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VIVIEN DEAN

The Ice Butterfly

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A Phaze Snuggler HeatSheet by

Vivien Dean

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Phaze
6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

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The Ice Butterfly

Also by Vivien Dean

The Canvas of Her Skin

Anyone who ever thought snow was soft and silent had never trudged through the bowels of northern Canada in the middle of the night in mid-December with a thirty-pound pack strapped to his back and a hundred-pound thief complaining at his side. With their destination still miles away, the only thing to keep the sound of the monotonous crunching from turning Tomas Dalmau homicidal was his dwindling pack of Winston Reds.

"Jesus, T..." Though the only light came from the few stars that remained in the night sky, the wave of Jett's lithe hand in front of his face was still all too visible. "What the hell did I ever do to you? You're trying to kill me here, I know it."

Deliberately, Tomas turned and blew the smoke he'd been holding in his lungs downward into Jett's face, watching with mild amusement when the smaller man burst into a coughing fit and waved more frantically in order to clear the air. "I don't see you carrying the pack," he said, his smooth baritone pitched low in the somber Saskatchewan night. "So stop bitching if I'm doing what I have to to stay warm."

"They're called coats. Look into 'em."

"For one assignment?" Tomas snorted. "They don't pay me enough."

His cigarette left a red arc in the air as he lifted it to his mouth and took another long, deep drag, savoring the heat flaring through his veins. He could practically feel them crisping. Of course, with as much whining as Jett had done since Tomas had teleported them north, he could almost see his lungs blackening, too, but he wasn't thinking about that right now. He'd think about that later. After he didn't need the nicotine courage to face the next four hours.

"And what the hell is it with taking this assignment anyway?" Jett was either on a roll, or he was talking to keep his mouth from freezing shut. Tomas was half-tempted to make the latter a very real possibility anyway. "I didn't think you ever set a foot north of the thirty-fifth parallel."

"I don't. This'll be my first."

"And you're busting your snow cherry and dragging me along for the ride because...?"

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Tomas glanced down at the cigarette burning down between his long, callused fingers. He had been vague on details of the job when he'd contacted Jett in Miami, purposefully so. "I need the best hands in the business," was all he'd said, and the little guy had jumped on the compliment like a whore on a john at the end of a very bad night.

"Because I'm the only sentinel who's got a history with her," he admitted.

For the first time since they'd stepped ankle-deep in snow, Jett looked at Tomas with something other than annoyance. "The honchos roped you into it, huh?"

"No." It took twenty yards of silence for him to confess to the clarification. "I asked for it."

That shut Jett up. Tomas knew it would.

He didn't know if she would remember him, but he'd carefully left that detail out when he'd made the plea for the job. Their last encounter had been a decade previous, at a sentinel gathering in Tijuana. Tomas had been high off graduating the Institute six months early and Rana was part of an entourage that had crashed the party. They had three sex-drenched days when the city got hit by a freak cold snap and then she was gone. Along with half of his magical supplies and the Incan totem that had been entrusted to his care for his first official assignment. Tomas had sworn then and there never to let a woman use sex to get to him again.

Half the time, it was a philosophy that actually worked.

Next to him, Jett blew on his gloved hands, as if that would be enough to warm them through the thin leather. Tomas glanced down, a mild surge of guilt drawing his brows together, and tossed his cigarette butt aside, listening to the faint sizzle when it hit the top of the ice-encrusted snow.

"Sorry I couldn't get us closer," he said. It was a weak apology, but it was the best he could manage. "But Rana would've detected my magic and figured out there were two of us before we got within striking distance. The whole trip would've been a waste."

Jett shrugged. The thick anorak he wore barely moved. Tomas thought it probably weighed more than the tiny thief did. "I've worked worse," he said. "Don't even get me started on what happened at that furies and plushies convention in Brooklyn. And it's not like we're sticking around. In and out, right? Presto, change-o, I'm invisible."

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"She'll never even see you," Tomas assured. "The spell will tip her off I'm in the area, but by that point, you'll be cloaked, and I'll be busy keeping her distracted while you find the butterfly."

"How come you can't just zap it out of there yourself?"

"Because she's not a witch. Our powers are incompatible."

"Wait." Jett stopped in his tracks and frowned. The ski cap he wore over his blond buzzcut didn't protect his face, and the tip of his nose was bright red from the cold. "What the hell are we dealing with here? I'm not going to have to watch out for fire-breathers or bloodsuckers, am I?"

"You shouldn't." He sure as fuck hoped not. "Rana's an ex-legate for the Elemental Regency. She's got some magical powers, but those all stem from the forces of nature, which don't reconcile with sentinel witchcraft. It's likely she might have a guard or two around her hideaway, but for the most part, they're redundant."

"Why?"

Tomas stuffed his broad hands into the pockets of his pea jacket. Talking about Rana made him itch to strangle something. "Because she's got the weather at her beck and call. Mostly. You think it's an accident she's squirreled herself away in the winter of our discontent?"

Jett stared at him for a long moment before letting loose a martyred sigh and resuming his path. "Oh, man..." he muttered. "I'm beginning to think getting stuck in an elevator for three hours with a six-one cowboy named Otis in a wolverine costume was preferable to this."

The guilt swelled for a brief moment before receding back to an acceptable level. Nothing's going to happen to him, Tomas reminded himself. It was just melodrama in action.

They walked in silence for another mile, the velvet sky unbroken above the Canadian prairie. The lack of cover was a good sign of imminent success; Rana could conjure up a cloud or two, but nothing that could merit a blizzard or ice storm or something else that might render them snowmen. At least, Tomas didn't think so. The sentinels had little current information on her, and the Elemental Regency was staying mum. They were still reeling from one of their own going rogue.

