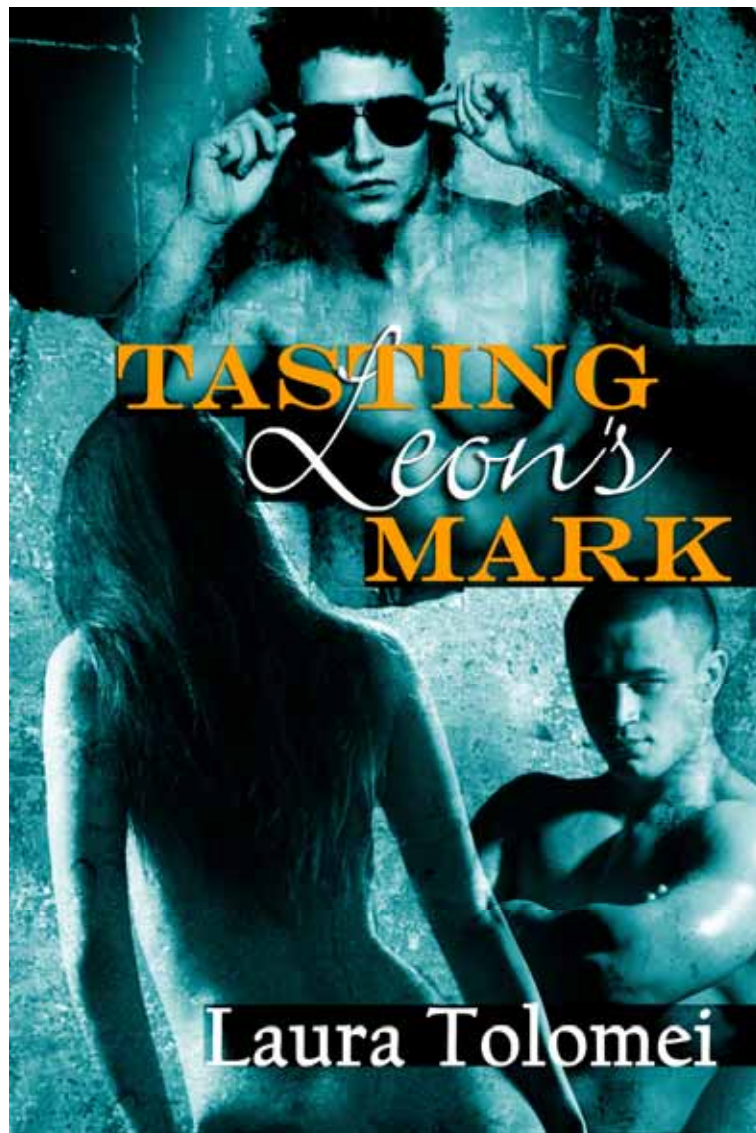




TASTING LEON'S MARK

by

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Chapter 1

“What?” She lowered the music and looked at him, reading a question in his eyes.

“I said, Mr. Sterling’s car is ready. You can call him to pick it up and fast ‘cause it’s in the way.” The man turned to leave, then retraced his steps. “Are you all right, Janet?”

She nodded vigorously.

He peered close. “Sure?”

“Yes, Albert, I’m fine.”

He did not look too convinced, but accepted her assurance. “All right, little girl.” He turned to leave again. “Oh, by the way, Mr. Brooks is coming over to pay for his car.”

“What did you do on it?”

“We changed the tires, then fixed the brakes and clutch.” He creased his forehead. “All in all, I’d say—”

“About five-hundred dollars.” Janet was quick to calculate.

He made a face. “It...may be a bit too much...”

Never enough, considering what a pain in the ass Mr. Brooks is. “I think it’s a fair price, Albert. I know how hard you’ve worked on it.”

He shrugged. “As you say, Janet. You’re in charge of payments anyway.”

And of pains in the ass. She watched Albert leave, his greasy suit rustling.

To work in a San Francisco auto repair with annexed body shop was hardly the most exciting experience in life. The job was not bad...Customers aside. Her father had forgotten to mention this aspect when he had hired her as the accountant of his thriving business. *God knows, I certainly didn't ask for slimy clients drooling all over me. Who knows why, they all think I'm a fast one.* Maybe the fact she worked in the company of ten heavily muscled mechanics had something to do with it, though she could not be certain. True, she was the only woman at the shop so people just assumed she enjoyed a good time with men of any sort.

