they woke up to get inside.

When his mobile phone started ringing right afterward, though, he knew it hadn't been a mistake. He fumbled blindly along the top of the nightstand until he found it, and hit "talk" without opening his eyes.

"Are you sleeping?" Tyrone's chirpy voice. Of course. "You can't be sleeping, man. Let me up."

"Do you know what time it is?"

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“Time for you to stop dicking around and let me in. You would not believe the night I’ve had.”

Oh, yes, he would. Because getting lucky seemed to be Tyrone’s way of life, not an exception to the rule.

“Hang on.”

Tossing the phone back onto the nightstand, AJ rolled off the bed and made his way out the living room, rubbing at his bleary eyes. The blare of the intercom pierced the dark room, too loud and too grating. Tyrone had to be leaning on it. AJ was going to have to lean on him to tell him to knock it off.

Less than two minutes later, Tyrone let himself into the apartment. “You should’ve come. I told you it was going to be off the hook—” He stopped when he saw AJ sprawled in the corner of the couch. “You really were sleeping?”

“What else would I be doing at four-thirty in the morning, Ty? I’m not you.”

For the first time, he noticed the shine in Tyrone’s eyes, the slightly bloodshot whites. He’d been drinking. Had he slept with Kira? Probably. The picture it painted soured AJ’s mood even further.

Pushing over AJ’s legs, Tyrone sat next to him on the couch and propped his own feet up on the coffee table. He leaned back his head and closed his eyes, a long line of dark scrumptiousness that made AJ’s mouth water even now.

“Man, you would not believe the night I’ve had. That Kira is a girl and a half, let me tell you.”

AJ grimaced. “Aw, come on, do I really need to hear all the gory details?”

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Though his eyes stayed shut, Tyrone smiled wide. “You don’t want to hear how she wants us to open a new restaurant in the New York, New York? Okay, I’ll spare you those and just tell you how good she is at giving—”

“*The* New York, New York? The casino in Vegas?”

“No, the one in Albuquerque.” He smacked AJ’s thigh. “Of course, the one in Vegas. I told you she books acts there. You never listen to me.”

“I listen. You just say an awful lot that never means anything.”

At the gibe, Tyrone’s smile softened, and he turned his head in order to level those baby browns right at AJ. “That’s why I like you. You call me on all my shit.”

It was impossible to stay annoyed at Tyrone when he did that, even worse when he looked like that. Against his better judgment, AJ relaxed and shifted in order to make both of them more comfortable.

“So you had a good time tonight?” he asked. If Tyrone wanted to tell his stories, AJ would listen. He might put up a fuss at first, but honestly, it was better than Tyrone leaving him alone again.

“Not for the reason you think I did. I didn’t sleep with her. You know I said that to mess with you.”

“Because I think so clearly when I’m woken up at four-thirty in the morning.”

“You’re going to remind me of that until the day we die, aren’t you?”

“No, just until the next time you pull a stunt like this

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again.”

Tyrone chuckled. “Kira loves us.” Back to the earlier subject, it looked like. “She’s been scouting around, trying to find something that’ll mesh with the vibe of this new restaurant, and she thinks we’re perfect for it.”

“She thinks we’re perfect after one show?”

“Nah, this was the fourth one she saw. You never saw her watching before?”

AJ shook his head. Unless they were right up by his piano, he rarely remembered anybody in the audience. All his attention was fixed on Tyrone.

“Anyway, we’d get a three-month probationary contract, twice what we’re making now, plus tips. In Vegas. You just know those are going to be sweet.”

“But we live *here*, Ty. You really want to up and move like that?”

A frown replaced Tyrone’s smile. “What’s wrong? This is our dream.”

“No, it’s your dream. I’m perfectly happy here.”

“You call this happy?” He gestured around the dark apartment, the silence echoing back at them. “You live the quietest life of anyone I know. I can’t even remember the last time I saw you go out on a date.”

“Because it sucks being gay in Reno,” AJ countered. He might have had to hide his feelings for Tyrone all this time, but at least he hadn’t had to worry about disguising the truth about his sexuality. That had been blurted out the very first time he saw Tyrone kissing a guy. His hopes had soared for

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precious seconds until Tyrone laughed it off and explained he was bi. Which in AJ's book meant straight, but horny enough to take it anywhere he could.

Tyrone made a face, brushing him off. "That's no excuse. Plenty of guys come through who look at you twice. You're just too much in love with your piano to notice them checking you out."

*No, I'm just too much in love with you to want anyone else.* He wondered how things would change if he ever found the nerve to tell Tyrone the truth. But almost as quickly as he wondered, he laughed at the idea. It was ridiculous to even contemplate because he and Tyrone weren't cut from the same cut of cloth at all.

"I'm not interested in one-night stands," AJ said. "I can't dissociate like you can."

Dark, liquid eyes searched his, long enough for AJ to start getting lost in them. "Which is even more reason for you to move to Vegas with me. If there's anyone I know who deserves to find someone, it's you."

Sentiments like that made it harder to stay annoyed with Tyrone. Because AJ knew he meant it.

"Moving is a lot of work," he tried instead. "And what about Freeman? We owe him a lot."

"We'll help him audition replacements. And you know he and Janie want only what's best for us."

"I won't know anybody."

"You'll know me." Another devastating smile. "And with me as your roommate, maybe you'll finally start letting

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everybody else see what I do.”

Roommates. Living together. Vegas. AJ’s head whirled at the possibilities. On the one hand, living with Tyrone would be torture. Having to see him bring home the men and women he hooked up with on a constant basis? AJ was setting himself up for heartbreak every single night. On the other hand, maybe seeing Tyrone on a daily basis would dispel some of the perfection AJ saw. If he could see the object of his affections at his worst, maybe he could finally move on. And if anybody could help him find someone, Tyrone was the one.

“It’s a big step,” AJ said slowly. “Did you tell Kira about my music?”

“She knows all about it.” Tyrone sat up, turning so that his bent knee was between them. “You wouldn’t believe how many people she knows in the business. We hook up with her, and you’re going to have access to pros you’ve only dreamed about.”

The whole thing sounded too good to be true. In AJ’s experience, that usually meant it was. Not in Tyrone’s. This enthusiasm was typical.

“You don’t really expect me to make that decision now, do you? I’m going to need time to think about this.”

For the first time, Tyrone seemed wary. “Well, you don’t have long. They want us to open the restaurant in two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” Now, AJ was awake. “Two weeks? Are you shitting me? There’s no way we can find replacements, find subletters, pack up, and find someplace to live in Vegas in two weeks. It’s impossible.” When Tyrone just continued to



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look at him, he repeated, "Impossible."

"It'll be tight, yeah," Tyrone conceded. "But we could divvy up the apartment work. You take care of your place here, and I'll cover packing and finding someplace in Vegas. All I'm asking is that you try it out. Who knows? Maybe I'll hate it after three months and want to move back. But we won't know if we don't try."

AJ didn't think for a minute Tyrone was going to hate it. Las Vegas seemed right up his alley. This whole offer seemed like a dream come true. In the end, with those pleading brown eyes fixed on him, there was only one answer he could give.

"All right." He held up a warning finger before Tyrone could leap from the couch in excitement. "But only if Freeman's good with it, and we can find guys to replace us. Otherwise, no dice."

"Those are the only dice I need."

When Tyrone pulled him into a sharp hug, AJ stiffened, hesitating to return it. He was too aware of just how hard his friend's body was, the press of a sharp hip into his, the musky scent of Ty's cologne filling his nose. It wasn't that they never touched. Tyrone was a very touchy-feely kind of guy. But that was when AJ was better prepared for it, when he had time to brace himself, to put up the walls that he needed to remember this was his friend not his lover.

If Tyrone noticed, he didn't say anything. He was too busy getting up and heading to the kitchen, complaining about how hungry he was, to pay AJ's pause much mind.

With a sigh, AJ followed.

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Because it was Tyrone leading the way.

\* \* \*

“This one. And this one. And this one if you want someone to bring in customers because he’s pretty.” AJ pushed the applications across the table to Janie and Freeman before sinking back in his seat. Auditioning replacements had taken almost the entire day; the response had been far more overwhelming than any of them had anticipated. So overwhelming in fact, Tyrone had skipped out after lunch, saying he needed to start the ball rolling on a Vegas apartment for them.

“It’s like shooting fish in a barrel here,” he’d said. “You don’t need me.”

AJ didn’t argue. It was easier to concentrate on the music without Tyrone fidgeting next to him. Every time the man jiggled his leg, his thigh rubbed against AJ’s. No one should have had that kind of energy.

Freeman picked up the three applications and flicked through them. “You think the first two will have the same chemistry as you and Tyrone?”

AJ shrugged. “Not without hearing them together, I don’t. But they were the two who were quickest, and knew the widest selection of music. My suggestion would be to call them back and have them play together.”

With a grunt, Freeman rose from the table and headed for his office. “I’ll call ’em all, just so they don’t think the job’s in the bag. A little competition never hurt anybody. Thanks, AJ.”

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Janie stayed behind. "For what it's worth, I think you're doing the right thing," she said without preamble.

"Now you sound like Tyrone. I can't remember the last time I saw him this excited."

"I'm not talking about the new job, though that's the right thing, too." She went behind the bar and grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge. "I mean going with Tyrone. I'm glad you're taking a chance with that."

"Whoa, there's no chance there. Not the kind you mean." With fresh alarm, AJ hopped up from his seat. "I'm doing this for our careers. As soon as we're more settled, I'm sure Tyrone is going to want his own place."

"What're you going to want?"

"Can you let this go?"

She was like a dog with a bone. Ever since Tyrone had made the grand announcement, Janie had taken every opportunity she could to comment on their new living arrangements, or how good they were together, or how good Vegas was going to be. She never did it when Tyrone was around, though, which AJ found more than puzzling. And a little irritating. Because if she did, maybe Tyrone would set her straight on the whole situation and she'd just drop it.

"I'm trying to make you see what this could do for you." She passed over one of the bottles. "The two of you are going to be on your own. Tyrone's going to need you."

AJ rolled his eyes. "Tyrone doesn't need anybody."

"Then why didn't he just tell Kira you weren't interested and they could find him another partner?" Janie answered the

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question herself. "Because he knew he couldn't do it without you. And he's not going to know how you feel about him if you don't get off your tuckus and tell him."