Both men stopped when they rounded the crest of a small hill and saw the sprawling house in the valley below. A slight wind, the kind that cut to the bone and made Tomas long for his apartment in Puerto Rico, picked up the light snow that dusted over the icy drifts and blew it in eddies around their ankles. The cold crept up his worn jeans, but it was the sight of their destination that riveted him in his spot.

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Rana had a touch for the flamboyant. The ranch-style home that had probably been on the property for decades had been transformed with her arrival, siding replaced by sheets of ice that glittered even without any light, the chimney fashioned into a turret that looked like it had been carved by Michelangelo. Somehow, smoke still curled from its opening, and the entire house glowed from within. It almost pulsed.

Jett whistled under his breath, and the cloud of it hung around his head. "Lady's got style," he murmured.

"The lady has the ice butterfly," Tomas countered. He shifted the pack off his shoulders, dropping it to the ground. "Let's do this."

With their target in sight, both men eighty-sixed their foul moods in favor of the job at hand, crouching on either side of the supplies to take what they needed. For Jett, it was his roll of tools, tightly bound in black velvet, and the small box to contain the ornament for the transfer home. For Tomas, it was a series of weapons that he tucked around his person, a blade at his calf, a gun in the small of his back, and the vial containing the potion for the invisibility spell. The pack was nearly empty by the time they were done.

Tomas handed the vial over to Jett, who grimaced as he pulled out the stopper. "How come all your best magic smells like my Aunt Ro's compost heap?" he complained.

"Just drink it. The sooner I can't see you, the happier we're both going to be."

He ignored the show Jett made of holding his nose as he downed the thick fluid, choosing instead to bow his head and close his eyes. For all his caustic comments, Tomas felt like throwing up. At that moment, his every nerve and every fear decided to remind him that this was the same woman who'd made a fool of him at his graduation. He'd come a long way since then, rising through the ranks of the sentinels, but it had been a rocky start, complete with a probation that took forever to finish and lingering disappointment from those he'd admired. Damn it, with that single theft, Rana had stripped Tomas of the regard and respectability he'd fought for throughout his teenage years.

He shouldn't be nervous. He should be pissed off as all fuck.

He took a deep, steadying breath. Part of him was. Deep inside, in a dank corner that only saw the light of day when Tomas needed to draw upon those powers that frightened even him, he was angrier than anyone could be. But if he let that out, this entire mission would be over before it

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even started. Not even Jett would survive that blast, and the little guy had more lives than a pack of cats.

Maybe it was better to be scared.

When he lifted his head, his stomach as calm as it was going to get, Jett was nowhere to be seen. Well. That wasn't exactly true. Tomas could see the distortion in the air that indicated where Jett was, but that was because it was his magic. To everyone else, there was nobody there. Nobody would ever be the wiser.

"That stuff tastes as bad as it smells."

As long as Jett kept his complaining mouth shut.

"You have four hours before the potion wears off," Tomas said. He handed the empty pack over and watched it fade into the same thick air that characterized Jett. "Get the butterfly and then come find me. I'll teleport us out of here as soon as I see you."

"Got it."

The two men began their slow descent down the hill, Tomas leading the way. Twenty feet from the front gate, the door opened and a swathe of brilliant white light cut across the snow, blocked out quickly by a female form. They froze as she stepped onto the porch. At his side, Jett whistled under his breath.

"What a way to bust your cherry..." he muttered.

Everything inside Tomas sizzled at the sight of her. All he could do was nod in agreement.

Rana looked exactly the same.

She wore a long nightgown that would have been prim and proper enough for Tomas' great-grandmother if it wasn't for the fact that it was completely transparent. Even from that distance, her hard nipples were dusky shadows through the fabric, calling attention to her full breasts. His gaze traveled downward to the ripe curve of her hips, his fingertips growing hot at the memory of sinking into the soft flesh, of gripping her tightly as he ploughed into her from behind. It was almost a shame she was facing them. Rana had a magnificent ass.

"If she's some kind of winter element chick," Jett whispered, "where's the white hair? Shouldn't she be all pale and icy or something like that?"

"You don't know your temperatures," Tomas replied, his lips barely moving, his voice so low that his breath didn't appear as a cloud in the crisp air. "Get cold enough, and you always burn."

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She still wore her fiery red hair in a pixie cut that exposed her long neck and delicate bone structure, and the rest of it was straight out of the scrapbook of his memories. Deep brown eyes. The crooked mouth. If she smiled, a dimple would dance in her left cheek.

She wasn't smiling now.

Rana came off the porch and onto the snow, her feet bare beneath the hem of her gown. It took several seconds of scanning the darkness, but then her head swiveled, drawn in his direction as if that had been her intent all along, and her gaze settled on them unwavering.

"Wait until I'm inside," Tomas breathed without a glance at his partner. He walked forward until he reached the edge of the front path, his strides long and confident in spite of the cyclone currently residing in his stomach. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught his reflection in the ice and wondered if he looked the same to her, too. He doubted it. If nothing else, his six-two frame was no longer the rangy limbs of youth, with bulkier muscles cording his back and shoulders, and there was a strand or two of gray shot through the dark hair that was always a little too long, a little too wavy. Maybe only the eyes would be the same, deep-set and heavy-lidded.

Considering what he'd seen over the past ten years, though, maybe not.

"Tomas Dalmau. This is...unexpected."

Her honeyed alto made him hesitate, his foot cracking through the crusted veneer to sink to mid-calf in the snow. Rana's fingers flickered, and the ice re-formed around his leg, closing in on his jeans to root him to the spot.