"Hello, dearie." A sleazy voice pulled her back to reality. "They told me you've got something for me."

She smiled brightly. "Why, yes, Mr. Brooks." She typed something on her keyboard, clicked the mouse a few times, then turned to get a paper from the printer. "Here's your bill," she announced sweetly, handing him a neatly filled invoice.

He hardly looked at it. "How much is it this time, dearie?" His hand casually slipped from his wallet to land over hers.

Resisting the urge to flatten his palm like a pancake, Janet brought the invoice closer to her face. "It's seven-hundred dollars this time, Mr. Brooks."

He did not even flinch and for a moment, Janet wondered whether he had heard her at all. "All right, dearie." After fumbling in his pocket, he took out a credit card. "And have you thought about my offer?"

I'd rather spend five minutes with a boa constrictor than an evening with you. "Sure, Mr. Brooks, and I'm flattered." She slid the card through the machine. "But...my mom's not been well lately so I have to look after her, especially at nights."

"Then I guess you're always busy." He took back his card, a look of disappointment crossing his face.

The second she held out a pen, his clammy paws grabbed her hand and held on to it.

Slipping out of his hold, she pushed the receipt under his nose. "Please, sign here."

Sweaty palms and wistful looks, though barely tolerable, were still better than outright passes to a woman who was anything but beautiful. *Lousy blind pigs*. Every time she saw her reflection, she wondered at their lack of taste. *They'd go with anything that breathes*. Or maybe she was not objective enough.

If she had to think about it, perhaps her best feature was in her small, yet compact size. Intense physical training had shaped her body into a balanced flow of muscles and elegant curves. A dietitian once had remarked, "Your body is incredibly proportioned...nothing too thin or too fat for your frame."

Of course, Janet had not believed her otherwise she would not have been there in the first place. Yet, something in her body moved sensually enough to attract some men's attention, though never the right kind. *Maybe the rest of me attracts the wrong guys*. Coldly appraising her not very tall figure, Janet knew she was a cute brunette with a small triangular face lit by startling huge grayish eyes that changed color according to the weather, rain making them as gray as the sky above while sunny blue days turned them almost green. This alone determined a different face from one day to the next or rather, "An adorable cat look," as her father used to comment affectionately. *Too bad, Papa, that's hardly enough to find me a decent man*.

Mr. Brooks handed her the signed receipt. "I'm really sorry you're not free this weekend. There's this new movie out and—"

"Yes, I'm really sorry, too." Janet bent her head to put the receipt in a drawer. "Have a good day, Mr. Brooks." *And I hope I shan't see you too soon*.

Mr. Brooks hesitated again, but she turned to the screen, raising the music's volume and ignoring him completely.

* * * *

"These men are insufferable." It was a common complaint with her best friend Stella, the depository of all her secrets. "They strut around like overgrown turkeys, acting as if they owned the damn place and I were a piece of the property."

Stella smiled and Janet stopped talking, dazzled by the blond woman's beauty. Sparkling intense blue eyes, vibrantly alive and knowledgeable, were the first things men noticed of Stella Phelps, but they never stopped there. Like with Janet, looks traveled further down to an arresting figure that spoke of femininity in its every curve. Fascinated, men seldom could tear their gaze away from the enticing blond who often laughed in their face, clearly refusing to play their game. Being men, they never noticed the scorn, too busy appraising the round ass or the erotic breast sway. *That's all they'll ever notice.* Or so Janet believed, reading their intentions clearly enough. Not that Janet had been any different at the beginning. Like the unlucky suitors, she, too, had felt the intense desire to possess the beautiful Stella, although it would have been difficult to declare it outright. Men were just fine for her tastes, Janet had professed loudly for years, or at least until she had met the one who changed her life.

* * * *

Laurie was the name of a striking woman eighteen years older than Janet had been at the time. Her first real romantic experience, if she had to be honest, since her few—very few—high school flirts hardly qualified as such. Boys at that age were only a mass of raging hormones who did not know the difference between a woman and an available hole. Janet had hated their indifference while her choosy nature did not help matters. Already endowed with a working

brain, she refused to play dumb only for the sake of having someone, anyone, to fill her time. She did not mind being alone on weekends or at nights, especially if the alternative was to spend it with a complete idiot. This earned her the reputation of being snobbish that did little to improve her social life, though it suited her just fine. Not that she was actually a snob, but certainly different from most people she knew.