"My tuckus is just fine, parked where it is."

"Except you want your tuckus parked in his lap."

AJ set the bottle down on the bar and went back to the table to start packing up his things. "I am not having this conversation with you. Tell Freeman if he wants me to come listen to the callback to give me a ring."

Someone rapped at the glass in the front door. AJ's stomach plummeted when he saw Tyrone outside, waiting to be let in.

"Or maybe I should just tell Tyrone what a good thing he has in you, and let fate take over."

"Don't you dare," AJ warned as he went for the door. His palm slipped on the handle as he fiddled with the lock. By the time he stepped back to get out of Tyrone's way, it wasn't just his hands that were sweaty.

"Tell me you got winners." Tyrone's cologne drifted behind as he walked past, a musky scent that always made AJ want to sink to his knees. "Because me and Kira found the perfect place for us. Straight shot to the Strip, security, even a lock-up for storage like you wanted."

"See?" AJ looked pointedly at Janie, hoping she would take the hint. "He and Kira worked it out."

Tyrone stopped between them, his slight frown hopping back and forth. "You doubted me? I am deeply dismayed."

"Of course, we didn't," Janie said. "I just didn't expect you

## *INTERLUDE*

to find something so soon, that's all."

AJ uttered a silent prayer of gratitude. Janie might be eager to see them paired off, but in the end, she would respect his boundaries. She didn't know Tyrone like he did. AJ suspected nobody did.

With his efficiency no longer in question, Tyrone's broad smile returned. He hopped up on one of the bar stools and leaned his elbows back against the counter, his shirt pulling taut over his well-defined chest. "All that's left is signing the papers," he said to AJ. "I think after the show tonight, we should drive to Vegas and get it done. You can see the apartment then, too."

Another one of Tyrone's whirlwind decisions. "Tonight? That's an eight-hour drive. We'll be exhausted."

"So you sleep, while I drive. It's not like it would be the first time I've pulled an all-nighter."

How did every topic of conversation come back to Tyrone's sex life? Regardless of the other man's protestations, images of Kira's long body writhing atop Tyrone's resurfaced to torment AJ, mingling with Tyrone's cologne still lingering in the air to leave AJ's mouth dry.

"I think it's an excellent idea." Of course, Janie would. Anything that put him and Tyrone into close quarters for long, extensive hours was a good idea to her. "We can have the new guys play tomorrow night to try them out. It's a slow night for us, so if they suck, nobody's out anything."

"See?" Tyrone said. "Problem solved."

## *INTERLUDE*

It wasn't, not by a long shot. If anything, AJ thought the problems were only just beginning.

For him, at least.

## CHAPTER 3

AJ stood in the middle of the living room and gawped. There was no other word for it. His jaw hung wide, his eyelids seemed permanently glued open, and speech was beyond his capabilities.

The apartment was nothing like he had envisioned. Considering they had such little time to get it all sorted out, he had figured they would end up having to compromise on what they were used to. AJ liked his comforts. He liked feeling safe. He liked nice furniture, and no bugs, and not smelling urine in the hallway. In spite of Tyrone's assurances that the place he and Kira had found on the Internet was great, AJ hadn't really believed he wouldn't have to give up on at least a few of his

## *INTERLUDE*

amenities.

But this...

This was better than his place in Reno. By a longshot.

Typical cream paint colored the walls, but it was immaculate, the scent of a fresh application still in the air. The carpet looked reasonably new, too, a pale gray that covered everything but the kitchen and bathroom. Tyrone had gone for furnished in order to make the move easier, and the navy couch and chair set rested opposite a small, but solid wood—not the prefab stuff he was used to—entertainment center. The galley kitchen wasn't huge, but the appliances weren't twenty years old, and it already had a microwave. Even the mattresses on the beds were reasonably firm.

Tyrone hovered at his elbow. "I figured we can move the dining room table against that wall..." He gestured to the corner by the hall leading to the bedrooms. "And then put our keyboards against this one. There's power there to plug in, and it's not an inside wall so the neighbors won't yell at us if we don't want to put headphones on."

AJ did a slow revolution. "I can't believe you found this. Are you sure we can afford it?"

"Well, it's more expensive than our places back in Reno, sure, but we're splitting rent now. That ends up being cheaper for both of us."

It did. And it was just one more piece of the puzzle of their new lives slipping easily into place.

When he turned back to Tyrone, he was struck by the careful set of the other man's shoulders. The drive to Vegas



## *INTERLUDE*

had been a long one, and Ty had refused to let AJ take a shift. It showed. Faint lines creased the corners of his eyes, and his smile when it came was slower, like it hurt too much to drag the muscles into place. He had faked it with the manager; he was a pro at that. But he couldn't fake it now. He was just too tired.

Exhaustion didn't make him any less attractive, though. AJ had the overwhelming urge to take Tyrone by the hand and lead him over to the couch, pull him into his arms and hold him until he fell asleep. Nothing sexual. He'd be more than happy to feel the weight and heat of Tyrone against his body. He dreamed about it often, actually, almost as often as he wondered what it would be like for Tyrone to turn one of his seductive smiles in AJ's direction. Ensconcing themselves in the corner of the couch, his longer arms wrapped around Tyrone's slighter build, seemed like nothing short of nirvana right then.

"I swear to God, you have the best luck of anybody I know." AJ shook his head, smiling in bewilderment. "If you tell me Kira's covering our expenses, too, I will eat that couch."

Laughter rang out, clear and true. "No, I'm not quite that lucky," Tyrone said. "Just determined to get what I want. I want to make this work." His eye caught AJ's, held it, refused to let it go. "For both of us."

The intimacy of the moment startled him. In another place, under other circumstances, he might have gleaned something different from it. He might have let hope bloom instead of

## *INTERLUDE*

crawl into a corner and hide from the brilliance of Tyrone's smile. It didn't feel the same as other times, those incidents when it was just the two of them, working on their act. The camaraderie was there, yes, but nothing quite as delicate as this, nothing that left his stomach fluttering or the skin prickling at the back of his neck.

The latter was his first clue he needed to rein himself in. Tyrone was talking about their careers. He had always been driven by his desire for more. The fact they were such good friends meant now he just wanted AJ along for the ride.

"It'll work." AJ roamed down the hall, his fingertips gliding down the smooth paint, desperate for distance. "And to show how grateful I am, I'll even let you have the bigger bedroom. God knows you'll get more use out of it than I will."

He wandered into the room he'd just claimed as his own, assessing the drawer space. At his back, he felt rather than saw Tyrone come to the doorway, leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Are you going to stop pussyfooting around the dating thing here?" Tyrone asked. "Because it's time. It's more than time. It's so much past the time, you left it behind a decade ago."

"I already told you—"

"I know what you told me. When are you going to start listening to what I'm telling you?"

Before AJ could ask what he meant by that, Tyrone's phone broke out into Christina Milian's "Miss You like Crazy." He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the

## *INTERLUDE*

display. "It's Kira," he said as he answered it. Into the phone, "You got some kind of radar that says we're in town or something?"

AJ blocked out the rest of the conversation, focusing on the task at hand instead of tormenting himself with tangible proof of Tyrone's affection for Kira. They might not have already had sex, but frankly, he thought it was only a matter of time before it happened. Kira was clearly interested, and now that they had the job, there was no ethical reason for Tyrone not to go for it. They would certainly make a handsome couple.

"Kira wants us to come down to the casino to meet with the managers of the new restaurant," Tyrone said when he disconnected. "But if you're not up to it..."

AJ looked up from where he'd been examining the empty closet, trying to determine if he had the room to finally get all his extra sheet music out of his parents' house. "Why wouldn't I be up to it?"

Tyrone shrugged. "We had a long night. You might want to take it easy."

"You're the one who drove. You're the one who should be taking it easy."

"How about I call her back and see if we can get a room at the hotel for tonight? We can take a nap, shower, and be all minty fresh for nobbing with bigwigs then."

It sounded like a lot of trouble. They already had the gig, though good impressions were never bad to make. And they were supposed to be back in two days for official meetings

## *INTERLUDE*

anyway. Kira's request now seemed more of a desire to see Tyrone than anything else.

The only thing that didn't jive with AJ's original assessment was that it was Tyrone who usually pulled AJ along, trying to sway him to forego the niceties for what he wanted, not the other way around. Tyrone had to be more tired than he was letting on if he wanted to shower and nap first.

"Don't bother Kira with that." AJ pulled his phone out. "I'll book us a room if you tell her we can meet up before dinner."

The grateful smile told him he'd guessed right.

\* \* \*

If sharing a hotel room was any indication, AJ had a feeling living with Tyrone was going to be torturous.

They took turns using the bathroom, though Ty insisted AJ go first. "You're the one who's going to have to drive back tonight," he used as an explanation. "You need more rest than I do." Which made sense. Except the soft patter of the shower on the other side of the wall did not have any sort of lulling effect. And he was still wide awake when Tyrone came waltzing out of the steam-filled room with only a white towel wrapped low around his hips and water dripping down his shiny dark skin.

It didn't just drip. It veered course specifically to fall along the valley between his sculpted pecs, collect at the tips of his succulent nipples, and glisten in the tiny crevice of his belly button. He had an innie. AJ's mouth watered the split second

## INTERLUDE

before he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Tyrone didn’t venture farther into the room, hovering at the edge of the beds as he rubbed himself down with another towel. “Whole point of me going first was so you could get some decent shuteye.”

*Caught. Damn it.* “Strange bed. I’m not used to one so soft.”

Frowning, Tyrone closed the distance and sat down on the edge of the mattress, bouncing up and down slightly to test it. “What’re you talking about? It feels great.” Without an invitation, he stretched out next to AJ, staring up at the ceiling. “This is the life, isn’t it? I really think things are going to change for us here.”

The clean scent of his skin masked any laundry smells from the sheets. AJ had the irresistible urge to lean across and lick across a dusky nipple, which only prompted him to bury his face deeper into his pillow.

“Hey, I’m trying to build some castles in the clouds here.” Good-naturedly, Tyrone jabbed AJ in the ribs until he emerged, though his smile faded when he met AJ’s eyes. “Why don’t you believe it?” he asked. “We’re good. You know that. We’re not going to fall on our faces here.”

