

Laura Tolomei



Re-Scue

However you lived your past, today
you're the key to changing your future.

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Re-Scue

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To my “front door” colleague and friend, my thanks for having inspired one of my best characters yet.

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By

Laura Tolomei

BOOK

FOUR

Twelve

Sean Davis read the email one more time. “We inform personnel that starting today the new Project Division CEO is Leon Sterling. Tomorrow he will conduct one to one interviews with every division member, so we strongly recommend being available all day.” As usual in official jargon, direct orders were preferred over other more formal perhaps, but certainly less crude formats. Or maybe it was Sean who abhorred it, this impersonal business way of handling people and information alike, something he could never quite get used to despite his five years at Strategic Development Market. Then again, he did not agree with most of their bureaucracy, which to be fair was partly his fault since he did not quite fit into SDM’s standards.

“My, my, a new CEO. What will they think of next?” Heavily spiced in irony, the familiar voice across from his desk brought Sean back to the immediate present. “Can’t wait to see what this one’s like.”

“What are you expecting, Keith?” Stretching luxuriously, Sean glanced up at his colleague.

“Nothing actually, knowing SDM’s management, but at least I hope he isn’t an ugly old bastard like the last one.” He winked at Sean. “It would be nice if he looked more like you for a change, wouldn’t you say?”

“Hum...yeah...” Sean shook his head embarrassed. No, he definitely did not belong in their rigidly classified world, his looks simply too striking for SDM, if not the male category in general. To his advantage, though, a sunny disposition assuaged much of his appearance’s initial impact and guaranteed an easy time with everyone. Men liked him, however little he talked about sports or beers. Women poured their hearts in his ears, trusting on his sympathetic receptiveness toward their complicated love affairs when not relying on his taste and sophisticated sense of style to compare notes, on fashion or on art’s prevailing trends. “You never know, but seems hard he could be worse than the last one.”

“In this company?” The other man shrugged indifferently. “I know he can be a hell of a lot worse.” Then he fixed his gaze on Sean. “And give you just as hard a time as ever.”

So he was no model employee and his bosses seldom liked him...big deal! If they seemed to have trouble adapting to his *alternative style*—not just a question of looks, rather his way of working—Sean could care less. Never a priority, work was simply necessary to survive, one thing he managed quite well in SDM after top execs began exploiting him to attract potential clients. And since Sean Davis was more effective than any well-formulated marketing plan, he became invaluable to the point CEOs often brought him along to business lunches or dinners, as if hoping his good looks conveyed the message of a successful and trendy company on the go. In return, Sean was sure they shielded him from his direct superior’s harassment and closed an eye on his incomppliance with trivial details, like being on time every day and playing the part of the efficient team player devoted to company goals alone—an unfeasible possibility due to his busy side-life, which on a few occasions even interfered with

his job. On top of it all, Sean was also short trained in Marketing, having only minored in it after majoring in Art, an additional feature that set him further apart from colleagues and management alike.

“You’re being pessimistic as usual.” Sean rubbed his tired eyes before looking out the giant window at his left side. The day was ending, and people were getting ready to bottle up in Atlanta’s hectic evening traffic. “He could be great, instead—”

“His name reeks of Harvard...”

“And of old money.” He was quick to grasp Keith’s conclusions, which come to think of it, could not be so far-fetched. “Yeah, you’re right, just another rich bored guy who isn’t going to give a damn about us or our problems.” Yawning loudly, he deleted the email.

“Now who’s being pessimist?” Mouth open, Keith was unable to resist the contagious yawn. “But whatever he is, I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

“He can’t be any worse than the last one.” From around the door, another colleague popped in Sean and Keith’s office obviously in search of a bit of gossip before his long ride home.

“I wouldn’t be too sure, Tom.” Keith scoffed. “I mean we’ve changed four in the last year or so, and most of them left without even saying goodbye.”

“It’s your fault, blondie!” Despite the seriousness of his tone, Tom’s eyes flashed at Sean in amusement. “They can’t manage you, so they’d all rather leave.”

Sean grinned. “And get back to their boring family life and their routines—”

“Of which you’d know nothing about,” Keith observed suppressing a smile.

“Envious, Keith?” It was a game, to pick on Sean, which he never minded, enjoyed actually because it gave the

measure of how close the men felt to him. In short it was their way of showing it without seeming unduly...caring.

"Damn right I am! If I went back, I'd think twice before I got married and started a family."

"I guess it's just a matter of choices." Sean's tone softened. "And I never made that one."

"I think blondie's right." Tom and Keith exchanged a glance. "You probably live better without a family that'll bitch at you if you're five minutes late in getting home." Looking at his watch, Tom smirked. "Plus they tell me life's pretty hot for single men these days." He moved closer to Sean.

"You can't imagine how!" Sean leaned back on his chair. "You might try it, too, if—"

"Hey, guys!" A pretty petite blonde entered. "Aren't you excited about the big boss?"