Rana stepped within six feet of him, though maybe glided was a better word. She had the grace of a winter wind, and while the breeze still snuck beneath his clothes to chap his skin, her gown hung untouched around her legs. "A little...cold for you, isn't it? I wouldn't think you'd travel this far north."

Tomas shrugged. "What can I say? I'm the sultan of surprise."

She laughed, and it made him feel twenty-one again. He could almost smell the sunshine.

Shaking off the nostalgia, he pulled himself to his full height, ignoring his inability to move from where he stood. "You know why I'm here, Rana," he said. His voice cracked a little on her name. He really shouldn't have smoked as many cigarettes as he had. "This is official sentinel business."

"Since when do I care about official?"

It was a good question. Rana had left the Regency in a high-profile theft that had rocked the supernatural world and never looked back.

"Are you armed?" she asked.

"What do you think?"

Her gaze raked over his long body, pointedly lingering on his hips though the length of the pea coat hid his crotch from her scrutiny. "I think you're a lot smarter than to show up on my doorstep without a small army to take me in."

"That's because I'm not here to arrest you." His calm tone was rewarded with the swift leap of her eyes back to his. "I'm here to negotiate for the return of the ice butterfly."

Rana arched a single brow. "Negotiate? Since when do sentinels negotiate?"

"Since I asked for the chance to talk to you, up close and in person. I'm not interested in seeing you get punished, Rana."

She exhaled, long and slow. Even at that distance, it tickled across his neck, colder than the slight wind. "Well, well," she murmured. "You are a sultan. Too bad I can't believe you."

Tomas had expected that, but still asked, "Why not?"

"Take the word of a sentinel when I've broken enough laws to never see the snow of winter again?" Her eyes took on a calculating gleam. "I'm not so dumb, either, Tomas."

As soon as he began to reach for his coat pocket, her hand shot out, ready to stop him. Tomas froze. "Come look for yourself," he said.

He stretched his arms out to his sides, inch by inch, until her hand relaxed and she took a step closer. Rana's gaze jumped from his face to his coat to his face again as she closed the distance, until she stood directly in front of him, dark eyes fixed on his. Without looking away this time, she took the path he had, sliding her hand inside his pocket and curling around the object she found there.

He could see the surprise in her face long before she pulled it out. Sooty lashes widened, and her nostrils flared. Tomas never moved, not until she had retreated several feet with the broken half of the amulet clutched firmly in hand.

"I'm authorized to negotiate," he said, as if he hadn't already made the declaration more than once already. "You want my weapons, fine. I'll even swear not to use any attacking magic. But I'm not interested in

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standing out here in the cold any longer than I have to. If you don't want the other half of the amulet, just pass it on back and I'll be on my way."

She wouldn't turn it down. The Willandra Amulet was a valued piece of the Elemental Regency's collection. In the wrong hands, it promised more power than even the butterfly did. Provided it was whole.

"Your magic couldn't harm me anyway," she said. Her attention slid back up his body, long and lingering this time, with a fresh hunger that made his cock jump. "But I think stripping you down will suit my purposes just fine."

He had never deluded himself into thinking distracting Rana long enough for Jett to do his thing was going to happen with conversation, or at least, not a lot of it. Those three days in Tijuana had been three of the most sexually intense days of his life, before and after. He might not like Rana very much at the moment, but there was an electric attraction between them that still made his blood hum. Looking at her now – and yes, the sheer nightgown helped because it only reminded him of how lush she really was – brought back the sensations of how dangerously soft her skin had been, how her body had moved in time with his without his ever saying a word.

"I don't play as nice as I did when you first knew me," Tomas warned.

She smiled. Her dimple had him fully hard. "I'm counting on that."

Rana's fingers flickered and the ice loosened around Tomas' leg. As she turned to lead him back into the house, displaying her heart-shaped ass to perfection, one thought permeated his brain.

God bless chemistry.

* * * *

The house's interior was unexpectedly warm, a fire blazing in the fireplace that licked long, dancing shadows across the hardwood floor. A thin blanket lay twisted on the beige couch stretched in front of the hearth, evidence of Rana sleeping in front of the fire. As he stepped into the living room, Tomas sent out careful feelers to probe for other occupants in the building, but the only life sign other than his and hers was the low thud of Jett's somewhere beyond the walls. So far, so good.

He peeled off his coat and tossed it aside, watching Rana cross the room and set the broken amulet on the mantle. "Weapons, too," she said without looking back. Tomas did as he was told, removing the knives and gun he'd only just strapped to his body and dropping them in an unceremonious heap atop his coat. They would get left behind when it

came time to run, along with his jacket, but that had been planned for. Almost everything was disposable on this assignment. The other sentinels hadn't started calling him Trojan Tomas for nothing.

The orange glow from the fire shone through her gown, burnishing the outline of her skin. "So when did sentinels start teaming up with the Regency?" she asked. "They've never cared about elemental politics before."

He toed off his shoes, then bent and peeled off his wet socks. "Since you decided to fuck around with the weather in stealing the butterfly," he replied. "You'd be surprised how pissed off we can get when we're in the middle of a job and a freak snowstorm lets the bad guy get away. Shoves politics right out the window."

Rana turned to look at him, standing in profile so that he had full appreciation for both front and rear views. In spite of the nerves that still turned his stomach into a barroom brawl, his mouth watered at the sight of the taut peak of her nipple.

"And you? How angry are you, Tomas?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"That doesn't answer my question, and you know it."

It didn't. He didn't care. He wasn't about to admit to how much she got to him even now, a decade later.