Nothing dramatic, though she suffered through odd and unexplainable perceptions, playing strange tricks on her mind, flooding her with other people's sensations or images. Particularly with strangers. She often had the impression of seeing events of their lives she could not possibly know, as if she slipped into their shoes and watched things through their eyes, even if she had never seen the person before in her life. And she would come to know fragments of other existences as the images played randomly through her head, giving her an intimate knowledge that could make her anticipate their thoughts or actions. Other times, she perceived what they felt as if she was living the exact same experience, too.

These odd intuitions—easily acceptable during childhood—unsettled her while growing up, throwing her into utterly confusing social relations. The only sensible remedy seemed to be a defensive closure, which prevented the annoying flooding of unwanted sensations. As a result, she carefully analyzed people before getting close to them, accurately selecting her friends.

Laurie had caught her attention the first time they had met. The circumstances were not important. Suffice to say, Janet could not tear her eyes off a woman who was not beautiful, but fascinating. Very slim to the point of being skinny, blue eyes hiding behind thick John Lennon glasses under a sassy reddish haircut, without make-up, Laurie did not need any artificial help to show people her

shiny essence because she was a witch, as Janet recalled from their short-lived romance.

Only nineteen at the time, Janet had never considered women as possible partners, believing in society's restraining clichés about gays. In the end though, no amount of rationalization could prevent her from falling head over heels in love with the intriguing witch. Naturally, Janet had not given up without a fight, a hard bitter struggle that surprised her even more than the depth of her feelings. Still, nothing had worked to erase Laurie from her mind so her only option had been to accept the inevitable truth.

Laurie had squeezed her hand in understanding. "You fight against it, Kitty, because you're thinking label-style. You're afraid that if you love a woman, it'll corrupt your taste and prevent you from appreciating men, too. At least that's what society tells us, classifying people and relationships into recognizable and convenient tags. Heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, they mean nothing, except useful categories for a well-ordered society. Luckily, life is much more complicated than their pitiful attempts to cage it and you could easily end up loving a man, a woman...or both."

"So everyone could be gay or lesbian or—"

"I believe everyone can potentially love anyone else, both same and different genders. Sometimes, your inclinations or tastes run to both directions. Other times, it could be just a matter of finding the right person. But most people are simply scared of this incredible potential so they not only hide it, but create rules and regulations to prevent others from discovering it, too."

* * * *

This plain truth had opened a new level of awareness for Janet. As the confusion cleared, she came to realize she loved Laurie regardless of her gender. *The witch could have been a man or a wom-*

an—hell, even a dog or a cat—yet I'd have loved her just the same. So she had embraced the new love wholeheartedly, eventually moving in with her lover to live fully their passionate connection.

Needless to say, the relationship had not lasted due to their age difference, incomprehension, sexual dissatisfaction or even her odd insights. Whatever the reason, the variables of two completely different lives could not hold them together. Stubbornly, Janet had insisted on the same path until, after a few bitter fights, Laurie had split town without a warning, much less an explanation, returning the young woman to her golden isolation. The damage, not to mention the pain, had been extensive if not devastating. Janet realized, walking through the empty rooms of what had been their home.

As if waking from a long sleep, she discovered she had an alert mind that, completely unlike her former self, went scouting in avid search of new people. More than once, she caught herself staring at someone, wondering curiously how they would react in bed. On one thing, she had to admit Laurie had been right. Despite her intense attraction to the witch, Janet preferred males as sexual partners, although her romantic life had not fared any better than her high school days. She had her flings, especially straight hard sex, which seemed a disappointment compared with Laurie's sweet lovemaking, but never fell for anyone in particular, man or woman. So she doubled her efforts in seeking special people who could teach her something about life. She hoped there would be a long line of them. Such as women like Stella Phelps.