"Hey, Suzy, does he really want to see us one by one?" And Keith's eyes grew wide as if calculating how long it would take to accomplish it.

"That's what Karen told me, and she ought to know since she's the number one secretary." She moved next to Sean. "He'll be conducting interviews all morning."

"Yeah...and all night, too." Tom sneered. "There are a lot of us in this division."

"He must know that, too." Then Suzy turned to Sean. "They also tell me he's a very attractive man."

"You mean to tell us we're going to have two of them in our division alone?" Tom snickered.

"As if it ruined our image!" Passing a hand through Sean's hair, she smiled sweetly. "And there are plenty of your unattractive species anyway to even out the score."

"Is he also single?" Looking at his computer screen rather than at any one in particular, Sean began closing his files.

"I'm afraid not." Taking a step back, Suzy shook her head disappointed. "And the bad news is his wife works here, too."

"As if that would stop you, Suzy," Tom quipped.

"Hey, pal, believe it or not, I'm not in the habit of sleeping with just anyone." She threw back her shoulders defiantly. "I happen to *choose* my men."

"Yeah, and nothing's better than banging the boss," Tom added.

"If he's cute, why not? A little fun on the side is never bad for business, right, Sean?"

"I guess not, but I'd be careful if I were you." Taking his eyes off the screen, Sean fixed them on Suzy. "An in-house wife may mean trouble." *Or a lot of fun if he likes playing the field.* But it did not seem appropriate to share his thought, not with Suzy, not after what she had been through.

"Have you heard about Leon Sterling?" Another woman stepped inside the already crowded room. "I wonder how his wife took the news."

"Hi, Mara." Suzy smiled at her. "You actually know Mrs. Sterling?"

"Paige? Sure, I do. She works in Accounting, and she's a real nice lady, always goes out of her way to help people."

No one commented, probably reluctant to spoil Suzy's fling, however imaginary.

"Well, guys, I'll see you tomorrow, and I bet everyone's going to be extremely efficient and productive." Chuckling, Tom left.

The others followed his example by returning to whatever off-time life they nursed on the outside, which for Sean was full of friends, but no steady mate to his mother's dismay. He knew she wanted him to settle down with a

special someone, not necessarily in the married sense. What could he say? She had figured him out by now—no, even before he realized it himself. *So where's my dream man?*

Oh, he looked for him, had since his school days with the unfortunate result that what he sought still eluded him and not for lack of eligible suitors. Sean attracted men and women of all ages, looks or inclinations, including those who adamantly refused men as suitable sexual partners. Actually, they made for irresistible targets to the point of getting involved with men at their first gay experience just for the fun of it. But even if many liked it, or maybe they simply surrendered to his allure, the relationship seldom lasted. Tired and bored of people who only two days before were excitingly alive, Sean would revert to his favorite dump line to get out of sticky situations. "You're wonderful, really, but I'm looking for something more...like..."

A bigger cock for sure! It was probably the dumped guy's guess, and he could not be farther from the truth. True, dimensions were important—of course they were, yet it was often a matter of knowing how to wield whatever size equipment Mother Nature bestowed. Still they were not everything. Something beyond mere sex tormented him, his body craving more passion, more game, more *blood*.

Shaking his head, he tried to get the obsession out of it while driving home the night before Leon Sterling's arrival. Not a very successful technique, then again nothing worked to stop his need for someone stripping him naked and draining his very life source while having hard, rough sex with the aid of a sharp blade. And the first time he realized how dramatically different he was from everyone else, he had been just a teenager watching splatter movies of late night trash TV.

The discovery had shocked him, even worried him at

first. Something was not quite right with him if he had an erection from watching people dismembered or cut to pieces, unable to tear his eyes off the horrifying sequences or his hands from the hard-on. Whether melting in the darkness of a cinema or after creeping downstairs while his mom was fast asleep, he pretended to be the one brutalized, wondering how it might feel to have someone actually carving his flesh. *Pain or...pleasure?* He could not determine, but his cock demanding immediate attention seemed to have already made up its mind. At that point, there was no alternative besides jerk off on a fantasy lover capable of inflicting both at the same time. Aroused by imagining the stingy sensation of the warm tongue tracing the wounds' uneven edges, Sean pictured him sucking the tiny droplets before starting a fresh wave of incisions, until he flooded his hand with the semen bursting in rapid jets from his twitching dick.

And to think his nature was anything except cruel, despising violence and suffering along with anyone causing it, particularly if on purpose. Still his yearning spiraled to the point it took complete hold of him, inevitably spilling into his otherwise great sex with lean bodied studs, not to mention spoiling whatever chance he had of a *normal relationship*. So there was no cute but quite ordinary fellow waiting for him at home, and no one who might cuddle him when he woke up in the dead of night—sweaty and out of breath—grabbing the air to clutch his dreams or wipe out the disturbing image with a healthy, non-bloody fuck.