He hated being the downer to Tyrone’s good mood, especially when Ty was so attuned to his. “It’s just a lot to process, that’s all. I’ll come around.”

Rolling onto his side, Tyrone propped his head up on his hand. “Can I ask you a question? Without you throwing up any walls, or getting pissed that I’m prying, or calling me a

## *INTERLUDE*

girl when I'm done?"

His mouth twitched. Damn it, Tyrone always knew how to make him smile. "Okay, but it better be only one question."

Tyrone nodded, the very picture of seriousness. He seemed to ponder for a moment, and then, "Are you sure you're gay?"

"What?" AJ couldn't help it. He laughed. The entire notion was ludicrous. "Of course, I'm gay. Why would you think I wasn't?"

"Because I've never seen you with another guy. And I've never even heard you talk about another guy. Jesus, AJ, we talk about all kinds of shit. You've told me about your family, and your music, and that idiot in high school who thought you were trying to steal his girlfriend. And you certainly listen to me complain all the time about dates. Sometimes, I wonder if you tell people you're gay so you don't have to worry about getting set up."

This was the most bizarre conversation he'd ever had. "Not all of us can have social lives like you."

"But it's not just that." Tyrone was really digging down into the topic now. "You and me, we're friends. And you were comfortable enough telling me you were gay in the first place, but you're not comfortable talking to me about guys you might think are hot? Where's the logic there? You know I'm cool with it."

"This is sounding like a lot more than one question."

"It's all the same question."

"Does any of it really matter? Why are you so determined to get me a date?"

## INTERLUDE

For whatever reason, that shut Tyrone up. It wasn't the first time AJ had asked, but within the context of their conversation, it seemed to take on a whole new weight. The familiar smile was gone, too. The man who lay next to him was almost a stranger.

"It's not that I don't appreciate it," AJ said when the silence stretched too long for his comfort level. "I do. You want to see me happy. That's what you said. But happy for you, and happy for me, aren't necessarily found in the same places, Ty. You want to know when I'm happiest? Honestly? When we're onstage. When it's you, and me, and our pianos, and the music. I don't even need an audience. Our rehearsals are enough for me. So if I don't get a hard-on every time you bring up the issue of dating, or me having sex with some indiscriminate stranger, that's why."

Somewhere in the back of his head, he worried about saying too much. Tyrone was wired differently; he'd known that from day one. Their differences had always been their greatest strength, but maybe he'd pushed too far this time. Maybe he'd said too much. Was it possible to make the leap from *I love working with you* to *I love you*? Not even Tyrone would do that...would he?

"That's what I needed to hear." Tyrone didn't sound mad, or annoyed, or distant. In fact, he was starting to smile again, the infectious gleam in his eye returning. "If it means anything, the same goes for me. So I won't try to push you into other guys anymore. I promise."

Heat crept up the back of his neck, his damp hair sticking

## *INTERLUDE*

to his temples. The returned sentiment meant more than the vow not to pry any longer. He would almost let Tyrone try to set him up every night if he could get more words like those to hold close.

Tyrone rolled onto his back to mirror AJ's pose. "I think you're nuts about this bed. It feels great."

He was finally comfortable enough to relax into his pillow. "Yeah, maybe it's not so bad."

"You're in one of the primo Strip hotels, and it's not so bad?" Tyrone clicked his tongue. "That's what your problem is, man. Your standards are all the way in the clouds."

"Doesn't that work, then? Since you're building castles up there." His eyes drifted shut. "Feels like karma to me."

"Feels like something."

Though Tyrone wasn't moving, AJ relaxed even more. Nothing wrong in two friends crashing together, he told himself. They'd had a long night. They had another long one ahead of them. And if Ty's arm brushed lightly against his, if the smell of his body wash filled AJ's head and provoked dreams of being in the shower with him next time in order to do the scrubbing, that was okay.

"You've got room up there for one of my castles, don't you?"

Tyrone's chuckle echoed into him. "Whatever is mine, is yours."

For now, AJ was going to believe that.



## CHAPTER 4

“You two look good enough to eat!”

AJ’s smile froze at Kira’s effusive compliments, but Tyrone took them in typical stride.

“Wasn’t that why you booked us?” he said. He didn’t leave AJ’s side, choosing instead for Kira to come rushing through the empty restaurant and meet them. “Thanks for letting us do this later. We were beat.”

Kira waved a long, thin hand in dismissal. “No problem. It gave me time to see to the piano delivery.” She nodded toward the raised platform in the center of the room. “Want to see what you’ll be working with?”

The new restaurant was meant to reflect a cozy, Italian

## *INTERLUDE*

bistro someone would find in Greenwich Village, but the designers had done it with a typical Vegas flare, making everything just a little too big, a little too bright. White-covered tables ringed the room, leaving the stage in the middle the center of attention. It was more exposed than anything they had ever done in Reno, and with each step closer, AJ's panic levels swelled.

Maybe he gave off some kind of pheromone of fear, because halfway there, Tyrone slipped a hand behind him and patted him on the back in comfort. "You can do this," Tyrone said for his ear only. "You deserve this."

AJ was pretty sure he was wrong on both counts, but the contracts were already signed, not to mention their new lease, and there wasn't much he could do about it now. All he could do was climb up the platform and get a closer look at the piano that would be his lifeline for the next three months.

What he found took his breath away.

The restaurant, or casino, or whoever was responsible for running the place, had spared no expense. The two pianos were Steinway grands with a mahogany finish, not refurbished models but brand new, spit and polished, the kind he'd sell his soul to the devil to get to play. The keys called out to him to touch, but AJ's hand hovered over the board, reluctant to mar their perfection with oily fingerprints.

"You can go ahead and try them out," Kira said. "They're just waiting for you guys to bring 'em to life."

Tyrone was the first to move, shooting AJ a smile as he bounded to the piano opposite. He groaned as he slid onto the

## *INTERLUDE*

bench, and the look on his face could only be described as orgasmic.

“This is the second most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life.” His fingers danced over the keys, tickling out an impressive run up the scales. “Man, we have hit the big time.”

AJ could only agree. He was slower sitting down, his heart thumping in his chest as he caressed the smooth polish. This was almost better than falling asleep with Tyrone semi-naked beside him. Nothing had happened, of course, but that hadn’t stopped his exhausted mind from concocting all sorts of delicious dreams, scenarios where Tyrone rolled over and tossed aside the towel, where he covered AJ’s body with his and rubbed their cocks together while devouring him in kisses. He’d awakened with a hard-on, but at least he’d been the first to rise. Tyrone had still been out like a light long after AJ jerked off to a shuddering climax.

He smiled when Tyrone launched into the Honeydrippers’ “Sea of Love” and picked up his part effortlessly. It wasn’t a part of one of their sets, but they noodled around with it during their rehearsals quite a lot. Oddly enough, the song was one of Tyrone’s favorites.

“I still think we should have this in the show,” AJ said. “And make it very clear that Mr. Too Cool for Classical has a soft spot for vintage Robert Plant.”

“At which point, I’ll remind everyone the song was written by a brother, and you’ll look the fool,” came the easy response.

“Just to join your company.”

## *INTERLUDE*

“My company’s not so bad. Ask anyone.”

“And what’s so funny about that is I know I can take that literally.”

“One of these days, and it won’t be long, I’m going to make you eat those words.”

AJ lifted a brow, meeting Tyrone’s amused gaze over the pianos. “If you tell me you’re joining a monastery, I’ll eat more than my words.”

Tyrone pursed his lips and blew him a kiss. “All of a sudden, I’m very tempted to tell you that’s the case.”

Kira’s soft laugh from a nearby table reminded AJ he wasn’t alone, but the rush of bantering and playing with Tyrone had already taken root. She could laugh all she wanted. At that moment, all he cared about was the piano at his fingertips and the man sitting opposite.

AJ ended the song early and segued without pause into Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” Even Tyrone laughed at that. Like the dutiful partner he was, he picked up the bass line, this time letting AJ take the lead.

“So still think I’m nuts for wanting to come to Vegas?” Tyrone asked.

“I think everybody has to be a little crazy to come to Vegas.”

“You could use some crazy.”

“No thanks. I kind of like being the sane one in the sea of chaos.”

“Or the sea of love.” With a wink, Tyrone dropped out of the Cline song and replayed the chorus from the previous,

## *INTERLUDE*

somehow synching it in so that it actually sounded like it belonged.

AJ rolled his eyes. "That's your domain."

"It could be yours. Good-looking guy like you." Tyrone shifted in his seat to better face Kira, though his hands never faltered where he returned to the bass line of "Crazy." "Isn't he a good-looking guy?"

Though he felt the weight of Kira's gaze, AJ refused to look in her direction. Heat crept up the back of his neck, and he watched Tyrone through his lashes, willing him to look back and return to the music.

It didn't work.

"He's gorgeous. You two look great together."

"We're not together," AJ shot out before he could stop himself.

The denial came sharper than he intended, but this was treading on territory too much like he and Tyrone had straightened out in the hotel room. Or, at least, he thought they'd straightened it out. The fact that the subject got brought up—again—indicated maybe the only one who'd believed that was AJ.

Some of the brilliance was gone from Tyrone's smile when he turned back to the pianos. "We're a team," he said simply. "Sounds pretty together to me."

"That's not what she meant."

"And you know that because you can read her thoughts?" "Crazy" was dwindling down. Tyrone chose a Duke Ellington medley they'd long ago arranged, something they could do in

## INTERLUDE

their sleep. They usually used it for pre-show warm-up when one of them wasn't onstage yet, or during longer audience participation sections when they needed to talk more. AJ didn't like that he chose it now.

"This isn't the place, Ty," he warned. Hopefully, using the other man's nickname would show him how serious he was.

"What? Nobody's here but you and me."

"And Kira."

"An impartial third party."

AJ scoffed at the description. "She'd only be impartial if she wasn't getting a cut of our paychecks."

"That just makes her equally invested in both of us, then. Nobody better to get an opinion from. She can't afford to upset either one of us."

"Tyrone has a point," Kira piped up.

His hands picked up the tempo, swinging into a different version they rarely used. He was getting too agitated to stay with the easier Ellington slide.

"Why are you doing this?" AJ asked, trying his best to ignore Kira. "I thought we got this straightened out upstairs."