Exactly what I needed, another intriguing witch to upset my life. Janet had thrown herself eagerly into the new friendship, soon discovering that being close to a woman did not necessarily imply sex. Theirs was mostly a social exchange, made of candlelight dinners, nights at the pub or the disco, drinking and talking until the wee

hours of the morning. Mostly, they made fun of life, of themselves and—their favorite topic—of the many men who tried to pick up Stella. Through the jokes and the laughs emerged a deep intimacy, though a different closeness from the one she had known with Laurie. Especially since the blond woman kept a stern physical distance, making it clear to Janet's tortured soul that, even if she did not entirely dismiss the possibility, sex was not what she sought. Her ironic eyes preferred to sparkle when commenting on the poor fools attempting a pass, rather than spark erotic flashes in Janet's direction.

At first, Janet had found the situation hard to bear. *Tonight's the night*, she would promise herself every time they went out together. Yet, her hints, seductions, praises or adorations never tempted her friend enough. Inevitably, nothing happened and Janet had lost any hope of ever turning the friendship into something more, learning to make do with whatever Stella chose to offer of her precious self, which was practically nothing. Just like what she offered to the jerks attempting to catch her attention in any way possible. Those not easily discouraged would invariably step forward to try their luck up-close, often shot down by a biting remark or look.

Janet was fascinated by Stella's ease in handling these pressing suitors, always with a smile on her beautiful face and a sweet attitude that hid the steel coating. She watched her friend turn another potential lover into brittle ashes. *I should learn to be like her, more detached and cool when it comes to men*. Instead, she sought something that continued to escape her, despite—

“Janet!”

Lost in her music and her thoughts, she had not seen him approach her desk. “Yes, Albert?”

“Did you call Mr. Sterling? His car is in the way so the sooner he picks it up, the better.”

“I’ll do it right away, Albert.”

With a sigh, she picked up the phone and dialed the number.

Chapter 2

Leon Sterling leaned back on the chair. "Yes?" Raising an eyebrow, he placed the file he had been reading on the desk, noticing for the first time the rain hammering at his San Francisco office's large windows.

The woman shuffled her feet nervously, then cleared her throat. "Hem...I...no, we...I mean the secretaries were wondering about Mr. Spencer's dinner engagement tonight."

He suppressed an amused grin. "What about it?"

"Well, we know you usually take—"

"He's not here." Leon's cold reminder cut her off.

"Right, that's why we were wondering if you'd like some company anyway. Mr. Spencer can get a bit...difficult."

Don't I know it! John had insisted on the meeting to talk about FDC's future developments. It would have been easier with the right company, but perhaps, one of the girls could do the trick anyway. "All right, Brenda..." He grabbed a piece of paper. "What's your address and cell number?"

The woman blushed violently and shuffled her feet even more. "It doesn't necessarily have to be me."

Leon raised his gaze and looked steadily at her face. "You had enough guts to come in here and ask me so I guess you deserve the chance, don't you?"

Something about his expression obviously made Brenda even more nervous, but not having much choice, she swallowed hard and gave him the information he required.

“I’ll pick you up at seven.” And it was the end of their conversation, his only interest now on the mesmerizing ass, swaying seductively to the door, followed by the click of her high heels.

His coming to Foreign Design Consultancy as the new CEO had probably raised the secretaries’ expectations. It must have seemed unreal that such an attractive man, recently divorced and available, should fill the highest managerial position that had been empty for a long time. FDC was one of John Spencer’s finer creations, although it had not gone as well as he had expected. True, the tycoon could suffer a loss or two, especially since his financial empire seemed boundless, but Leon knew he hated failures. Head of a multi-billion dollar empire built mostly on food manufacturing, he had created FDC after his first disastrous foreign market experiences had made him suffer heavy deficits, mostly due to cultural differences. Evidently, his aggressive commercial strategies did not work as well outside the U.S. and his product, instead of selling like it did at home, was a complete flop. “A matter of message,” John insisted, obviously convinced that it did not get through, as it should have.

After the detrimental experience, Mr. Spencer had created a brand new company whose purpose was to advise on foreign markets. Currencies, languages and cultural barriers seemed overwhelming obstacles, apparently unrelated to marketing approaches. In reality, they were strongly connected and companies had to target their strategies according to the different nations if they hoped to be successful abroad.

Not an easy task, though very challenging for a young man John had the chance to notice in SDM, a consultant of his empire.

Leon Sterling's brilliant and aggressive management style, with a strong inclination to teamwork, had not escaped Mr. Spencer's notice. Eventually he offered the man a CEO position at FDC.