Thirteen

“What’s the commotion?” Puzzled, Sean turned to Keith, stepping in his office the following day. No question about it, tension was thick with people pacing nervously up and down the hallways, then stopping to whisper in small groups after having checked behind their shoulders like a bunch of conspirators. “It seems everyone’s on the lookout for something.”

“Yeah, the new boss.” Despite his colleague’s grin, Sean detected traces of the same anxiety. “It’s these damn interviews.” Restlessly, Keith ran a hand through his hair. “People are scared Sterling will ask them about past mistakes or worse, fire them.”

“Relax, Keith.” After leaving his coat on the hanger, Sean went to his desk. “If he’s smart, he won’t fire anyone until he’s figured out what we do exactly and how we work as a group.”

“I hope you’re right, blondie,” Tom commented gravely on entering the room and going over to his desk.

“Has he interviewed either of you yet?” Sean glanced at one, then at the other, both shaking their heads in denial.

“No,” Tom was quick to add, “he started with the women, then he’ll talk to us.”

“Sexist! I like that in a man,” Keith joked to ease

tension. "Is he calling alphabetically by last names?"

"I don't know if he's following any order at all." Tom shrugged indifferently. "He may have a list or simply go by the whim of the moment." He creased his forehead. "Actually, for the ladies, he seems to be calling by level."

"So Suzy got in first?" Sean inquired.

"Yes." Tom nodded vigorously. "Now I believe he's with—"

"Hey, guys." From the door, Suzy approached Sean's desk. "I really have to tell you how gorgeous our new boss is."

"Really?" Sean's attention peaked immediately. "Gorgeous?"

"Well, after you, darling, he's probably the handsomest man around." Suzy wrapped her arm around Sean's shoulders. "It's going to be tough competition between you two."

"Who's competing, honey?" Sean grinned. "I'll always be the best, particularly since CEOs come and go, while I'm here to stay."

"Does this mean you already have a plan to conquer Mr. Irresistible?" Amused, Tom winked at Suzy.

"Sure, now that I saw him, I can skip step two and move straight to step three."

"Which is..."

"Seize and seduce," she joked.

"Bit crude, but sounds effective." And Keith cocked his head in admiration.

"Maybe, if you didn't have to deal with an in-house wife," Tom reminded. "But for what it's worth, my money's on you, so good luck, Suzy." He checked his watch. "But now I better get back in my office, in case the boss calls." With an anxious grin, he disappeared.

“And I’ll go check if there’s any news.” Rising, Keith hurried to follow Tom out the door.

“I’m going, too, darling.” She kissed his cheek fondly. “The boss seems keen on never leaving the secretary’s pool unmanned.”

Alone, Sean turned on the computer and watched the screen come to life, already knowing it would be a long day. And he was right, having to spend it listening to the gossip of finished interviews, the guesses of those yet to come, everyone increasingly uptight about it. As a result, no one actually worked, productivity running at an all-time-low, except for Sean who seemed unaffected as he sat at his desk, catching up on client, and personal, mail until dusk fell and lights turned on.

“Darling, he hasn’t called you yet?” Looking ready to leave, Suzy popped in his room.

“No.” Sean shook his head, glancing up to smile at her. “I guess he either forgot about me or wants to see me last.”

“Save the best for last.” She winked mischievously.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Sure, darling. He’s a very thorough man who’s done his homework and knows our profiles inside out, including our dirty little secrets.” Taking a tentative step forward, she frowned as if unsure whether to keep talking, but then continued, lowering her voice. “Just imagine he even knew of that...hem...incident with the Preston account.” Suzy paused, evidently remembering her mistake, which almost cost her job at SDM. “Still he didn’t hold it against me, and that’s more than you can say about many bosses.” Delicately, she brushed Sean’s hair. “I think he’s trying to figure out how we feel about the company, how we fit in the team, if we have particular problems, if we like our jobs, and stuff

like that. And he seemed willing to go out of his way to help anybody in need of counsel or advice.”

“Is he a manager or a psychologist?”

“A little of both, I guess. All in all, I think he’s a fair man, and we’ll work great with him.”

“Is this the woman or the secretary talking?”

“Both I think.” Suzy sighed deeply, as if she suddenly felt the day’s tension. “Anyway, I hope he doesn’t keep you much longer.”

“That’s ok. I didn’t have anything planned for tonight.”

“You don’t?” She narrowed her gaze. “Is everything all right? I thought you were going out with Pat again.”

“Nah, I tried to stay with him after that little scene at the pub...” He looked at her. “When you were there, too, remember?”

She nodded.

“But it didn’t work out, like I told him at the pub.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

That I’m either sick or mad or both.

“You don’t like him enough?”

“I...I’m not sure, Suzy.” *And even if I were, I wouldn’t know where to begin explaining it.*

“What’s there to be sure?” She scoffed. “Either you like him or you don’t.”

“I wish it was that simple.” He shrugged, frustrated. “But it’s more complicated than that.”