"This isn't the same thing."

"How is it not the same thing? We agreed you weren't going to bother me about dating anymore."

"No, I agreed not to push you into the arms of other guys anymore." The Hollywood smile was still there, but now it was softer, more seductive. "I never said anything about pulling you into mine."

AJ crashed into the next note and jerked his hands away

## INTERLUDE

from the keyboard. Everything in the room tunneled down to the man sitting opposite him. No Kira. No restaurant. No beautiful Steinway. Just Tyrone. And that shattering statement.

“That’s not funny,” he croaked.

Tyrone was still playing, though not the jazz. The slower strains of Cole Porter echoed through the room. It took a few measures for AJ to recognize “In the Still of the Night.”

“It’s not meant to be funny,” Tyrone said. “You think I pushed this hard for a gig like this just for me? I did it for you, man. Because you’ve got a gift, and people need to hear it.”

“That’s not...that’s not what you said.” His hands were lead. He couldn’t play even if he wanted to. “You said there’d be pulling.”

“Because I’m tired of waiting. This thing with you and me? It’s the longest relationship I’ve ever had. For a reason.”

AJ started shaking his head before Tyrone had finished. “This isn’t a relationship. This is...” But he couldn’t say what it was. Because he had always considered it a relationship of sorts. There hadn’t been kissing or touching or any of the other things he’d wanted to do to Tyrone’s body, but there had definitely been friendship and trust. At least, there *had* been trust. “We’re friends. I’m not one of your conquests.”

A flicker of something sad passed behind Tyrone’s eyes. “No, you’re not.”

When Ty rose from the piano, the muscles in AJ’s body finally found life. He scrambled to slide off the bench in the opposite direction Ty was approaching, and practically tripped

## INTERLUDE

over his own feet as he got off the platform. Tyrone froze at the retreat, the smile stripped away.

"This isn't how I wanted to do this," Tyrone said. "I had this whole scene planned after our opening night here. With wine."

The more AJ heard, the more his skin flamed. He even felt the heat creeping to the tips of his ears. "So you were going to get me drunk and seduce me? Why? So I wouldn't blow the gig here?" He backed up toward the front doors, away from the pianos, away from Tyrone, away from everything that wasn't making sense. "I know I dragged my feet about it, but you should know I wouldn't blow it just to spite you, Ty. I'd never do something like that. Not to you."

"I know." Tyrone held up his hands, palms out, in an obvious attempt to try and calm AJ down. "I *know*. That's not what this is about."

"No, it's about everybody loving you. And about everybody wanting to be with you. Did you forget? I *know* you. I know what you do. How many people you sleep with. How you need the company. I'm not interested in being a notch on your bedpost. Not like that."

He saw Tyrone's mouth open, probably to try and rebut what AJ knew to be true, but there was no way he was sticking around to hear it. Turning on his heel, AJ ran for the door, slamming it open with both hands and plunging into the casino crowds. He only had one instinct. To get as far away from Tyrone Dahl as humanly possible.

Out of Vegas.



## *INTERLUDE*

Home.

Getting up to their room was a blur. He stared at the display over the elevator doors, willing it to go faster. Every hair stood up on the back of his neck in fear. He had to be fast. In, grab his keys and his stuff, out. Out before Tyrone had the chance to make it to their room. Out before Tyrone got the opportunity to try and sweet talk him again. Out before Tyrone got within touching distance, and everything AJ wanted disappeared in a flash-fire of lust.

Because he had no doubt that if Tyrone kissed him, he would be lost.

It took three attempts to get their room unlocked. He even dropped the key once. Inside, the scent of Tyrone's cologne still hung in the air, tempting him to stop and just breathe. Then he saw the rumpled bed, and remembered how Tyrone had slipped in next to him. A plan. Ty had planned all this. He'd probably feared AJ being a flake about the whole Vegas arrangement. Considering how much of a fuss AJ had put up in the beginning, he supposed he couldn't fault Tyrone for coming to that kind of conclusion, but this solution was going too far.

He was in the elevator, his bag slung over his shoulder, car keys dangling in his hand, when the doors opened to the lobby. Right on the unsmiling face of a certain man he was trying to avoid.

"AJ..."

Though Tyrone stepped back to allow him room to get off, AJ twisted out of his way when he tried to grab AJ's arm.

## *INTERLUDE*

“Don’t,” he warned. “I’m getting out of here.”

Tyrone had to walk twice as fast in order to keep up with AJ’s longer stride. “Let me explain—”

“So you can con me like you con all the others? I don’t think so.”

“It’s not like that.”

AJ ground to a halt at the corner of the faux Greenwich and Bleecker Street signs. “It’s always about that. I’ve seen it all, remember? I’ve been there.”

“This isn’t—”

“Don’t tell me it’s not the same. Don’t lie to me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

AJ stared into those liquid brown depths and saw what he was afraid to see. Sincerity. Though his stomach tumbled as it always did, his heart ached.

“No,” he said softly. “You really don’t think you are. And that’s the problem.” He backed up toward the exit. He knew he should turn around, but he couldn’t tear away from the confusion in Tyrone’s face. “I’m sure Kira won’t mind putting you up until I get back.”

“You’re coming back?”

“We have a contract, don’t we? And a lease.” Oh, God, the lease. How was he supposed to live with Tyrone after this? “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let you down.”

“But you’re still going to leave.”

“I have to.” The only thing that made it easier was the fact that Tyrone had ceased trying to stop him. He just stood there, getting smaller within the crowd. “I’ll be back.”

## *INTERLUDE*

Whether Tyrone believed it or not, AJ knew it was the truth. He'd made a commitment. Now he had to figure out how to live with it.

## CHAPTER 5

“You just left him there?” Janie stared at AJ in disbelief. “How is he supposed to get home?”

“I’ll go get him. In a couple days.”

He sat at the bar in Heat Wave, his head on his folded arms, wishing he had chosen to go straight home instead. He was exhausted. He’d driven all the way back to Reno, only stopping once to get gas. His brain hadn’t stopped at all. Tyrone’s words kept playing on repeat, and he couldn’t stop seeing the look in the other man’s eye when he’d vowed he wasn’t lying.

He didn’t understand why Tyrone would say those kinds of things now. The contracts were signed. AJ would never give

## *INTERLUDE*

less than his all in a job. Trying to seduce him served absolutely no purpose. Tyrone wasn't malicious or mean-spirited, either, so if he'd guessed at AJ's attraction, it wasn't in character to wind him up and use it against him.

The possibility that Tyrone could have meant every word made it even worse.

Heat Wave was deserted, the bar now closed. He had hoped Janie's clear head would help him put things into perspective, but she didn't have a problem with Tyrone's actions. All her concern stemmed from AJ's desertion.

"You two are partners," she said, not for the first time. "The least you owe him is the courtesy of sticking around to listen to his explanation."

"What kind of explanation is there for that?" His voice was muffled but he couldn't bring himself to lift his head. "None. Zero. He's playing me, just like he plays everyone."

"Or he's telling you the truth." Janie leaned down closer, nudging at his arms until he dared to look up at her. "How many times have I told you, you two have something good? You're just not willing to see what's right in front of your face."

He glared at her. "You're right in front of my face."

"Because you ran away like a big baby. It could be Tyrone in my place. And it's not like you don't want him there."

A terrifying thought made him freeze. "Tell me you never told him how I felt."

She sighed. "Of course not. But Tyrone's a smart guy. It's possible he finally figured it out on his own."

## *INTERLUDE*

It was. And that was the prospect that scared AJ the most.

"I gotta get out of here," he muttered. Sliding off his stool, he headed for the door, not seeing anything but the image of Tyrone's face burned on his memory. He had the distinct feeling he was going to see it, even after he'd fallen asleep.

Janie might have called after him, but AJ didn't hear it. For once, he was glad he didn't live that far away from Heat Wave. The drive home would be mercifully short, he could crash, and maybe in the morning, when he wasn't exhausted, this wouldn't seem as much of a mess as it did.

Though he sincerely doubted it.

He fumbled with the keys at the secured front door. Would all this have happened if he'd let Tyrone in that night? What if he'd insisted Tyrone go home? If he'd been presented with the Vegas job by the light of day, would he still have caved?

Probably. Because Tyrone had asked. It was a good opportunity for them, regardless of whether or not Ty was going to try to get him into bed.

On the other hand, what if he had taken Tyrone up on his offer? There was nothing wrong in taking pleasure where he could. Lots of guys had casual hook-ups. Hell, Tyrone was the poster child for casual.

But therein rested the root of the problem. They could sleep together, and Tyrone would be able to walk away afterward and continue on with their work like nothing had ever happened. AJ knew he didn't have it in him. He wanted Ty, yes, but sex would muddle feelings he already had to hide. He had no doubt that if things progressed to a physical level

## *INTERLUDE*

with Tyrone, AJ would crack and admit he loved him. And Tyrone would be a gentleman about it. He'd smile, and be flattered, but in the end, he'd still walk away. That's what he did.

When the elevator doors slid open on his floor, AJ felt like the walking dead. He just wanted to drop everything, crawl into bed, and not wake up for a week. His head ached, and his eyes burned, and if he thought too much about the look on Tyrone's face when AJ had walked out of the New York, New York, his heart twisted.

He was nearly at his apartment before he saw the familiar legs stretched out in front of his door.

AJ halted. The face Tyrone turned to him wasn't smiling, wasn't laughing, wasn't anything joyous at all. His eyes looked larger and darker than usual, sunken like he was as tired as AJ. When he rose to his feet, he moved like a man preparing to face an executioner, each move carefully contained, a dirge awaiting its opening.

Neither moved after that. The air between them hung heavy both with everything that had been said and everything not dared.

"I need to talk to you." Tyrone stated the request without a hint of assertiveness, none of the barreling enthusiasm that usually accompanied such declarations. "I can't leave it like we did."

AJ thought they could leave it just fine. "How did you get in?"

"Lean on enough buzzers and, eventually, somebody

## *INTERLUDE*

cracks.”

“And you beat me home...how?”

“I caught a flight. Kira knew we needed to sort this out. She helped hook me up.”

Just mention of the woman’s name made AJ wince. “Yeah, of course, she did.” His hand shook as he stepped toward his door, and he clutched his keys tighter to quell the tremors. “I don’t have anything to say to you right now. You wasted a trip.”