Leon had accepted the challenge. Firmly installed in his San Francisco office, he had boosted the company's failing accounts, turning them into winning portfolios. Following his usual style, he had divided his work force into teams, each one dedicated to a specific issue. Whether it was currency, language or culture, he had them trained to become experts on how the non-U.S. world conducted its business and how to apply this knowledge to a winning commercial strategy. Each group worked independently save a final coordination to give clients a topnotch campaign applicable only to the target countries. In addition to teamwork, Leon assigned individual managing responsibilities for each client, effectively stimulating creative as well as executive skills. He even had his own in-house campaign advisor, a brilliant insight on the foreign way of thinking coupled with an artistic eye that fitted American ads to different markets.

Perhaps the only aspect which baffled him was the excessive number of top models passing as secretaries. True, Spencer had a taste for beauty—and *don't I know it*—not often matched by high IQs. It had been his steady company policy to hire only beautiful, but inefficient, women as secretaries. Amused, Leon had watched their attempts to catch his attention, competing against each other for one more glance, "Like a bunch of hens," a friend of his remarked. Leon smiled, hearing the words in his head.

"Ah, boss." Brenda turned around before reaching the door. "The Body Shop just called."

Damn! He had forgotten his car was out for repairs.

"They said your car's ready and you could go anytime to pick it up."

“What a relief.” He grinned, getting up. “I’ll go straight away, then.”

Brenda looked at the windows behind his desk. “Take a big umbrella along. It’s been raining cats and dogs since four this afternoon and it doesn’t want to quit.”

He looked behind him. The city hid behind a thick downpour that dampened the roads and dimmed its lights. “It’s right down the street.” Getting round his desk, Leon followed her to the door. “But if you have one available, I’ll gladly accept it.”

* * * *

“That’ll be three hundred dollars, Mr. Sterling.”

Cocking an eyebrow in amusement, he reached in his pocket for his credit card. “Is that how much Italian brakes cost?”

“Damn!”

Even if unsure about the reference, he did not hesitate to agree. “Exactly my thought.”

The petite brunette turned, blushing violently. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sterling. I didn’t mean to...” She looked out the doorway again. “It’s just I didn’t need this rain, not today when I lent the car to my mom. How am I going to get home now?”

Leon stood in front of her desk after his trusted mechanic had just finished explaining what had been wrong with his Maserati Gran Turismo and how he had fixed it. Lucky for him, Albert specialized in Italian cars, working miracles where most mechanics would not know where to lay a finger. No, not even the added inconvenience of stick shift bothered his impressive workmanship. Leon glanced absentmindedly out the doorway where the rain had only worsened. Turning back to the brunette, he looked her over.

Though he had found the Body Shop only recently, Leon had gone there often enough to notice the petite woman. She always had her music—one of his greatest passions—turned up loud, play-

ing tunes that appealed to his cultured taste. Not the top model beauty he usually saw around the office, she had something that had caught his attention even beyond a sharing of musical interests. Perhaps he remembered her because of her obvious attempts to hide from people. She liked to sit at her desk, listening to quality music, staring at the screen all day long pretending her work absorbed her completely. In reality, he knew she was much more aware than she let on, though for some strange reason, she did not want to show it. Now staring at her huge eyes, as gray as the cloudy sky outside, he felt drawn into her universe, getting lost in their depths for a second.

“Where do you live?” The words came out before he thought it through.

Looking startled, she opened her mouth. “Over in Richmond,” she blurted, then stopped abruptly. As if realizing what she had just said, she blushed violently. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I’ll take you, if you’re done for the day.” He silenced her protests since her place happened to be roughly where he had to pick up Brenda.

She eyed him carefully. “I won’t give you any discount because of the free ride.” Once again, it seemed obvious her mouth worked faster than her brain. “It would take much more than that to get one anyway.”

He grinned. “I wasn’t looking for one, but just so I know, what would it take to get a discount around here?”

It was her turn to smile, a deceptively sweet smile if he was any judge. “Oh, I don’t know if you could afford it.”

Unruffled by her challenging attitude, he leaned closer. “Only because you don’t know me. Luckily, we have a long ride ahead to get better acquainted.” He glanced at his watch. “But we have to leave now because I have to be somewhere by seven.”