“It’s not a question of complications. I think you just don’t love him. That’s all.”

“Maybe you’re right...” But he knew the problem lay elsewhere.

“Or maybe you’re still looking for that something special?”

Wish I knew what it was and where to find it! “As a

matter of fact, I'm getting tired of looking." And it was no lie.

"Oh, don't get depressed, not you, too. One of us is enough for both." She hugged him from behind. "Whatever it is, I'm sure you'll find it soon and get a new start in no time at all."

"I hope if it weren't so damn hard to find people I like, I mean *really like*."

"I know the feeling." Suzy gripped his shoulders in solidarity. "After we've played the field for a while, it seems nothing's good enough anymore." She pulled away slightly. "But at least tonight it won't be a problem." Bending over him, she pecked his cheek. "Goodnight, darling. See you tomorrow." Then she turned and went out the door.

If time did not speed up after she left, Sean continued to be oblivious to the clock's ticking, wrapped up as he was chatting with an old college buddy he had not bothered to keep tabs on until the man managed to find his profile on Gayromeo and tried a blatant on-line seduction. *Wait till Mark and Jemmy hear about this!* Yes, his two best friends would definitely have a fit. They had joked a lot about the poor guy's confused, clouded to be precise, sexual orientations in spite of Sean's crush. And now that he had made up his mind, he was tormenting Sean who, as things usually went, was not interested anymore. Then again, life was ironic, so maybe it was worth taking a shot—

"I can't wait to get home." Like a train running way behind schedule, Keith whirled in the room and grabbed his stuff in a single sweep. "That man...he really wants to know everything about you, so be ready to tell your entire life story."

"Did it go well?"

"Who knows?" Keith was already at the door. "I

didn't stick around for my final grade." He moved a few steps away, but just when Sean thought he had left for good, he saw his head pop around the threshold again. "Oh, by the way, you're in deep shit. He's really as striking as the women said." Then he, too, was gone.

Detailed rounds in the division's dark and noiseless offices revealed Sean was practically alone. Only the secretary's pool, the place farthest from his and the entrance to Sterling's bureau, was still lit, so Sean stopped on the threshold to gaze at the closed inner door. *What kind of man is he really?*

All the accounts described him as a gorgeous, and after Keith's comment there could be no doubt about it, intelligent, open-minded and with a quick grasp of the situation, which could turn out positive for Sean, given the low esteem of his previous bosses. And while he continued to look at the door, catching only Tom's heated voice from time to time, he wondered briefly whether he would get to see more of an office where he had been seldom invited. Then heading back down the hallway, Tom reached him from behind.

"Hey, blondie, it's your turn. I'm outta here."

"How did it go?" No need to ask. His tired face betrayed a less than brilliant performance.

"Ask me tomorrow." And hurrying away, Tom disappeared.

After retracing his steps, Sean stopped to steal a peek from the huge window next to the secretary's desk and stare at Atlanta's impressive lit skyline, wishing he were out in the nightlife he loved so much, instead of knocking at the new manager's door.

"Come in," a strong masculine voice called out.

On entering, Sean took one glimpse at Leon Sterling,

and his mouth went dry. *Fuck!* No one did him justice, almost impossible to believe his rugged good looks, framed by dark long hair falling to his shoulders, square jaw and firm chin under full lips, broad chest, tall muscular build, bigger than Sean, yet equally elegant and harmonious, dressed with the classy taste of a refined man's style that only money, and lots of it, could buy, at least judging by the crotch that had captured his gaze. An honest mistake, to be sure—he expected the boss to sit after all, rather than stand behind his desk like a Greek statue. Still it did not prevent Sean from measuring sizes, dimensions and shapes, if not wonder how he would get through an interview with the most distracting man—

“Hem...”

With a start, Sean raised his gaze, ready to introduce himself when the greenest eyes he had ever seen did not stop him cold, cutting off his air and his heartbeats.

As a rule, Sean was used to beauty in whatever form it came, so no pair of green eyes, however intriguing and dazzling, could disturb him. No, what really threw him into a state of utter confusion was the undeniable sensation of recognizing the person in front of him as if he already knew him, which was simply impossible. He had never laid eyes on Leon Sterling before in his life, and he was damn sure of it. *A face like that, who could ever forget it?* Yes, he was a complete stranger, yet undoubtedly a familiar one, too, so very much he could have easily been a brother or a relative...no, even more intimate like a *lover*?

“Hem...” Drawn into the sparkling gaze, Sean's mind went blank. Somehow, somewhere, he must have met Leon and not just for cocktails, and the deeper he drowned, the louder it spoke of an ancient tale about blood sharing, misplaced love and heart-breaking tragedy, which was sim-

ply ridiculous! *Totally and completely absurd! I gotta learn to curb this fucking imagination of mine or I'll really go mad!* "Sorry, sir..." Uncomfortable and afraid to read or listen any further to the compelling eyes, Sean averted his gaze and cleared his throat, trying very hard to ignore the pounding in his ears and the rush of adrenaline flooding his entire being.