When he didn't speak or move from where he stood, Rana smiled and shook her head. "You used to be a lot more fun," she said. "Please don't tell me the years have turned you into an old man. These negotiations are going to be dry as toast if that's the case."

She was flirting. Damn if she wasn't playing coy and trying to get under his skin like he was some kind of twenty-year-old kid who hadn't been around the block more than a few hundred times with women just as experienced as she. It might have worked in Mexico when a whirlwind redhead stampeded past every other female in a five-mile radius into his attentions, but now, it only served to make him more determined.

Without saying a word, Tomas strode over to the fireplace, his gaze heavy and direct on his target. Rana didn't flinch, didn't break, didn't do anything until he wrapped his long, callused fingers around her slim wrist and yanked her against him, and even then, it was only a short, sharp gasp. There was a second--infinitesimal and pounding--when he felt the flutter of her pulse against his skin and wondered if maybe there wasn't a better way to distract her from the theft about to take place.

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But then she looked up at him. Lips parted. Pupils blown with desire.

His mouth crashed down against hers, stabbing past her nonexistent defenses to sweep his tongue inside, and his arm scooped so tightly around her waist to press her against his aching cock that he had a sudden flash of fear that he might actually hurt Rana. That vanished when she responded to his kiss with a curl of nails into his shoulder, pulling Tomas even closer, with only the thin cotton of his sweater preventing her from drawing blood. She was a big girl, an elemental by birth, a seductress by nature. She could take whatever he dished out.

Of all the memories that he'd relived since getting the assignment, the one Tomas had forgotten was the sweet tang of Rana's kisses. She tasted of frozen juniper as it was just about to thaw, a heady elixir that had crashed his entire world when he'd first experienced it. Now, it was tempered by time, each caress a pinprick reminder of what he had to lose if this failed. It was bittersweet and mouth-watering, and he had to close his eyes against the temptation of forgetting himself once again.

Her hands flattened against his chest, pushing until the back of his knees hit the couch. Tomas fell along its length, her warm body sprawled atop his, but not even that was enough to break the seal of their kisses. If anything, it made it easier to deepen them. Lips parting, tongues exploring, hands roaming now that there was no fear of retreat from either of them. By the time Rana pulled away to gasp for air, Tomas was ready to tear the gown from her ripe curves and fuck her right then.

The tip of her tongue appeared as she swiped it across her swollen lower lip. "You still kiss like tomorrow is the end of the world," she breathed. "I always loved that about you."

His chest tightened. Just because she had left a huge crater in his life didn't mean he'd assumed he'd made any sort of impact at all on hers, let alone be important enough to bear remembering a simple kiss. "And you still talk too much," Tomas replied. His large hand curled around the back of her head to pull her back until her mouth ghosted over his. "I only want to hear you scream."

"Keep that up and--"

He didn't let her finish. He wasn't interested in platitudes or pretty words. He didn't want to hear lies about what might come or what had been. When it came to what she might have to say, all Tomas wanted was pleas for more. Anything else wouldn't make a difference.

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He kissed her until his lungs burned, and then he kissed her for endless minutes longer. Every time Rana attempted to tear away, Tomas tightened his grip and held her closer, fingertips molding to her skull, muscles taut where his forearm clamped around her waist. She writhed and squirmed and ground against his erection and always her hands moved. On his shoulders. At his hips. Beneath his sweater. When they reached for his belt buckle, he finally abandoned her mouth.

"Stand up," he ordered.

Rana seemed grateful to be released, peeling away to rise, swaying as she stood next to the couch. Sitting up, Tomas grabbed the skirt of her nightgown, ready to strip it from her ready body, when a better idea presented itself. He was level with her hips, the dark hair covering her mound visible through the gossamer fabric, her pussy only inches away. A slow smile curved his mouth, and he let the material fall, sliding his hands around to the back of her thighs and up to her ass in order to pull her closer between his legs.

Her breath hitched as he leaned forward and sucked at her hip, uncaring of the barrier between his tongue and her skin. Tomas tasted only the faintest hint of salt, but there was no denying the scent of her arousal, not at this proximity. It made his cock throb, his fingers dig into the soft flesh of her ass. When her hands came to rest on his shoulders, he encouraged her to hold on by biting into the top of her thigh.

Rana cried out. Her nails sank into his skin.

He soothed over the spot with the flat of his tongue, closing his eyes as he took a moment to inhale deeply. He wasn't normally this rough. Then again, normally, he wasn't trying to seduce the elemental who had hijacked the start of his career. Keeping Rana on edge did more than give Jett the time and chance he needed to get the butterfly. It made Tomas feel fucking good.

Her soft moan filled the room as he licked a path toward the junction of her thighs. The nearer he got, the more she fought against his hands to spread her legs further apart, but he held her still until his nose hovered over the dark hair. Then he helped her move, coaxing the separation of thigh from thigh. It bared the tender skin, shiny from her juices, and Tomas paused, his heavy breaths making the transparent fabric flutter before his face as he savored the sight.

"I remember that night on top of the hotel," he said softly, unable to stop the memories. "When we snuck up because you wanted to see the

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city. You let me eat you out while you stood on the edge of the roof and I thought you were the bravest woman I had ever known."

She laughed, a low, musical sound. "That's not what you said."

No. He'd called her crazy. And then proceeded to hold onto her for dear life while he buried his face between her legs.

Leaning forward, Tomas ran the tip of his tongue over the soft flesh of her mound and down between her outer lips. It drove the fabric against her clit, into her wetness, and Rana moaned again as her fingers clawed through his sweater, but that didn't stop him. It only incited him to suck at the nightgown, tasting her arousal for the first time in a decade. It only made him more determined to turn her moans into screams.