"I'm ready." Bending, she was about to turn off the music and the computer when something stopped her. "Hey, wait a minute, you haven't paid yet."

"I hoped my generous offer, not to mention my charm, would have made you forget such trivial details," he teased, handing her the plastic card.

"No way, buster." Clearly feeling more at ease with him, she took the card from his hand and could not resist adding, "And sorry to disappoint you, but you're not that good looking anyway."

Leon's lips curved in a half smile. "At least you don't beat around the bush."

"Never have," the brunette confirmed, managing his card.

And probably never will, he wanted to add, but let it slide.

The financial transaction completed, she bent down again, this time turning off the computer, then opened a drawer to take her purse. "Do I have a minute to tell Albert I'm leaving?"

He nodded. "I'll wait in the car..." He stopped, searching for a name.

She immediately came to his aid. "The name's Janet, Mr. Sterling."

"Mine's Leon," he reminded, heading away. Sitting in the Maserati, he watched Albert's concerned look while she talked with him, probably worried at having his accountant kidnapped by a client. But she managed to ease his fears, squeezing his hand and leaving a peck on his cheek before moving away. With a few strides, she was in Leon's car. "All right, let's go."

Traffic was hectic because of the heavy rain, which did not allow for a clear vision. Rush hour was in full swing as cars moved slowly on the main streets while fat drops beat down on their shiny metal covers.

"I'm glad to notice a Maserati has the same defects as a regular car when it rains." She underlined the heavy irony by trying to peer out the foggy windshield.

"You don't like cars much, right?" Even if he had not commented before, Leon had been surprised she had not praised his most prized possession.

"Actually, cars are fine. It's their owners I usually can't stand...with a few exceptions," she added quickly.

"I'm not going to enquire in which category you put me."

"That's easily said. Those I can't stand have nothing to show for themselves so they use their miserable four wheels to attract a woman's attention, thinking it'll make up for their deficiencies as people."

"That's exactly the reason I have a Maserati."

"As if you needed one!"

He cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "Don't you believe me? Most women have to see what car a man drives before deciding to go out with him. I admit, with a Maserati it's easier because they fall for it every time."

Janet smiled sweetly. "Rest assured, Mr. Sterling. It's not my style to throw myself at someone just because he drives a Maserati."

He grinned, amused by the turn of the conversation. "That's too bad. Unfortunately, I don't have many other weapons to seduce women."

"Yeah, I bet. Is that how you convince your top model secretaries? Let's take a ride in my Maserati?"

Impressed by her insight, Leon turned to look at her profile. "How do you know I have top model secretaries?"

She shrugged. "It's a question of looks." She paused a second. "And money, both of which you have in abundance," she stated,

matter of fact. "In addition, you also have taste. You like nice things whether it's cars or clothes, nothing showy, but with a lot of class." She looked him over one more time, as if to be sure she was still on track. "In the end, you probably always get the best money can buy so I guess you apply the same measure in your business, too. Since you must be a top executive, it's fair to assume you'll have a large secretarial staff just as it's equally logical you'd choose them to fit your refined taste for beauty."

He was silent for a moment, wondering why the woman's intuitive analysis felt so oddly familiar, but quickly suppressed the thought. "You're right. I do have more than my share of top models around the office, even if it's not all that fun."

"Is that why you're going to pick one up tonight?"

This time Leon was very surprised. "How did you figure that out?"

"That was easy. Over where I live, it's full of pretty girls working downtown, mostly as secretaries."

He grinned. "Just because I work with a certain type of woman, doesn't mean I'd want to date her, too."

"Whatever the type, it wouldn't be anything like me."

Leon gripped the steering wheel tighter, annoyed she should consider him superficial. "Why not?"

Instead of replying, she eyed him like she had in the office, a strange look that unsettled him a bit, as if she were reading deep inside his soul. "May I be blunt?"

"I don't recall you've been anything else so far."

Janet blushed violently. "I'm sorry. As usual, my mouth gets way ahead of my brain. Mom always scolds me for being too outspoken for my own good. She says, if I keep it up, I'll never find a decent boyfriend."

Motionless in an endless queue at the traffic light, Leon did not need to pay attention to the road ahead so his gaze caught the unsettling grayish eyes and held them in thrall. "I like people who speak their mind. It takes a lot of guts—"

"Mom thinks I do it because I don't give a damn about people's feelings."