"Good evening." Only Leon's firm tone finally managed to break the spell. "You must be Sean Davis." Coming round his desk, he extended a hand. "Leon Sterling, pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine, Mr. Sterling."

Taking Leon's hand, Sean squeezed it tightly, and maybe it was just another impression, but Leon prolonged their exchange more than customs dictated while flashing a look of...*Recognition? Relief? Mocking irony? Possession? Bloodlust? All of the above?* Sean could not be sure of which, except up close there was no margin for mistakes. Something was definitely there, and it had nothing to do with work.

"Please, call me Leon." Eventually letting go of Sean's hand, the powerful man returned to his seat. "I'm sorry you had to wait so long." Leon gestured to a chair in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat."

While Sean sat, Sterling skimmed an open file, randomly arranging papers, picking up one and fixing it intently before laying it down to sift through another piece, apparently absorbed to the point he seemed to have forgotten all about Sean.

Damn! First time in my life someone ignores me, and it had to be with him. Sean shifted nervously. *I 'm better than any fucking piece of paper!* And he pictured himself sprawled on the desk, naked ass wriggling up in the air to

tempt Leon's hard dick into slamming and pumping the hell out of him. Too bad looking up, he saw no end in sight for the thorough scrutiny. *Yeah, I wish!*

"I couldn't help noticing your...involvement in the Spencer account." Seemingly very interested in the topic he had chosen, Leon finally raised his gaze, yet if what Sean read inside the green pools had nothing to do with it or any other business, for that matter, rather more with—

An icy cold shiver ran down his back, and Sean quickly turned away. Having watched more than his share of wildlife documentaries, he recognized the predator's satisfied look after having trapped a prey in a no-win situation. And as though sensing his unease, there was no disguising the blatant mockery or outright challenge either.

Not this time, pal! Well, wherever the thought had come from, Sean did not stop to wonder, simply braced himself for what looked like an inevitable fight. "Actually, I was pulled into it."

"By who?"

"By John Spencer himself."

"Why so?"

"Don't know for sure." John Spencer, SDM's biggest client, was a rich, nasty, old man who loved to harass people by holding his money and power over them, particularly the ones he deemed incapable at their jobs. "Never asked him why." But with Sean, he was different from the start, like love at first sight for John, or almost. "Could be a number of reasons..." Over the years, Sean developed quite a few more theories to explain the tycoon's reaction, none of which he was prepared to share with Sterling. "It's...complicated."

"Is he attracted to you?" The green eyes now caressed him in the carnivore's maddening tease before the kill.

"All right, maybe not *that* complicated." Galled, Sean sat up straighter, one part of him advising for a quick

retreat before the hunter's damage became too extensive, while the other only wished to fall on Leon's lap and let him have his way, whatever that was. "Can I speak frankly?"

"I wouldn't expect anything less from a member of my team." Leaning on his elbows, Leon tensed as if getting ready to spring.

"Ok, but what I'm about to say is just a matter of speculation, my very personal, and I repeat personal, thoughts on this matter."

Leon nodded in understanding. "Fair enough."

"My meeting with John Spencer was anything except casual. Mr. Thompson, a CEO from three years back, used to work in one of Spencer's holdings, so he knew how difficult the man could get..." And that was an understatement at best. John quarreled with everyone, including his own appointed staff, and deemed no one capable of doing a good job. In the end, no one did, particularly the marketing companies that had tried to manage his impressive empire. "Anyway, when Thompson approached him, Spencer had been looking for a new campaign to increase sales of his food-manufacturing division. Knowing how difficult a client he was, Thompson decided to use me to keep him quiet."

"Why you?"

"Thompson told me John Spencer loves beauty to the point he hires idiotic secretaries only because they're as good looking as top models, and as young, too, then changes them every month or so to have always something new to look at. They can't type either, John often jokes about it a lot, but typing is the least of their requirements."

"I guess he wouldn't approve of mine then." Leon chuckled.

"I guess not, if Thompson was right. I've never been to Mr. Spencer's headquarters, so I wouldn't know."

“It’s hard to believe. I mean he seems much taken by you, almost obsessed, and after what they told me about him and you—”

“No, they got it all wrong. There’s nothing between us and how could it?” *He’s an ugly old man, and I’m used to something much better.* “And to be honest, he never asked me for anything except to be there when he’s in town.” Sean leaned forward to make his point clear. “But I can understand *why* they would think otherwise.”

“Something to do with the way he behaves when he’s around you...” The tone implied Leon knew more than he was telling, though he obviously did not want to play all his cards.