Tyrone at least had the decency to move out of his way, though he hovered at AJ’s side as he slid the key into the lock. “That’s okay. You just need to listen.”

“To what? More of your lines?” As he turned bleak eyes to Tyrone, AJ knew at least some of his feelings dangled in the wind for anyone to see. He was simply too tired to pretend right now. “I’m begging here. Don’t do this. I don’t want to wreck what we’ve got professionally because you think you need to convince me to stick it out, or you need to prove something to yourself, or whatever it is that brought all this on. Just go, and I’ll see you in Vegas in a couple of days.”

“No.” Tyrone didn’t even hesitate. “I’ve waited too long to have this discussion, and I’m not running away now. And I’m not letting you run away from it either, man. So unless you want your neighbors to hear what I have to say, let’s take this inside, okay?”

Tyrone knew him too well. AJ hated scenes. His neighbors didn’t even know he was gay.

Without a word, he pushed his door open, not bothering to



## *INTERLUDE*

stand back to let Tyrone in first. He dropped his bag as soon as he was inside and headed straight for the kitchen.

He didn't make it two steps before Tyrone grasped his shoulder.

"I'm getting this out of the way first." Ty turned him around, and slid his hand to cup AJ's neck. There wasn't even time to blink before Tyrone brought their lips together.

He'd dreamed of kissing Tyrone too many times to count. He'd dreamed of soft kisses on the couch, hard kisses against a wall, hungry kisses in bed. He'd fantasized about what exactly it was that brought all those men and women back to Tyrone's bed, what he did to them to make them melt, make them need his kisses more than anybody else's. None of the dreams were ever quite satisfactory enough, though, especially when he faced that mouth and that smile every night over their pianos. He always believed there was something he was missing.

There was. The tender exploration of a tongue that knew right where to go. The way it sought out AJ's, coaxing it to play rather than forcing it. The way it tickled along the edge of his teeth, or swept into warm corners, or traced along his lower lip. AJ couldn't have refused anything at that moment, whimpering in the back of his throat when Tyrone rested a hand on his hip and pulled their bodies even closer.

By the time Tyrone pulled away, AJ's mouth tingled, and his cock was hard as a rock. He couldn't even feel the bottom of his feet. His hands itched to grab Tyrone by the shirtfront and drag him back, but then he caught the shine in Tyrone's

## INTERLUDE

gaze as it slid upward from AJ's lips to his eyes and he couldn't do anything but stand there.

"You have no idea how long I've waited to do that." Gone was the slick purr of Tyrone's voice. In its place was a husky rasp, more shaken than anything AJ had ever heard from him before.

"You don't need to prove anything to me," AJ managed to get out. "You never have."

"But I do." Tyrone hadn't let go of his neck, and now, his long fingers caressed the rigid muscle, slowly working through the tension. "Because I know what you think of me. About the way I date."

"And this is supposed to change my mind?" He summoned what little strength he had to brace his palms against Tyrone's chest and push him away. He couldn't think with the massage that was slowly eroding his defenses. "This only proves my point."

Tyrone let him go. He ran the back of his hand over his mouth, not in a gesture of rubbing the kiss away but in some semblance of rubbing it *in*. "You think I want something physical because I want some kind of control over you, so you won't abandon what we've got in Vegas. You couldn't be farther from the truth."

"You haven't said anything yet to change my mind."

"How about, you're the best friend I've ever had?"

AJ snorted. "I know that already."

His comment didn't faze Tyrone. "Then how about, I've been attracted to you since the day we met?"

## INTERLUDE

That was a little more sobering. But in spite of the frisson of desire that snaked down his spine, he said, "That's not exactly a short list."

Tyrone's nostrils flared. "You know, I think you're deliberately making this harder than it has to be. You've got these pictures in your head of who I am, and maybe some of it is true, but man, you cannot see what is right in front of your face."

Hearing Janie's words reiterated from Tyrone's mouth brought back the fear that had gripped him at Heat Wave, but more than that, a rush of fury balled his hands into fists, fists he shoved into his pockets in order to hide.

"I'm getting sick and tired of people telling me I'm blind," he snapped. "I *see* you, okay? I always have. That's the problem. I see what kind of a guy you are, and I see how you treat me, and I see what kind of chemistry we have onstage. I've always seen it. Which is exactly why I fell for you in the first place."

The frustration that had been building in Tyrone's features shattered. His jaw fell slack, and he retreated half a step before catching himself.

"If you've got feelings for me, then what the hell is all this fighting about?" he demanded. "This should've been dirt simple."

"Are you even listening to me? Did you hear a word I said back in Vegas?" He jabbed a finger in Tyrone's chest. "I don't want to be a conquest. I can't be. I let this happen, and it's going to kill me seeing you with someone else when we're

## INTERLUDE

over. Which will mess with our act. And I *know* you don't want to screw up your career, not even for sex."

"Who said this was just about sex?"

The blunt question dampened the anger swelling inside him. It came so matter-of-factly, so without guile, that it had to be genuine. His mind raced. He replayed every word Tyrone had uttered back in Las Vegas, every word he'd said here. He'd said he was attracted to him, but there had been other hints, his assertions that AJ was wrong about his motivations, the declaration about their long-lasting relationship. Taken at face value, they added up to something else entirely. The question was, could AJ accept that without assuming Tyrone meant otherwise?

"What would it be about if it wasn't just about sex?" he asked carefully.

With a slight chuckle, Tyrone shook his head. "You just don't see it. You never have. It kills me to think how long we would have stayed in autopilot if I hadn't said something at the restaurant."

Slowly, he reached out to cup the back of AJ's head again, though this time he did it with the care someone took when they were trying to calm a skittish animal. AJ couldn't look away. He drowned in liquid eyes as Tyrone caressed him again, finishing the massage that had nearly destroyed him only moments earlier.

"This isn't about sex," Tyrone said. "This is about being in love with you almost as long as I've known you."

"You..."

## *INTERLUDE*

The notion was so out there, he couldn't even say it. His ears vibrated from the force of his heartbeat, and his throat had closed off, refusing him any air. He couldn't deny that it could be a line. Tyrone could be saying all this to get him into bed. A last resort when the other seduction hadn't worked.

There was only one problem with that.

Tyrone didn't resort to those sorts of tactics. He never had to. His appeal was based purely on how genuine he was, even if it didn't last.

"You never said," he said.

"Because I always thought we'd only be friends. Every time I flirted with you, it looked like it just rolled off." His other arm snuck around AJ's waist, pressing their lower halves together. "I kept waiting for you to find a boyfriend, but you never did. So I decided enough was enough, and took matters into my own hands."

AJ still couldn't believe that Tyrone would have feelings for him, not after so many months of denying his own. But there wasn't any denying the arousal lined up against his, or the soft touch of Tyrone's hand at his neck, or even the absence of the man's ever-present smile. When the realization hit him, his eyes widened. Tyrone was nervous. He was putting everything on the line, and he actually feared AJ's response.

"I never dated because nobody ever measured up to you," he confessed. "I told myself a long time ago it was better to be your friend than anything shallow I might find with someone else."

### *INTERLUDE*

Tyrone tightened his fingers. “We have wasted too much time,” he muttered.

Then he was kissing AJ again. And AJ couldn’t agree with him more.

## CHAPTER 6

AJ had to touch him this time. His hands came up and cupped Tyrone's face, surprised by the muscles flexing beneath his fingers, the heat pouring off Ty's skin. While their bodies molded together, their mouths opened and explored in a heated quest for more. Now that he had Tyrone in his arms, he didn't want to let go. AJ wanted to taste every part of him. These hot, wet kisses were only the start.

At the first tangle of their tongues, Tyrone groaned. The arm around AJ's waist tightened, and Ty ground their hips together even harder, rubbing cock against cock until he wasn't the only one groaning. Shivers undulated down AJ's spine. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be real. He'd

## *INTERLUDE*

wanted Tyrone for so long, loved him almost longer, that this was a dream that should disappear as soon as he opened his eyes.

So he didn't. He squeezed his eyes shut, and held Tyrone closer, and when he felt those silken fingertips edge their way beneath his shirt, stroking along his waist, he shuddered from sheer want.

"Let me stay," Tyrone said. His lips moved to the corner of AJ's mouth, the tip of his tongue tickling the crease. "I'll make it worth your while."

"You don't have to prove anything."

"I do." He nibbled at AJ's jaw now, scraping their stubble together to create a whole new burn. "You need to believe me. You need to know I'm serious."

It was already starting to sink in. Everything tumbled into knots too difficult to undo, his hands sliding down to Tyrone's chest as the man insisted on tasting elsewhere than his mouth. Tyrone forced him to tilt his head to the side, exposing his neck. More tremors reverberated through his body, and he fisted Ty's shirt, his nails scratching through the fabric, in a desperate bid not to fall over.

"You can stay." Acquiescence was surprisingly easy. Considering how much he'd been arguing with himself about Tyrone's motives earlier, AJ shocked himself at his swiftness to bend to Tyrone's wishes. "But only if you promise this isn't going to turn into some kind of competition." Tyrone pulled back slightly at that, a frown marring his handsome features. AJ was quick to clarify, "I just mean, we're still friends."



## *INTERLUDE*

We've never been like that, and I don't want to lose what we have just to add this. So don't think you have to do anything but what you really want. Just act like you'd normally act with me." He grinned. "Except, you know, with kissing."

Tyrone matched his smile. The hand he'd slid beneath AJ's shirt emerged, and he clasped their fingers together, stepping past him to head for the bedroom. "So how come you didn't catch on when I climbed into bed with you at the New York, New York?" he asked. "I thought I might've been coming on too strong."

His hallway had never seemed so long before. "I was trying not to focus on how good you smelled." He stared at their entwined hands, at the shadow of Tyrone's dark skin against his fading tan. "Kind of like I'm trying not to focus on how much I want to lick you right now."

The look of surprised delight Tyrone shot him made AJ blush. "One kiss and you turn into this?" Ty shook his head as he pushed the bedroom door open. "Damn, I should've kissed you a lot sooner."

AJ was starting to agree with him. If Tyrone had taken the initiative a little sooner, outside of the entire Vegas situation, he was pretty sure he would have responded with even more enthusiasm.