Without breaking his hold on her ass, his fingers pulled the skirt of her gown up inch by excruciating inch, until it was bunched in his hands and had his skin against hers for the first time without barrier. Tomas released the suction of his mouth to sit back and finish the job, and when her pussy was finally naked before him, he licked his lips.

"Wish all my negotiations could be like this," he muttered.

Seconds passed. When his mouth didn't return, Rana fidgeted in his grasp. "What are you waiting for?"

He wasn't waiting for anything. This was one of his favorite parts about oral sex, though she wouldn't know that. It was a preference developed in the time since he'd first known her.

Tomas loved the way women looked when they were aroused. Soft flesh swollen and glistening with the fluids of their desire. Sweet little clits poking through the folds, deceptively fragile-looking yet firm against his tongue when he finally stopped his gazing.

But as much as he loved to look, there was little on this earth as tantalizing as losing his tongue and teeth and cock in the secret dips and valley a pussy concealed. No matter what had transpired between them, Rana was no different.

She grew impatient and reached down to grab the hem of her nightgown. The fabric tore from his fingers as she stripped it over her head, and it landed in a flutter on the floor nearby, distracting him for precious seconds from the treat he still held. "Do it," she said. She threaded her fingers through the thick hair at his nape and tugged his mouth closer. "Please, Tomas. You can't leave me hanging here."

He could, but he didn't want to, not any longer. Her scent was growing too thick in his nose, his cock aching inside his jeans. Letting Rana pull him toward her, Tomas licked a path along her outer folds,

enjoying the texture against his tongue. When that was no longer enough, he dipped lower, slipping between her lips to trace around her opening, catching the juices and swallowing them down as a soft groan of satisfaction escaped his throat. He didn't know how long he could keep this up. He only hoped Jett didn't find the butterfly until he had a chance to come himself. If the little guy interrupted during the good stuff, Tomas just might have to kill him. Slowly.

He avoided her clit as long as he could, dragging the flat of his tongue across her opening in a broad sweep before shallowly fucking her with it. Rana began to grind against his face, her inner thighs warm along his cheeks, her ass even warmer beneath his fingers, and the small noises she made went straight to his cock. There were breathy sighs and small gasps, little mewls and unintelligible mutterings. Each rained down around his head, saturating his senses until all he could feel and taste and smell and hear was her.

When he couldn't stand it any more, Tomas released his hold to slide his hands to the front, withdrawing his tongue as he sank both thumbs deep inside her tight passage. His fingers splayed across her hips, absorbing as much heat as possible while keeping her open and exposed, and he glanced up through his lashes to see how she was taking it. Rana was oblivious. Her head was thrown back and her eyes were squeezed shut and she was too busy riding his broad hands to be aware of anything more than how she was being touched and where.

"Not so much the old man now, am I," he commented softly, his mouth quirked into a twisted smile.

"Remind me to send the sentinels a thank you note for making you the negotiator," she breathed.

He could've gone without the reminder of his lies, but Tomas dismissed the faint stirrings of guilt low in his gut. Rana was getting exactly what she deserved, if not for what she'd done to him, then for these delusions of grandeur she seemed to have acquired over the years. In fact, she would have gotten much worse if he hadn't stepped in and asked for responsibility.

But he didn't want to think about that. Banishing the thoughts, he bent back in and flicked his tongue over her unsuspecting clit, hard and fleeting. Rana cried out, arching towards his mouth, but he kept his lips purposefully away from her skin, settling for fucking her with his thumbs while he nibbled on her clit. Tiny bites that caught the very tip. Long strokes that felt every flutter of her inner walls. And when he finally sank

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his teeth hard into the sensitive flesh, she came so swiftly and so violently, Tomas had to pull her onto the couch with him for fear of her legs giving out beneath her.

She straddled his hips, her thighs quaking, her body a living flame to match that of the hearth behind her. The sound of her ragged breath beat against his skin, and inwardly he cursed the fact that he wasn't already naked with her, so that he could feel every inch of that soft skin when she collapsed down the length of his body. As it was, he had to satisfy himself with burying his mouth in her pussy again and catching every drop he could find.

"Is this your strategy?" Rana slid down so that she sat on his lap, knees on either side of his body, her hard nipples pressed to his chest. Looping her arms loosely around his shoulders, she licked along his chin where he knew his skin was shiny and wet from eating her. "Make my body useless and hope that my brain will follow so that you can get your way in the negotiations?"

He regarded her silently.

She skimmed over his lower lip. "It's going to take more than one orgasm to get me to that point, you know."

"I know. Trust me, I know."

"And you don't have some sort of schedule?"

Tomas shook his head. Grabbing her hips, he situated her more comfortably across his thighs, arranging the hard line of his cock right against her pussy. Feeling her trembling still in his arms dispelled the worst of his nerves. Regardless of how fearful he was about her control over him, there was no denying he still got to her, at least a little bit. It helped, in more ways than one.

"We don't have to worry about being interrupted?" he asked. A lazy hand tickled across her stomach, finding a path up to the lower swell of her breast. "I'd rather not have to spend the next few hours looking over my shoulder for the angry boyfriend to come storming in and cut my dick off."

Rana chuckled. "No, no interruptions. It's just me here."

"Good."

"I followed your career, you know," she said. He had to tear his attention away from the heat seeping through his jeans to meet her dark eyes. "You've made quite the splash, Tomas Dalmau. I was particularly impressed with how you managed to blow up the Argentine consulate when you went after that necromancer a few years ago."

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"That was an accident," he argued automatically, but his gut twisted, both at the memory and the fact that Rana even knew about it.