So Sean had no choice besides make a clean slate of it. “From the beginning, John behaved intolerably, placing me in one delicate situation after another.” Straightening his shoulders, Sean stroked his hair nervously. “Like you noticed, I never managed his account, yet he calls only me, refuses to talk to his appointed Project Manager, then wants me at every meeting, every presentation, every lunch or dinner. And it gets really embarrassing because he ignores everyone who’s with us and practically talks to me alone the entire time without bothering to glance at the others, not even by mistake.”

“And why do you suppose he does this?”

“You mean besides the fact he likes me?”

Leon nodded.

Sean shrugged indifferently. He had too many people liking him already. “I think he appreciates my artistic taste.”

“You majored in Art, right?”

The man’s done his homework, all right. “Yes, sir.”

“And it’s paid off.” Sterling paused to ruffle a few papers before focusing on Sean again. “And you never thought of using him to ask something for yourself?”

“He’s an old, dirty man.” Sean scoffed coldly. “What do you suppose I could want from him?”

“Money or power—or both. That’s what most people are after.”

Sean leaned further until their faces almost touched. “I’m not *most people*, Mr. Sterling.” He pulled back slightly. “Money doesn’t interest me, not the way you intend.”

“I can only intend it one way.”

“Then let’s say I’m not for sale.”

“Come on. Everyone has a price...”

“Well, if I do, John Spencer hasn’t found it yet.”

“So he never offered anything substantial in return for all the attention he forces on you?”

“Never breathed a word about anything that wasn’t how beautiful I look and how intelligent I am. He never came out with an offer, never tried to seduce me either, if that’s what you’re implying. He just does everything he can to draw me into whatever dealings he has with SDM, above and beyond his Project Leader’s head.”

“I bet he wasn’t pleased about it,” Leon sniggered.

“I don’t suppose he is.”

“So why didn’t they make you Spencer’s Project Leader?”

“Perhaps you should ask them,” Sean was quick to retort.

“I should, shouldn’t I?” Leon grinned as if he had trapped Sean exactly where he wanted him. “But I’d rather hear it from you,” he added softly, sounding dubious about Sean’s capacities.

“They probably didn’t trust me enough because I’m not your average team player, at least not according to their rules, but you could remedy their mistake by—”

“Placing you in charge of the Spencer account?”

“My thought exactly.” If the words came out before

Sean had a chance to think them over, he did not regret them, not one bit. And now was his turn to challenge Leon. "Particularly if I had to answer to you."

"So you're willing to play by my rules?" Admiration, mixed with another undecipherable emotion, flashed in Leon's green eyes, though he suppressed it so fast, Sean was not sure he had seen correctly.

"Yes, as long as they're fair." And he could not believe he was negotiating so casually with a man he hardly knew yet held his future in check. "And trust me for a change."

"Trust is always delicate in a million dollar company like SDM, and from what I understand the Spencer account is the greatest part of it." The green eyes appraised Sean for the longest moment, the searching look running beyond his face to encompass the tense body sitting in front of him.

Crossing his legs, Sean tried to hide his quite evident arousal, brought on by his vividly graphic scenes, unable to stop them with the erratic hammering of his blood that throbbed painfully in his stomach, not to mention his dick.

"So give me one good reason why I should put you in charge of the account." Suppressing a grin, Leon made a face as if he had no trouble in detecting the erection.

"Because I'm worth it." *And the hell with you and SDM's stuffed policies!*

"That's for *me* to decide, Mr. Davis, and for you to prove." With a firm gesture, Sterling closed the open file and smiled—a dazzling affair that lit his otherwise dark face and melted Sean's heart all at once. "It's been a very long day for both of us, and I'd like to make it up to you for having waited so long. What do you say if we grab a drink somewhere?"

"Uh..." Caught off guard by the sudden and unexpected shift, Sean cleared his throat, partly to recover his

composure, mostly to silence his cock's leap. "Sure, I'd love to."

"Great, then let's go." Coming round his desk and taking his coat, Leon waited for Sean to exit before turning off the lights. "I've seen enough of this place for one day," he joked as he followed Sean out the door.

Hardly containing his excitement, Sean went through the motions of gathering his stuff and taking the lift to the lobby, unable to think straight or plan a decent seduction strategy, his mind still working on where he might have met Leon, his body too distracted by the powerful frame standing way too close for comfort—enough to perceive his heat and strength despite long and probably extenuating interview hours.

"Everything all right, Mr. Sterling?"

With a start, Sean remembered the building was never unattended, and the night porter's deferential bow reminded he was going out with one of the men now in charge at SDM.

"Yes, Billy, thank you."

Still it did not stop Sean's rapid stride toward the elegant glass doors until he realized Leon had retraced his steps, returning to the front desk.

"Oh, I'd like to ask for a favor."

"Sure, it'll be my pleasure." Billy nodded gravely in a reassuring way.

"Can you please call my wife and tell her I'll be running late?"

"No problem, sir." And already, he was looking for the telephone directory that listed all SDM's relevant numbers.

"Thanks." Flashing a wonderful smile, Leon returned to Sean waiting on the threshold. "Do you know where to go? I'm not too familiar with this city yet."