As the door shut behind him, Tyrone turned on AJ and shoved him to the hard surface. "Just so you know..." He worked at AJ's belt, nimble fingers opening his fly in a matter of seconds. "This isn't about needing to prove anything. This is purely about wanting to suck you off."

## *INTERLUDE*

AJ's eyes widened. He watched Tyrone sink to his knees, pushing AJ's shirt up and out of his way with his free hand. Ty turned his head and licked along his waist, detouring at his belly button to drive the tip of his tongue inside. Even that delicate touch made AJ's cock jump, and his hands shot out to grip Tyrone's shoulders.

He held his breath as Ty tugged his pants open. He waited for the inevitable heat of those lips wrapping around his cock, but Tyrone didn't bother with his boxers yet. He slid his mouth down over the cotton and wet the fabric along the shaft, biting slightly with each inch. AJ jerked. It felt too good. He was going to come before Ty ever touched bare skin.

"You remember that Italian guy I went out with last spring?" The zipper annoyed Tyrone to the point of sitting back on his heels and yanking AJ's jeans off his hips. "The tall guy who never talked?"

AJ remembered. He hated the man on principle. He'd looked like he'd stepped out of an underwear ad.

"I only agreed to go out with him because he reminded me of you." Tyrone smoothed his palms up AJ's thighs, beneath his boxers to fondle his balls. "He had the same puppy dog eyes. And he was about your height." One hot hand curled around AJ's cock, pumping once. "But you put him to shame, in every other way."

"I still can't believe this is happening," AJ said.

Tyrone didn't have an answer for that but a brilliant smile and another squeeze of his cock.

His knees trembled with each pull along his shaft, each one

## *INTERLUDE*

firm and warm and a hint of what was yet to come. AJ wanted to request moving to the bed, but that would mean Tyrone not touching him anymore. He couldn't have that. He never wanted this to stop. He dug into the hard muscled shoulders and moaned when Tyrone bent his head and sucked at his balls through his boxers. The tremors became constant, threatening to bring everything to a crashing halt before either of them got satisfaction.

"Maybe..." AJ swallowed. His voice was more of a croak.

"No maybe." Now the boxers were down with his jeans, and Tyrone had his cock gripped tightly at the base. "Just enjoy."

He did a lot more than enjoy. At the first touch of Tyrone's tongue around the head of his cock, AJ slammed his head back into the door. Everything sizzled. Each wet trail Tyrone left along the crown created new ribbons of fire shooting through his thighs. AJ wanted to cry out, scream, make some kind of noise, but his throat had closed off entirely, breath precious, a voice impossible. It only got worse when Tyrone sucked the head past his lips. Then, AJ had to fight not to crumple on the spot.

Slowly, Tyrone sank down his length. The suction was tighter than anything AJ had ever felt before, warmer and wetter than he remembered blow jobs being. Granted, it had been awhile since he'd had sex, but none of his memories compared to this. He didn't remember that slight scoring of teeth catching on his skin. And he didn't remember tender caresses along his thighs, or a skilled hand slipping between to

## *INTERLUDE*

stroke the soft spot behind his balls. He definitely didn't remember that lack of hesitation when he reached the back of a man's throat.

Tyrone swallowed him down without a pause. His nose buried in the dark hair at the base, and the hot puffs of breath seeped into AJ's skin.

"Oh, God."

AJ braced himself by cupping the back of Tyrone's head. He didn't hold him down; he just needed something to hold onto. But even that was denied him when Ty immediately started sliding up again. He went all the way to the tip, his teeth catching at the crown, and then all the way off, looking up at AJ through his lashes.

"I'm taking the fact you fit perfectly in my throat as a sign this between us is right." He winked, his eyes twinkling. "But let's try it again, shall we?"

AJ licked his lips. "We could both try it." He jerked his chin. "On the bed."

Without taking his gaze off him, Tyrone tilted his head to the side and licked up and down the shaft until the tight skin glistened. "I was kind of hoping I'd get a taste of this..." The hand he'd had behind AJ's balls slid farther back, delving between his ass cheeks to trace over his hole. "Then I'd get a taste of this."

"We can..." It gurgled into a choked cry when Tyrone scratched his nail over the tight ring, taunting him with electric shocks that went straight to his cock. "We can still do that on the bed."

## *INTERLUDE*

“Yeah,” Tyrone agreed. “But the other thing I was hoping for was this...”

The finger teasing his ass slowly sank inside. Adrenaline shot through AJ, and he clenched automatically, which only drew another groan from Tyrone.

“You’re so tight.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

Tyrone’s brows shot up. “You’ve never been fucked?”

“Not never. Just...” The twist of Tyrone’s hand turned his thighs to stone, his muscles fighting for some semblance of control. He whimpered against the strokes, even though Tyrone kept it slow and even. “Just not in a long time.”

“Oh. I guess I figured you for a bottom.”

When Tyrone tried to add a second finger, AJ found the strength he needed to grab his shoulder and push him back. “I am. I...this is overwhelming, Ty. I’m not sure I’m ready for that on top of everything else tonight.”

The instant flash of guilt behind Tyrone’s eyes almost made him wish he hadn’t said a word of protest, but only almost. He wasn’t ready. He already felt like he was going to burst out of his skin from the sheer magic of discovering the truth. Anything more and there might not be any coming back.

“That’s okay, I get it.” Pulling free of AJ’s ass, Tyrone straightened and wrapped his arms around him. His mouth was soft, his gaze softer, and he stole a kiss while AJ adjusted to yet another shift. “Let’s lay down. Holding you will be just as good.”

AJ had to kick his jeans off the rest of the way before he

## *INTERLUDE*

could move, but Tyrone wasn't satisfied with that. His shirt was pulled swiftly over his head, and then there were hands molding over his body, a body he'd never thought was anything too special before, but now thought he might have to re-evaluate his opinion of if Ty's reaction was anything to go by.

"Tell me you like to fuck, too," Tyrone said, his voice hoarse with desire. "I've always wondered what it would be like to have you on top of me. These shoulders..." He leaned and bit along AJ's collarbone. "And now that I've seen your cock, I think I need it in my ass even more now."

AJ swallowed down the lump in his throat. "I think we can try that." Tyrone's answering smile melted away any more fear. AJ took the strength it gave him and dropped his hands to the other man's fly. "Your turn."

Tyrone stood there patiently as AJ opened his pants. His cock poked out from his tight black briefs, foreskin peeled back from the purplish head. It was more succulent than he'd ever imagined, dripping and firm and thick. AJ dropped to his knees on the spot, heedless of the carpet burn across his skin, and yanked underwear and jeans down together to let Tyrone's cock spring free.

"This is not the bed." Tyrone chuckled.

"No." AJ grasped Tyrone's cock, sliding his hand down in order to pull the foreskin back. "It's better."

He'd seen plenty of cocks in his time, if not recently. Long, short, thick, skinny, cut, uncut. AJ honestly thought Tyrone's was the most gorgeous one he'd ever been allowed

## *INTERLUDE*

to touch. He'd known from the press of their bodies that he was thick. Now he knew he was uncut, too. What he hadn't known was that delicious shade of dark brown, fading into a bruised purple in spots where the taut skin stretched along inch upon inch. It had a little curve, upward toward Tyrone's stomach, and with the foreskin peeled away, the crown was flared and ripe for the sucking.

So he did. He leaned forward, and he flicked his tongue briefly over the slit, and he parted his lips just enough to fit the head behind his teeth.

Tyrone tangled his fingers in AJ's hair. "I thought we were taking it slow."

AJ only pulled off long enough to say, "And I thought I told you I wanted to lick you all over."

He dove back in, opening his fingers in order to run his tongue down the length of Tyrone's cock. There were two prominent veins, one running underneath, the other along the side, and AJ chose the path between them back to the tip. He nipped at the tangible throb before doing the same with the head. More pre-come oozed from the slit. Enough to coat his tongue when he scooped it out.

When the litany of encouragement came from overhead, a secret thrill ran through AJ. It was surreal to think he was finally where he'd always wanted to be. He wanted to worship Tyrone the way he deserved, and knowing Tyrone wanted to do the same to him made it even better. He would let AJ do this for now, but AJ knew that as soon as he was done, Tyrone would reverse the tables again. All that talk about bed would

## *INTERLUDE*

go out the window, and it would be Tyrone on his knees, swallowing AJ's cock and hurtling him toward orgasm.

Holding Tyrone still, AJ licked around the crown once, twice, a third time until he felt he could recreate the shape in his sleep. Tyrone's grip pulled at his hair, but it was the pleasurable kind of sting, the kind that begged to be hurt a little bit more. He deliberately withheld taking any more of the length into his mouth until he felt the distinct tension in Tyrone's fingers.

He looked up. Tyrone stared down at him, eyes glassy, chest heaving.

"Suck me," he rasped.

AJ smiled. That was exactly what he'd been waiting for.

Sliding his hand down to the base, he flattened his hand over the tight, coarse curls, fixing Tyrone's cock between his thumb and index finger in order to keep him straight. Following with his mouth was the most sublime sensation he'd yet to experience, his lips tingling as they passed along the smooth skin. They stretched at the corners in order to accommodate Tyrone's girth, and the slight burn only made it all the better. It took no time at all for him to fill AJ's mouth. AJ sucked back up, ready to repeat long before he reached the tip.

He had to work up to swallowing more of the length. AJ wanted to feel the thick shaft filling his throat, but that wouldn't happen on the first pass. Or the second. Not even the third. Each stroke down Tyrone's cock meant a little bit more past his lips, but when he felt the blunt head nudge at the back



## *INTERLUDE*

of his throat, AJ always pulled back up.

Gasping for breath, he sat back on his heels and composed himself. Tyrone's thighs quivered visibly, but he hadn't done anything but coax AJ in continuing. AJ wondered if he should volunteer to move this to the bed as had been their original plan, but when he saw a fresh drop of pre-come gather on Tyrone's cock, he knew he didn't want to wait.

He dropped his jaw first, preparing to take it all. His descent along the sinuous, thick flesh was slow and deliberate, each sensation recorded in his memory for reliving later, when he woke up from this dream and it all disappeared. Halfway down, AJ closed his eyes, focusing on Tyrone's smooth voice, the musky scent of his skin, the way his balls were already hard in AJ's other hand. When he felt the now familiar nudge, he paused briefly, inhaled deeply through his nose, and swallowed as hard as he could.