He grinned. "Either way, I like to know straight up where I stand with someone."

She eyed him skeptically, as if debating whether to believe him. "All right, you asked for it." After making up her mind, she took a deep breath. "I'm guessing you like playing the field, regardless of commitments, which is understandable since women must be all over you. That's why you wouldn't go out with just anyone. In fact, I can't see you with someone...ordinary looking." She sighed. "As I said, you like beauty, especially in people. If you had a mate or a wife..." Her gaze slid briefly to his left hand. "I'm sure she'd be gorgeous. But since you're not married—"

"How do you know that?"

"I've become an expert in interpreting a man's hands." She reached across the steering wheel and took his hand. "See? No wedding band."

"I could've taken it off," he argued reasonably, feeling strangely reluctant to take his hand back.

"There'd be a halo around your finger." She brought his hand higher up. "Which I don't see here." She let go and turned to look outside. "Men are so stupid...most of them anyway. When they make a pass at me, many pocket their rings right before approaching the desk, thinking I'm either blind or dumb."

"A ring doesn't really mean anything. Many married men don't wear them, not to mention that if I lived with someone, you'd never know it."

She swung her gaze back on him. "It'd have to be someone truly special to hold your interest for a long stretch of time."

Even though surprised again, he did not let it show. "Well, I do get bored easily with things and people."

"That's because you have the instinct of..." she creased her forehead as if in an effort to pull out a suitable definition. "A hunter," she cried triumphantly.

Leon's blood turned cold. "How the hell did you do that?" The words fell off before he could stop them. "I mean, do you really see me as—"

"Don't ask me why, but that's exactly how I feel you. It's your nature, although—" She stopped to study Leon more. Then she shook her head as if to clear an unwanted vision. "I'm not sure, but I think you've changed lately. You used to be more...vicious? Independent? Aloof?"

Their eyes met and Leon had the heart-crunching sensation she knew more than she was telling. That's impossible! No, he had to focus on the car and the rain falling harder outside. But her huge grayish eyes pulled him far deeper than he cared to go, drowning him in a wet universe that—with a start, he pulled back before it was too late, tearing his gaze away and pretending to fumble with the heater. "I can still be pretty vicious, though I reserve it for the truly deserving."

She smiled. "Is that what your top model secretary is? Truly deserving? Or are you simply punishing your special one? Then again, I'm guessing she's not home tonight."

"She could accept—"

"With someone like you, I doubt she'd accept any funny business. Women are usually very possessive."

"Does that mean you wouldn't go out with someone unless he was free?" Leon challenged, curious.

"That would depend on what I want. If it's sex..." She glanced at him sideways. "Which wouldn't be our case—"

"Don't be so sure. I may just surprise you for a change."

"I know my limits, Mr. Sterling, and they don't include the likes of you."

"You could be wrong."

"No, I'm just practical and don't delude myself like many women do." She shrugged. "After all, there are men you can have and ones you can't, no matter how hard you try."

"So you've already placed me in the second category." He turned to look at her, not sure if it was a compliment or not. The odd girl had a way of saying things completely unlike anyone else, an amusing though disturbing trait that was beginning to wear on him.

"Only because you belong to someone else."

"A hunter doesn't belong to anybody but himself." Although his tone was teasing, he was in no mood for humor. *How does she do it?* Not only did she seem to know him past and present, but also her assumptions were getting too close to home for his taste.

She smiled. "I wouldn't know. I never met a hunter before, but I'd like to try him—"

"It's the hunter who chooses what and who to try." He cut her off coldly.

She stared out of the window in silence. "You're right, of course. It was only...wishful thinking." She sighed. "But he'd be difficult to handle anyway because I have the feeling he'd be very demanding."

Realizing he had been rougher than he had intended, Leon's tone softened. "Would that be a problem?"

"Maybe not, as long as he was straight with me. I can't stand lies, but that's the only thing men seem to be good at lately. It's a

pity, really, to see so many interesting ones tell a whole lot of crap just to take a woman to bed and then vanish into thin air.”

Thinking of his secretaries, he had no qualms in defending his category. “Maybe some women deserve it.”