Sean nodded. The exact spot was across the street under O'Malley's blazing neon, not just the closest pub around, mostly the best in town for vodka lemons, which explained the racket on entering and the many heads turning to stare at him. Nothing unusual when in a crowd, only this time eyes shifted to include Leon, too, for the two of them made quite a pair, no question about it.

"May I help you?" A petite brunette waitress smiling seductively intercepted them.

"A table for two, please." And Leon smiled back in the classic way men use to tell a woman they would not mind being with her in more intimate circumstances.

Yet, in spite of Leon's obvious preference for the opposite sex, something told Sean with him it would be different.

"Right this way." After taking them to a far corner booth, she left two cocktails menus on the table and disappeared, swallowed by the people cramming the joint.

"What will you have?" Leon turned his dazzling green eyes on Sean.

"This place serves the best vodka lemon of all Atlanta," Sean assured confidently. But even if it had not, he needed a stiff drink to recover from the emotional turmoil or whatever train had hit him. "High on the vodka please," he added to the new waiter who had come to take their order.

The young man scribbled something incomprehensible on a dirty pad, then looked at Leon. "And you, sir?"

"Negroni for me."

After a second equally undecipherable chicken scratch, the waiter moved off, and before Leon trapped him into another risky confrontation, Sean excused himself, hurrying in the direction of the men's room to ease tension. *Damn!* To be actually sitting at a secluded table with the

most attractive man in the world seemed a dream come true—or a nightmare in disguise if it did not turn out the way his straining erection demanded. Not that he had any choice in the matter. The longer he stuck around Sterling, the deeper he fell into the man's spell, increasingly harder to ignore or resist to the point he had to leave before he made a stupid pass at his boss and ruined his chances for a decent job forever.

Frustrated, he shook his head to clear it. This reaction was not like him at all, not with gorgeous men obviously expecting something very specific from him. Sex, because that was what most people wanted from him, came easy to Sean, always had since he discovered his orientations. Leon, though, seemed interested in something more, and whatever it was, Sean could not picture him as taking no for an answer. In the end, it would work just as fine. Sean wanted nothing better than to let him do whatever he pleased with his body—a marginal allowance considering he was already fucking with his mind, he and the damnable nagging sensation of knowing him from somewhere else. And everything be damned! Rationalizations included!

Mind made up, he looked at the mirror above the sink one last time, making sure his eyes held no trace of uncertainty, somehow knowing he could not afford to be weak with Leon. Then after washing his hands, he returned to the booth with the drinks already on the table.

"I appreciated your honest answers." Glass in hand, Leon leaned across the table once Sean sat in front of him. "So I'd like to level with you." He took a long sip of the red liquid, focusing on the brilliant color. "I must admit your profile is the most interesting one of all."

"Interesting?" *Well, I'll be damned!* "How so?" Inordinately proud, Sean raised his gaze to stare straight at Leon,

and it was his undoing. Swallowed by the green mesmerizing immensity, he forgot all about business or the world around him for that matter.

“You seem to have exceptional assets and equally extraordinary, if not more, liabilities. The president and vice-president, not to mention the other managers, all told me you had a lot of potential, but don’t live up to it.” Leon reached for the Negroni again and swallowed another generous taste. “You already told me you’re not a team player, but that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Apparently, you don’t give a damn about company policies, don’t follow the regular business hours let alone do extra time if required, never pitch in during weekends, and even disappear for days without notifying anyone. This qualifies as being unreliable, which is why management doesn’t feel it safe to put you in charge of a specific account or client, let alone the most important one of the entire company.” He raised a hand to stop Sean’s inevitable disclaimers. “Then again, they told me you’re the best advertising developer SDM has at present. No one can turn a failing marketing plan into a successful one faster and better than you can, which in itself is great, but not enough.” Pausing, Leon shifted his attention solely on Sean. “Another thing I couldn’t figure out was why they’d want to involve you with any and all potential clients, but at least that got cleared up fast.” He eyed him impressed. “Hell! It’s enough you let your...appearance speak for itself to convince anyone, not just clients, to buy whatever you’re selling.”

Fuck! Had to get a gorgeous boss to figure out my no-effort strategy, which was the same he used, too, Sean could bet on it.

“Have I left anything out?” Leon’s gaze never wavered, openly challenging.