He didn't want to think that she'd been interested enough after their parting to care what happened to him.

"Really? It didn't sound like that to me." She slithered a hand between their bodies and slipped it between their hips, curling lithe fingers around his erection. "You don't like playing by the rules. We both know that."

"Ever think about why that might be?" Bitterness laced his tone. He chastised himself for letting her get to him.

"I like to think I gave you permission to let you be yourself," Rana replied. Never letting go of his cock, she bent to nibble at his long neck. "I unlocked all that potential you had inside you."

His eyes squeezed shut, the conflicting sensations washing over Tomas in a deluge. This was Rana's true weapon, not the fact that she was an elemental with winter at her command or that she was wilier than half of Congress. Lies sounded like truth when they fell from her lips, and it was difficult not to believe her.

There was only one way to both ignore her gentle persuasions and stop any more from coming.

Letting go of her hips, Tomas leaned back in the couch in order to separate their upper bodies. He grabbed the hem of his sweater and pulled it over his head, then lifted his hips from the cushion in an obvious show that he wanted his jeans to come off next. Rana's eyes lit up, some of the sluggishness dissipating from her muscles as she got up on her knees and worked deftly on his buckle and zipper. As soon as his legs were free of the denim, Tomas crushed her back against his chest and silenced her with a ferocious kiss.

His head spun. His cock ached. His flesh burned. It was all easier to take than listening to Rana's lies.

He let her break away for breath and took the opportunity to move them to the floor. As he stretched out on his back, his erection was heavy between their bodies, but he refused to yield to the urge to sink into her yet, not even when she parted her legs and rocked her hips so that his cock glided between her wet folds. Instead, he kissed a course down her neck to the upper slope of her full breast, pulling her up his body enough so that the pert nipple was easily within reach.

Tomas traced around the rosy aureole, feeling it tighten even further under his tongue. Her breath caught as he made another swirl, circling in

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smaller sweeps around and around until he ended at the hard tip, but he didn't catch it between his teeth as she might have expected. He started over on the other breast, losing himself in the growing heat.

How it could feel like she was everywhere, he had no idea. Though Rana wasn't a tiny woman, he was still considerably bigger than her. It should have been impossible to feel her heat in such places as his feet or the backs of his hands. But he could. He did. Tomas even imagined his scalp burned from the encroaching fire of her flesh, though that could have been the raking of her nails through his hair when she dragged him back to her mouth.

His cock slipped between her thighs. Skimming across her clit, his hard shaft grew slick from her juices as it parted her folds, then grazed across her tight pucker as the head pushed free of her heat. Tomas groaned in the back of his throat as he cupped her delectable ass, and he couldn't restrain the thrust of his hips as he sought to retrace the same path with his cock. It felt even better on the second pass. And the third.

"I'm beginning to figure out what you might want," Rana murmured in between kisses.

The possibility made him pause. It was the one thing they hadn't done the first time around, though the fantasy had been a favorite of his for years afterward. To get it fulfilled now made his body hum in anticipation.

Abruptly, Tomas sat up, making Rana squeak in surprise as his hands slid up her hips to tighten around her waist. "Is that what *you* want?" he growled. "Do you want me to bury my cock in your ass? For me to fuck you so slow and deep that you're screaming for me to let you come?"

She shuddered, her eyes black and flashing. "Yes...god, yes."

It was all he needed to hear. Guiding her down, Tomas laid Rana on the floor between his legs, hers atop his thighs as he sat there and regarded the picture she presented. Her pussy glistened from her arousal, and he licked his lips, remembering how magnificent she had tasted. "It takes time, you know," he said, easing free from the tangle of their legs. Getting on his hands and knees, he licked a long trail up the inside of her calf, dipping behind her knee before traveling onward to the soft skin of her inner thigh. "Patience. Do you think you can handle that?"

Her nostrils flared. "I can handle anything you throw at me."

Tomas smiled. "I'll hold you to that."

Grasping her other knee, he lifted her leg and put it over his shoulder, forcing her folds to part. His mouth watered, and he dragged a fingertip from the tip of her clit, all the way down her pussy, across her slit and further to the puckered hole of her ass. It shone already from where his slicked cock had rubbed along it, but he merely teased the opening in tiny circles while he lowered his mouth to her heat.

"Let's take it slow, shall we?" As if to accentuate his point, his tongue drew a lazy swipe across her clit at the same time he pressed his finger into her ass, stopping when it reached the first knuckle.

A shiver ran through her. He felt it in his hand, up his arm, along his nerve endings all the way to his cock. It made him want to fuck the notion of preparation and go straight to the actual fucking, but the picture she presented--lips parted, breasts rising up and down with her shallow breathing--was too delicious to waste. She was completely at his mercy. He had waited a long time for this.

Rana wiggled as if trying to drive him deeper, but Tomas punished her eagerness by withdrawing his mouth completely, hovering inches away so that all she felt was the warm blasts of his breath.

"Don't stop," she pleaded.

"Don't move, then."

"But I want—"

"And you'll get it. Don't move."

It took a few more frantic seconds for her to obey. As soon as her body ceased squirming, Tomas pressed onward, sinking his finger past the tight outer ring until it was buried in her velvety depths. He held it there for a moment, then two, listening to her pant as she waited for him to do something, anything. The second he chose to start sliding his finger out, he ran the flat of his tongue across her pussy, burrowing it inside her as his finger emerged from her ass.

He alternated rhythms, fucking her with his tongue, filling her with his finger, keeping the pressure constant as his other arm draped across her waist to hold her in place. When he added a second finger to his thrusts, Rana stiffened at the added intrusion, forcing Tomas to slow as she grew accustomed to the thickness, but not once did he stop, not once did he pull away.