Tyrone slid in the rest of the way. AJ moved his hand out of the way, reaching around the narrow hip to grip a taut cheek, and the first sound he made was a whimper of satisfaction.

A shudder wracked through Tyrone's body. "Dirty pool," he said, but he didn't pull AJ off or force him to stop. Instead, he caressed the side of AJ's narrow face, the touch oddly gentle in spite of his earlier coarse words.

AJ stayed there as long as he could, but as soon as his lungs began to burn, he slid up and off in order to take a breath. It was a swift breath. He wanted that cock back in his throat. He swallowed Ty down again, though this time, he

## *INTERLUDE*

remembered how the other man had tortured him only moments before. Two could play that game.

With each throbbing inch in his mouth and throat, AJ slid his hand farther along Ty's ass, dipping between the cheeks in order to find the hole.

"Oh, fuck, yeah," Tyrone encouraged. He widened his legs. An invitation if AJ ever saw one.

The third time he swallowed Ty's cock, AJ pushed two fingers into his ass. He hummed as well, forcing every ounce of pleasure he could onto the man he loved. Tyrone made a garbled cry, and his balls hardened. The veins pulsed the moment before the first salty shot hit AJ's throat, and he gulped the thick fluid compulsively, unwilling to lose a single drop.

Tyrone's hips jerked with each blast. It drove AJ's nose into the wiry hair, but that just meant getting to drown in the scent of Ty's musky skin. He thought he could very well stay like that forever, if only for the need to breathe.

Ty was the one to pull him back. And Ty was the one to collapse to his knees. But it was AJ who sought out his mouth, and it was AJ who clung to him, who held onto the damp skin and the twitching muscles. AJ was also the first to murmur, "I love you," between kisses.

But Ty was the one who repeated it, over and over again, until both of them finally tumbled into bed.

## CHAPTER 7

AJ's stomach rumbled as he slid onto his piano bench his first night at DeLuca's. Working in a restaurant designed to fit into Little Italy in New York City was vastly different to playing in a bar. The scent of garlic and oregano peppered the air, with a red wine chaser. He had to remember to eat before their shows from now on. The intoxicating smells of all the food were going to distract him, even though the feeling that he was going to throw up had only grown worse as their opening cues got closer.

It was going to be fine. They'd done this a hundred, no, a thousand times. They'd rehearsed ad infinitum for the past four days. There was no reason to be nervous, just because the

## INTERLUDE

pianos were a little more grandiose than he was used to, the restaurant was packed, and he could hear slot machines dinging in the background outside.

He glanced at the empty piano opposite him. They could do this. Together.

A few patrons looked in his direction when he started to play Sinatra's version of "Embraceable You." It was slow and predictable, and almost immediately they turned back to their dinners. *Ignore the man at the piano. He must just be the warm-up for the real show. After all, the shows are bigger here in Vegas.*

Four days of intense practices. Four nights of Tyrone. AJ's fingers slipped over the keys, trying not to relive what had easily been the best week of his life. Going through the show with a hard-on would not be good. He couldn't afford to be distracted, no matter what it felt like waking up with Ty's arm around his waist and his cock nestled against AJ's ass. They had a show to do. AJ was determined it was going to be a good one.

Sinatra segued into Harry Connick, which led to a few more curious peeks from the tables. AJ didn't look up, not even when he picked up the tempo with some Bon Jovi, which turned more than a dozen heads. Whispers started to trickle to his ear, but he kept the same placid face he kept for all pre-show warm-ups. Kira had warned them it was a common Vegas trick; Penn and Teller had the same sort of set-up, though the pianist in that case didn't take part in the show. But AJ and Tyrone had been firm. If it didn't end up working, then

## *INTERLUDE*

they'd worry about adjusting the act later. For now, they weren't going to mess with a proven formula.

The lights dimmed slightly. No flashing light on the microphone here. The owners wanted the patrons to be fully aware that the cost of their meal included a show.

Pounding out the rest of the bass line, AJ reached up with his right hand and tilted his microphone down for a better angle on his mouth.

"Welcome to DeLuca's, ladies and gentlemen. Where the food's hot, the music's cool, and nothing says I love you more than a tip in the tip jar." When a wave of light laughter rippled through the room, something inside him relaxed. They'd worried about how things might play in a more sedate environment than a bar, or if the jokes that did well in Reno would look amateurish in Vegas, but so far, everything seemed to be going well. "I'm AJ Mobley, and for the next two hours, I'll be playing some current hits, some golden oldies, and probably a couple songs nobody but a starving music major has ever heard of."

He played the new introduction they'd come up with, a double-time medley of Sinatra hits, and looked pointedly at the opposite piano. After several measures, he slid his gaze to the side, scanning over the nearby tables until it locked on a familiar set of broad shoulders.

Lowering his head, AJ cleared his throat, a sound that the mic still managed to pick up.

Nothing happened.

Thirty seconds later, AJ started the medley over again,

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taking extra care to emphasize the opening. Several customers started looking around the room, fully expecting the late arrival of the other piano player. Miscues seemed almost to be expected.

When a full minute had passed, AJ sighed. “Ladies and gentlemen, my sincerest apologies. See, this is the part where my partner is supposed to introduce himself, but as you can see, he’s not at his piano. In fact...”

He turned the microphone on the piano away. It wasn’t necessary for the show; the owners had supplied both men with mouth mics that slipped on over their ear. They hadn’t been able to afford such luxuries in a bar in Reno, but Vegas was the big league. The mic on the piano was used merely to throw patrons off the scent that AJ was one of the stars.

Slipping the mic on, he rose from his bench and climbed off the dais, taking the few steps to the nearby table. He folded his arms over his chest and stared down at Tyrone, whose mouth was full of ravioli.

“Why do you do this?” AJ asked.

Tyrone chewed slowly and said around the food in his mouth, “Everybody needs to eat, man.”

The microphone planted in the candles at the center of his table picked up every word.

AJ rolled his eyes. “We have a show. That’s already started. You’re making us look bad.”

Pointedly, Tyrone looked around at the other customers, waving his fork at one, winking at a pretty girl. “They look fine to me.” He leaned across to a knobby older man at the

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next table, and whispered, “You have got to try the bruschetta. It will—”

He was cut off by the sudden thrust of AJ’s wrist in front of his face. “Do you see what time it is?”

Tyrone pretended to scrutinize the face. “Yeah, it’s time for me to buy you a new watch.” As the audience chuckled, he tossed his napkin onto the table and stood. “You know it’s going to be cold by the time we’re done, right?”

Shaking his head, AJ returned to his piano. “Oddly enough, I don’t think you’re going to have a problem heating it back up again.”

Tyrone slid onto the other piano bench and picked up his waiting microphone. Once it was in place, he turned his brilliant smile to the audience and said, “Good evening, everyone. I’m Tyrone Dahl.”

“Otherwise known as the man who can never be on time,” AJ added.

“Never say never, my friend.”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“Maybe you’re just early.”

“No, I’m just trying to give these people the show they came to see. Dueling pianos means two of us, remember?” AJ cracked a grin as he began playing, waiting for the prepared response.

“How many times have I asked you not to pull that ‘Ebony and Ivory’ crap?”

“How many times have I asked you to be on time?”

And so it went. Exactly as AJ had hoped for.

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\* \* \*

The sound of the audience's cheers and clapping echoed in AJ's ears, even though the show had been over for a good fifteen minutes now. He and Tyrone stood near the bar, their glasses of ice water nearly empty in front of them. A thin film of perspiration across his forehead made Tyrone's skin gleam darkly, and AJ had to resist the urge to lean over and steal the dampness with his lips.

He settled for the private angle of their bodies, hip brushing against hip, the musky smell of Tyrone's cologne superseding anything the restaurant could conjure up. Even after Kira came striding toward them, neither man moved.

"I knew you two were going to be a hit," she gushed. "The feedback already is through the roof. Everybody loves you."

"Of course, they do," Tyrone said. "We're sexy and funny."

"You're sexy. I'm funny," AJ corrected.

Tyrone smoothed his hands down his shirtfront. "I do look good tonight."

"The owners want you two to come to a little party they're throwing tonight to celebrate the grand opening." Kira reached between them to set a business card on the counter, a hotel suite number written across its front. "But I told them you'd probably have your own celebration to get to." Her smile was warm and teasing. "Something a little more private than a bunch of restaurateurs patting themselves on the back for a job well done."

It was hard to believe he had been so jealous of Kira.



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Tyrone had explained how he'd come clean to her from the start, and how she'd done everything she could to help Tyrone get what he wanted—namely, AJ. She might have had selfish reasons to keep them happy at first, but there was a heart of gold beneath the perfect façade. They couldn't have asked for a better first friend in Vegas.

"I'm crappy at the schmoozing anyway," AJ downplayed.

"And I'm exhausted," Tyrone added.

"My excuse was better." Kira bussed each of them on the cheek before turning away. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Now, if I'd actually slept with her, I might know what those boundaries are," Tyrone joked when she was gone.

AJ searched his face. "Did you want to go to the party? I didn't mean to be a buzzkill about it if you'd rather go."

"Free drinks with a bunch of bigwigs, or go home with you?" Tyrone smiled. "Not even a contest."

They made their way out of the bar without touching, without any more words, but as soon as they were in the parking lot, AJ slipped his hand into Tyrone's. He was still testing how far they could go. Though things seemed perfect behind closed doors, he wasn't always sure how much affection he was allowed to share in public, or even how much Tyrone wanted. To his credit, though, Ty had never turned him away. Every time AJ had tilted his head for a kiss, Tyrone was right there, his firm mouth responsive. Every time AJ entwined their fingers, Tyrone squeezed back.

Only the façade they had to present for the show held them

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back inside the restaurant. The truth might come out eventually—in a town like Vegas, secrets were hard to keep—but for now, they would enjoy the anonymity the roleplay gave them.

The drive back to the apartment was spent in silence, only the soft strains of some oldies on the radio breaking it. Tyrone was the one who led them upstairs, more minutes AJ could steal to watch him to his heart's content. Would there ever be enough? Doubtful. He'd hoarded every detail of the past two years, and there looked to be no end in sight now that he could have his fill.