The man in front of him was too intelligent—probab-

bly the smartest person he had the misfortune of knowing—to play stupid games, so Sean weighed his options carefully as he pretended to be busy drinking a generous swipe of vodka lemon. For one thing, this new turn of the conversation was different from the one in the office. If there Sean had felt in control, here Leon laid his cards on the table, certainly not all, still enough to warrant a straightforward response that risked contradicting the positive image Sean had worked hard to build. In addition, and this was the bigger danger, Leon wanted to trap—no, the word was seduce—him into a commitment he was not sure he was ready to take for the mere sake of a job, in spite of instinct telling him this man would make it worth his while. “I think you’ve covered just about everything, but I guess my future depends on what you consider is an asset or a liability.” Relaxing, he leaned back on the seat. “I mean we’re speaking hypothetically, right?” He glanced at Leon to get his confirmation. “You don’t know for sure how I work and I...haven’t put you to the test either.” He stopped briefly to check how Leon took this frankness and as expected, he had no problem with it. “If you’re as open-minded as I think you are, you’ll choose to make my assets work *for* you, with or without a team to back me up...” *Because you and I could be SDM’s real winning team*, but it was too extreme and without a shred of rationality to think it, let alone say it. “That’s for you to decide and eventually manage, turning a blind eye on strict adherence to insignificant details like business hours or schedules. I mean the purpose of work is to get a job done, not to sit at the same desk for eight or ten hours if you have nothing to do, right?”

“I’d agree completely, if people had the ability to rationalize their work load, which they usually don’t.”

“But like you said, I’m different, so why not try giving me the extra leeway I need to be more efficient?”

“And would I get the result I need?” Leon insisted. “What if I were to ask you to stay the extra hour, or worse, work on weekends?”

If I could have you in my bed, I'd slave for you night and day! “I guess...if I didn't have anything better to do...”

Better than me, sweetie? Forget it!

Leon had not moved his lips, yet Sean could have sworn he heard it just as clearly as if he had uttered it aloud. And the familiarity in the tone, even in the nickname that no one to his memory had ever used with him, was so stunning it made him jolt and close his mouth to silence the reply he had been about to deliver, more suitable to a lover than to a boss. Instead, he went for his glass, taking another large swallow while glancing surreptitiously behind his shoulder, where of course there was no one.

“You were saying?” Leon mocked as if he knew exactly what Sean was going through.

“I...” Sean cleared his throat, gulping for air. “Hem...I'd be willing to stay extra hours, if it doesn't become a habit, depending on timing, schedules and the boss's urgencies.” Smirking, he indicated a more intimate situation than intended.

Leon grinned. “Urgencies can be...deceiving at best, wouldn't you agree?”

Not the one I'm feeling right now. Yes, his arousal was taking a definite turn for the worst. “In the end, I suppose it will all depend on what you plan to do with me.”

In the moment's silence that followed, the world faded in the background, together with the strident chatter that had underlined their entire conversation. He and Leon alone remained, only they seemed to be in a different place, standing on a field, a prairie of some sort, except they were not humans anymore, but animals.

“I want...” His voice suddenly husky, Leon started

END

To be continued in:

Tasting Leon's Mark.

About the Author

With original borderline stories at the edge of accepted conventions, Laura Tolomei guarantees an erotic earthquake with each new novel.

Born 1965 in Rome, Italy, I soon started my traveling career. At the age of five, my parents took me to Lagos, Nigeria, where I grew up free and hot like I've never been since. I loved it there and still think of it with nostalgia. Anyway, it was also where I learned English.

After my African experience, I was ready to tackle the US. I lived in Atlanta, GA, five teen-age years, attending the Crestwood High School, where I started my writing career by publishing a short story *Nostalgia* on the Crestwood Journal. Very thrilled about discovering my new talent, I went ahead during college, writing for the Emory University journal *The Phoenix*. Three articles mark my first—and last—steps in journalism, "The peace Corps", "WAMM, Women Against Military Madness," and "Lesbism".

Leaving America, I moved back to Rome, but still kept living from time to time abroad, spending several months in Mumbai India, a country I always felt very close to me in more ways than one.

Recently I turned my insatiable curiosity about people and their relations into the erotica genre I'm currently into. Perhaps, the main reason I like this genre is that sex intrigues me not in itself, but in how it affects human and social relationships, inev-

itably changing them despite our beliefs to the contrary. After all, sex is the foundation of our society, the root of many prejudices and the basis of its dual nature. But sometimes individuals can't relate to these conventions so I analyze and challenge them, indicating alternative lifestyles that people could pursue.

Today, I write both in Italian and English, mostly fiction—erotica in various genres, from fantasy, sci-fi and paranormal, to contemporary—publishing with eXtasy Books, Whiskey Creek Press Torrid and Romance Divine.

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Also by Laura Tolomei

The Sex, Virtus Saga Book 1, fantasy novel, eXtasy Books

The Game, Virtus Saga Book 2, fantasy novel, eXtasy Books

The Festival, Virtus Saga Book 3, fantasy novel, eXtasy Books

Tasting Leon's Mark, contemporary novel, WCPT - SEQUEL TO RE-SCUE

To Seduce a Soulmate contemporary novel, eXtasy Books

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Coming 2011:

The Leader, Virtus Saga Book 4, novel—M/M, fantasy, paranormal, ménage, fantasy @ eXtasy Books.

The Pledge, Virtus Saga Book 3, novel—M/M, ménage, fantasy, paranormal @ eXtasy Books.