Her moans grew constant, electric charges that wrapped around his skin. When he added a third finger, Rana gasped and hooked a leg over his shoulders, forcing him to stop. "Wait," she breathed. "Just...wait."

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He licked his lips clean of her juices as he lifted his head to watch her struggle under the overloading sensations. "Think you can ride me?" His voice was a low rumble, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw goosebumps erupt along her bare thigh. "If I lie down and you climb on, do you think you can hold it together enough to make it worth it?"

She swallowed. And again. "Told you," she managed. "Anything you throw at me."

"Good. Because I want to see you get all pink and wet when I fuck you. See you fight for air, fight not to come until you really want it." He paused, a slow smile curving his mouth. "It lets me do this, too." And without looking away, Tomas pressed his thumb to her clit.

Rana cried out, bowing so far away from the hardwood floor that it tore his hands from her body. Scooping her boneless body into his arms, he slid his cock along her wet pussy, coating his cock even more before lying back and kissing her one last time.

"Whenever you're ready," he whispered, dragging his tongue along her collarbone to savor the salty taste of her skin.

She gathered strength from somewhere, bracing against his muscled chest as she pushed herself into a sitting position on his hips. Rana curled her hand around his cock, careful about what little slick they had to ease his entry, and took a deep breath as she rose up enough to position him at her tight opening.

Tomas gritted his teeth as she bore her weight down. He hadn't stretched her enough. He could tell. She was going to be tight, and she was going to be hot, and—

The head of his cock slipped past the tight outer ring. They both froze.

Any coherent thought he might have had immediately fled.

If he had hoped to hold on to his anger throughout their entire encounter, Tomas would have been disappointed. Because as he gazed up at her, watching her tremble as she adjusted to his girth, all he could focus on was the simplicity of her beauty. She glowed, as much from the reflection of the dancing flames in the fireplace as the spark within, and in that moment, in that light, he forgot about all the rage he'd harbored for the past decade. She was just a girl, a very beautiful girl, who set him alight like few others had. He would enjoy each and every second he had left with her.

Then she started to move.

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Tomas tensed, his hands gripping her taut thighs as Rana pushed down. She stretched around his cock, achingly slow, dragging along the shaft to scorch him. He wanted to slide his hands up, grab her hips, and shove her the rest of the way, because for all his talk, this was an exquisite torture he hadn't anticipated. But he didn't. Couldn't. All he could do was take it.

When he felt the weight of her body across the top of his thighs, he almost didn't believe it, but here they were, his balls pressed into her soft ass. Already, Tomas could feel her clenching and unclenching convulsively around his cock, though he doubted she was even aware of what she was doing, and he loosened his hold, hoping to incite her to start moving again. It took quite a few long seconds where all he could hear was her ragged breathing--or maybe it was his--but then her muscles tensed beneath his fingertips.

And she was rising, sliding off his cock.

Exhaling.

Inhaling.

He felt every inch of her ascent, a slow burn that made him hiss when the cooler air caressed his length. Rana didn't go far, only rising halfway before pushing back down again, but this time when he was fully sheathed, she didn't hesitate. She began riding him in ever-lengthening strokes, her breath still coming in shallow gasps as she grew accustomed to his size. Unable to stop himself, Tomas rocked his hips, assuming a slow thrusting that gradually picked up in speed.

"Always loved your ass," he growled.

Rana's dark eyes settled on him. Her brow glowed from the slight sheen of sweat that been drawn to the surface of her skin. "Did you dream about me?" she murmured. "After. When I was gone."

His blood roared in his ears. He shouldn't admit to the truth, but the tight heat around his cock made it next to impossible to lie. "Yes." When Rana curled her fingers into his stomach, the sharp sting of her nails made Tomas groan. "Fuck. Harder. Do it...*fuck*..."

The repeat of his request might have gone unsaid, but once was apparently enough for Rana to give him what he needed. She sharpened her speed, her skin slapping against his from the added force of her strokes, until the only thing he was capable of was grunting and hanging on. And thrusting back.

And watching the succulent bob of her breasts.

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And vibrating in time with the tremors that had set up house in her body.

She was close, he could see it. The way she fought for air, the way her throat convulsed as she swallowed again and again, the way she shuddered every time his balls hit her ass.

But then he saw something else. Out of the corner of his eye, behind the couch. It was a thickening of the air, the slight bending of objects in the background making it seem like he was looking through some kind of clear prism.

A magical prism.

Jett.

Rana was oblivious to his momentary distraction, and while knowing Jett was done and waiting tempered Tomas' desire a tad, it wasn't nearly enough to make him stop, not when he was on the verge of coming. He shifted his attention back to Rana, letting go of her hip with one hand and slipping it between her thighs. The next time she pulled off his cock, Tomas stroked along her pussy, teasing her clit before sliding two fingers into her slick passage.

She cried out at the unexpected intrusion, eyes flying open and staring at him wildly as both fingers and cock filled her. Neither stopped. If anything, Rana slammed against him harder, meeting his upcoming thrusts with a renewed hunger that had her drawing pinpoints of blood on his stomach. The second he felt her inner walls quiver around his fingers, though, Tomas lost it.

He roared and drove one last time into her ass, his balls emptying as he erupted deep inside her. Somewhere in the blurry world beyond the fire consuming him, he heard her scream, and the satisfaction that threaded through his veins stoked his orgasm all that much higher. Regardless of everything else, he knew he still got to her. That was worth the price of all the anxiety and all the fear and all the anger.