AJ hung back as Tyrone unlocked the door, though for different reasons this time. His gaze locked on Tyrone's profile. He wanted to keep every reaction.

Like that split second of awed surprise when Ty saw the layout waiting for them.

A bottle of wine with two glasses sat on the dining room table, with a single red rose resting between them. Rich, chocolate cake sat behind it, and fresh strawberries and cream waited for dipping.

"We only have one opening night in Las Vegas," AJ said softly. "It deserves something special."

"It does."

All the air expelled from AJ's lungs when Tyrone turned and caught him in his arms, crushing their mouths together in a hard, tremulous kiss. Even Ty's hands shook, grasping awkwardly at AJ's shoulders. AJ returned the kiss with just as much passion, just as much fire, wondering fervently why the

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gesture had shaken Tyrone so much.

"I can't believe you did this," Ty said between kisses.

"Why?"

"Because you were with me all night. Because it takes planning."

AJ pulled back in mock dismay. "So you're the only one who can plan in this relationship?"

"No, but you're not usually the one who likes the surprises."

With a smile, AJ caught his hand and began leading him to the bedroom. They'd given up on the pretense that they were going to sleep in separate beds. Now, the second bedroom was used as a music room.

"If you don't mind waiting for the wine and cake, that's not the only surprise I have for you."

Ty's brows shot up. "There's more."

"Yes." They stepped inside. The lamp on the nightstand revealed the lube and condoms waiting on one of the pillows. "I want you to fuck me."

The fingers in his tensed. "AJ..."

"I know." He tugged against the mild resistance Tyrone presented now, pulling him in the rest of the way. "I'm ready. Honest. I want this more than anything."

Though there had been a lot of touching and kissing since the grand revelations, this was one barrier that had yet to be breached. After AJ had asked for a momentary respite, the subject had never been brought up again. He knew it was Tyrone respecting his boundaries. He finally understood

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Tyrone feared losing him. But now he was ready, had been for at least the last day or two. He wanted to feel Tyrone inside him more than he cared about touching a piano ever again.

Tyrone didn't resist being guided to the edge of the bed. He stood completely still when AJ sat down on its edge. The passivity vanished when AJ pressed his mouth to his covered stomach, though. Amidst kisses rained along the hard muscle, Ty groaned and cupped the back of his head to keep him there.

For all his careful planning, for all his fantasies on how this would play out, for all his desire to make this entire night special for both of them, the reality of his mouth on Tyrone's body changed everything. AJ couldn't keep his hands away from undoing the other man's belt. The growing line of Ty's erection pressed against his chest, and his own cock throbbed in response.

The touch of a warm hand against his cheek made AJ pause and glance up. The shift seemed to be all Tyrone waited for. He cupped AJ's face and bent to kiss him, one knee coming up between AJ's legs to help press him back onto the mattress. More warmth, then, more fire to hold as AJ wrapped his arms around Ty's back and molded their bodies together. Nothing had ever felt so exquisite, so safe, so satisfying as this.

His lips were numb when Tyrone chose to start nibbling along his jaw. Closing his eyes, AJ pressed his head back into the bed, trying not to let the fresh shivers take control and ruin this. Fast was apparently off the playlist tonight. Ty was taking his time, exploring, touching, finding new patches of

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skin to delight in spite of having spent the last four nights doing this exact thing.

“This was supposed to be about me doing something special for you,” he gasped.

Tyrone didn’t break from his kisses, licking down AJ’s neck as he worked on the buttons of AJ’s shirt. “This is special. Getting to eat you up? Best treat in town.”

Goose bumps erupted along his chest with each exposed inch of skin. He fisted the sheets, and when that wasn’t enough, grabbed the back of Tyrone’s shirt and yanked it free of his waistband.

A low chuckle reverberated through his overheated flesh. “A little impatient?”

“Just a little.” AJ propped himself up on his elbows, watching Ty’s dark head move lower and lower down his body. “Aren’t you?”

“Knowing what we’ve got to look forward to? No, I know it’s going to come.” He glanced up through his lashes, his mouth hovering over AJ’s fly. “Besides, we take this fast, and you might not ever want to do this again.”

“Oh, I doubt...oh.” The meaning sunk in. “I know you won’t let it hurt.”

Sitting back on his heels, Tyrone undid AJ’s pants and quickly stripped them from his legs. “No,” he said, pushing AJ’s thighs up into the air to expose his clenching hole. “I plan on making this feel damn good.”

The first touch of his tongue arched AJ away from the bed. He hadn’t expected this. This was what the lube was for. But

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now that Tyrone was tracing around his opening with long, firm strokes, AJ couldn't imagine it any other way. His mouth watered. When they switched places, he was going to demand to be allowed the same privilege. He wanted Tyrone to feel what he was feeling, to know that the muscles quivering in his thighs were because of AJ's tongue.

Slowly, he settled back onto the mattress, bracing his heels against the edge of the bed. Without having to hold AJ's legs up, Tyrone slid his hand down to fist AJ's cock, pulling it at the same tempo he fucked him with his tongue.

"You do this, and I'm going to come before you even get inside me," AJ said.

He felt Tyrone's smile tattooed against his skin. "I'm already inside you."

"You know what I mean."

"So do you."

Fingers joined Tyrone's tongue. AJ had tried playing with himself in preparation of what it was going to feel like being penetrated again, but that had been nothing compared to this. This burned. Everywhere. He felt knuckles scraping against his walls, fingernails scratching. He felt pressure at his opening where Tyrone's hand pushed against his ass, and the thought that his cock was even thicker than that made him clench.

"Oh, God," Tyrone moaned. "Please tell me you are not changing your mind about this. Because I can't stop thinking about how tight you are."

"No, no changing it." That was the best he could manage.

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Everything inside him had seized and refused to function to its fullest capacity. The best he could manage was folding his hand over Tyrone's so they stroked his cock together.

AJ had no idea how long it lasted. If he counted in seconds...infinity. If he counted in shivers...infinity. If he could count at all...infinity. He was entirely boneless by the time Tyrone pulled away, his lids heavy as he watched the man stand and start undressing.

The strip show was worth it. He had never seen a man as gorgeous as Ty, in or out of clothes. And the sight of his thick cock, jutting out from the dark hair, made everything inside him sizzle.

Tyrone went over to the nightstand, but instead of the lube, he reached for the condoms.

"What're you doing?" AJ asked as Ty rolled one on.

"Trust me."

Somewhere, AJ found the strength to slide up the bed so his legs were no longer hanging over the edge. Tyrone slicked up his covered cock until it shone, then crawled onto the bed. He folded over AJ's body and lowered his mouth until each shared the other's breath.

"I won't hurt you," Tyrone murmured.

In that moment, AJ realized he wasn't just talking about what they were going to do. He blinked away the emotion burning in his eyes and replied, "I know."

Gently, Ty nudged at AJ's thighs, parting them more widely in order to angle his cock downward. Closing his eyes, AJ held his breath as the head nudged at his opening, but when

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Ty didn't move, he looked up at him again in query.

"Relax," came the soft directive. The pressure increased, burning, excruciating, and all the while, Tyrone never looked away.

"I love you." Hooking one leg around Tyrone's hips, AJ pushed, adding to the effort, and cried out when the tip slipped inside his channel.

Tyrone swallowed the sound with a kiss. AJ was lost as Ty sheathed the rest of his length.

When Tyrone finally began to move, they were both covered with a thin film of sweat. It helped their chests to glide together, heightening the pleasure-pain radiating throughout AJ's body. He trembled. He couldn't help it. Everything felt beyond his control, beyond anything he had ever imagined, and all the while, Ty continued to kiss him, murmuring endearments between each one.

The world bled away until all that remained was this bed, their bodies, Ty's cock, AJ's ass. AJ clung to his broad shoulders. Within a few strokes, he was meeting each of Tyrone's thrusts, hungry for the friction, desperate for the release, but soon, not even that was enough. Where Ty whispered love, AJ begged for more.

True to his word, Tyrone gave it to him.

AJ cried out as the fresh sting of balls slapping against his skin added to the dizzying bliss. He dug into Ty's back, his nails sinking into pliant skin, and Tyrone grunted in approval. Words had abandoned him. If AJ needed proof that the man was on the brink, that was it.



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He didn't expect Tyrone to grab his cock. The first hard pull felt like everything was being wrenched from his body, and he shook as Ty stripped his length, dragging his palm over the all too sensitive head each time. Breathly pleas sprang to his lips but remained unspoken, his voice drowned out by the electric pleasure shooting through his body. His only choice was to seal their mouths together and pray he didn't fly apart when he came.

His orgasm exploded through him, his cock jerking in Tyrone's hand to coat their stomachs. Every muscle he had constricted, and Ty tore away from their kisses, shouting out as he slammed into AJ's ass one last time.

Gradually, the blind euphoria faded, and AJ became aware of the hard body still splayed atop his. Folding Tyrone into a tight embrace, he buried his face in the other man's neck, trying to slow his erratic breathing.

"I'd say wow doesn't quite cover that," he panted.

Tyrone chuckled, dropping a kiss to AJ's temple before rolling to the side. AJ didn't want to let him go, but he didn't have the strength to fight him. The best he could do was swivel his head to watch Ty peel off the used condom and tie off the end before tossing it in the trash.

"Jesus, you're like the Energizer bunny even after sex," AJ teased.

Sprawling back onto the bed, Tyrone waved a tired hand in his direction. "Nah, that's the last burst of energy before I pass out." Though his eyes were closed, he smiled anyway. "At least for the next ten minutes."

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AJ joined in his chuckle before summoning the strength to sit up. At the shift in the bed, Ty opened his eyes again and watched as AJ reached for the towel he'd had ready for cleaning up. When the last of the come was wiped away, AJ dropped it to the pile of clothes on the floor and lay back down, spooning behind Ty.

"Love you, man," Tyrone murmured, already half-asleep.

AJ buried his face in Ty's neck yet again, inhaling the heavenly scent of his skin. "Love you, too."

As he drifted off, all he could think about was what a great new beginning this was. Change didn't have to be all bad. In fact, with Tyrone at his side, he thought he could just about take on the world.

## VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

<http://www.viviendean.com>

\* \* \*

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