Rana sank against him, her sweaty skin sticking to his as she curled up on his chest. "Damn..." she muttered. He watched her lashes flutter closed. "I think negotiations might have to wait until after I can breathe again."

Tomas wrapped an arm around her, running his fingertips up and down her spine. Her body was already heavy against him with its need for sleep, the rise and fall of her chest visibly slowing.

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"Go ahead and rest," he said, his voice rough. He deliberately closed his eyes against the sight of Jett still hovering in the background. Reality could wait a few more minutes. "We'll talk about everything later."

There was no answer.

* * * *

Tomas tossed a crumpled five onto the bar and picked up his beer, the bottle cold against his fingertips. For a moment, he hesitated, flashing on a crooked smile and a long, midnight walk, but the sudden cheer from the other patrons around him broke the momentary spell. Turning his back on the Heat trouncing the Pistons, he maneuvered through the packed sports bar to the corner table he'd already snagged.

"You sentinels are getting way generous," Jett said as he sat down. "Next time you need me for a job, I promise, no complaining about how cheap you are."

Tomas scowled at the stack of cash sitting out in plain sight. "Put that away," he complained. "And don't thank me. Thank the Regency. They're the ones who were willing to pay through the nose for getting the butterfly back."

With a melodramatic sigh, Jett picked up the money and squared an askew corner before slipping it back into its envelope. "Then let's drink to more weather doodads going astray. A few more jobs like this, and I can tell those bozos in New York where to shove their Hello Kitty costumes."

He didn't need an excuse to drink, but Tomas took it anyway, finishing half his beer before setting the bottle back down. It was supposed to be a celebration. The ice butterfly was back in the proper hands, the weather had settled down to exactly where it should be, and Tomas had been granted a proper Christmas vacation in return for a job well done. He hadn't had a holiday off in years. This was a good thing.

But when he closed his eyes at night, the first thing he saw was Rana's sleeping form in front of the fireplace, right before he'd teleported himself and Jett back to Miami. He saw the faint bruises his grip had left on her hips, and he saw the come still shiny on her thighs, and fuck karma, but he didn't want it to end like that. He wanted to stay and demand answers from her, and he wanted to try and see if maybe she had extenuating reasons for her thefts, if maybe she was worth spending a little effort on.

He didn't, of course.

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He was a sentinel, first and foremost. And she was a selfish and unpredictable criminal. She had proven that more than once.

His hands shook as he pulled out a fresh pack of Winston Reds from his pocket.

"Aw, T..." Jett grimaced as Tomas stuck a cigarette between his lips and lit up. "Have you ever considered quitting? I hear it's supposed to do wonders for living a long and fruitful life. For both of us."

He sucked down a lungful of smoke and held it there while the nicotine did its work. As soon as he felt his muscles begin to relax, he exhaled, careful to turn his head away from the table. "Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Or New Year's. Sounds like a perfect resolution to me."

Jett shook his head. "How you do so well with the ladies constantly amazes me."

"It's the badge. It gets 'em, every time."

Another shout came from the men watching the basketball game, nearly drowning out Jett's next question. "Did your ice lady get mad when she found out what you did to her?"

Tomas rolled the cigarette between his fingers, watching the path of the red tip. "Don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean, when the Regency went back to pick her up, she was gone. So your guess is as good as mine about how pissed off she is."

There was no denying the sympathy in Jett's gaze. "Tough break. But hey, that helps the odds in having to do another job for the weathermen, right?"

Tomas wasn't sure that was necessarily a good thing. Twice a lifetime might just have been his Rana limit.

Draining the rest of his beer, he pushed back from the table and unfolded from his chair. "Don't spend it all in one place," he said, nodding toward the envelope of money that still sat out.

"As long as it gets me through the holidays without suiting up, I'll be a happy camper." Jett brightened. "Hey, since the honchos gave you a vacation, you should stick around a bit. Christmas in Miami is a happening thing, I'm telling you."

In spite of his less than stellar mood, Tomas grinned. "I'll take your word for it." Sticking his cigarette in his mouth, he gave a small wave before heading for the exit. "See ya in the funny pages."

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As he stepped outside, the blazing December sun struck his eyes. He didn't stop, continuing down the crowded sidewalk and pulling his sunglasses out of his pocket. The moment he slipped them on, though, an icy chill skimmed across his neck, making the hairs stand up on end.

Tomas froze.

Rana.

He half-turned, expecting to see her standing behind him, to see her crooked smile or her dark eyes demanding answers. It hit him he had no idea what he would say to her.

A portly man in his fifties waited in the open doorway of the golf store Tomas stood in front of, holding the exit open for his wife who lingered inside. A definite blast from the shop's air conditioning swept into the street.

Taking one last drag on his cigarette, Tomas dropped it to the cement and stepped on its burning tip as he resumed his pace. He felt ridiculous. Of course it wasn't Rana. Not only would she never come this far south, but she had no real reason to seek him out. The score was even.

Except for the fact that he was seeing her where she wasn't. And thinking of her when he shouldn't. He refused to wonder if Rana was going through the same thing.

His features were immobile as he walked through the bright sunshine, his head high. To the casual onlooker, Tomas looked like he owned the world.

Only Tomas knew the truth.

And Rana.

About the Author

Vivien was born in a house very familiar with the written word. The daughter of an author and sportswriter, she fell in love early on with the stories that played inside her head, transcribing the first of those at the age of five. She moved on to explore other formats, including acting and film production, but always came back to her storytelling roots.

Currently, Vivien resides in northern California with her British husband and two beautiful children. She's thrilled to be back to her romantic roots, and looks forward to sharing with you some of the voices that have been living inside her head.

Visit Vivien's site at www.viviendean.com.