“I’d probably agree, if all I had to deal with were my stupid top model secretaries. Speaking for myself, I could forgive their manners, but not their lies. In a way, I almost expect them to disappear when the bed gets cold. It’s part of the game so I accept it.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “I also know relationships can get heavy and sometimes one needs to escape. Let’s take your case...hypothetically, of course. If you lived with someone, I’d have no objections to a little fun—”

“You just told me I wouldn’t be interested,” he teased.

Janet grinned. “That’s why I’m talking hypothetically. Anyway, I wouldn’t expect you to see me the next day or even the days after. I’d even understand if you were never to call me again—”

“Only if you told me where to find another mechanic like Albert.”

“Sorry, Mr. Sterling, there aren’t any like him in the whole of San Francisco.”

Leon grinned. “Then I couldn’t stop calling you, no matter what happened.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t be mad if I never saw you again as long as you played fair by me from the start.” A dazzling smile curved her lips. “You’re not the only one who likes to know straight up where he stands with someone.”

“And...always speaking hypothetically, if I told you I lived with someone, but wanted to keep seeing you, would you feel jealous or threatened?”

She shrugged. “I’m not a competitive type. If someone decided to pursue a relationship with me while having a previous

commitment, it's obvious there are problems that have nothing to do with me. It's hard times for couples anyway so I wouldn't be surprised."

"I find it hard to believe you'd accept such a situation. Most women wouldn't."

"I'm not like most women, Mr. Sterling. As I said, I'm not competitive—"

"Is that why you're the only woman at the Body Shop?" he teased, a huge grin curving his lips.

She could not resist returning his infectious good humor. "What better way to avoid competition? Actually, I work there because my father started the business back in the eighties."

"The boss's daughter, eh? I bet no one dares complain to him about accounting."

Janet turned to stare outside again, watching the rain and traffic, then sighed heavily. "Actually, he passed away a couple of years ago."

Reading more than he wanted inside her pain, Leon changed register immediately. "I'm sorry. I..."

She turned back, huge grayish pools flashing. "You had no way of knowing."

They remained silent for a while. The traffic situation had only worsened in the meantime as the number of people trying to leave downtown increased, clogging the streets. And since the rain had no intention of stopping, everyone had to go extra slow in order to see through the heavy mist that clouded their windshields.

"My father used to like watching people in their cars." Janet's voice broke the silence. "He said it told a lot about their characters."

"Do you think so, too?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I have to confess I don't watch people like he did. Most of them bore me because they're so predictable. I mean, most complain about how drab and boring their lives are, yet if you offered them an alternative, they'd never take it."

"People are afraid to take chances on something new. They prefer to stick to their old habits."

"Only because they feel more secure in something they know, rather than face the unknown."

"And what about you?"

"Oh, I'd like to try new things, if I found the right company."

"Perhaps with someone who already has a previous relationship?" he joked, trying to make her forget about sad things.

"Right. Sometimes, I wish I could—" She stopped abruptly, blushing violently.

"What?"

Janet shook her head. "No, Mr. Sterling, I can't reveal all my secrets in the space of a car ride. It's bad enough I'm treating you as a friend, a close one, too, when I hardly know you."

"If it hasn't stopped you so far, why should it now?"

"Because..." Her voice trailed off, obviously embarrassed by her thoughts.

"All right, let me guess." He pretended to concentrate, though he knew exactly what she had in mind. "You'd like to try a...different relationship, right?"

She blushed again. "Well, maybe."

Leon grinned satisfied. "Then here's the interesting question. What combination would you like?"

She blushed even more violently. "What would be your guess?"

He looked her over, taking in the muscular well-balanced frame that promised sweet delights in bed. She had a way of using her hands while talking that he found elegant and sensual at the same time. Her body also intrigued him. Its movements, the few he had seen, spoke of intense physical reactions that no one so far had tested to their full potential. And her ass...maybe it was better if he did not think about it, considering its devastating effects, but was unable to stop wondering about who would appreciate its firmness and roundness. "You look to me as if you've had your experiences with both men and women, but prefer the latter much more than the former."

She opened her eyes wide. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

He shook his head mischievously. "That's my secret."

"I'm sure it was just a lucky guess." She scoffed.

He shrugged without adding a word.

"As I said, I just can't trust men."

"And you're quite right," he agreed wholeheartedly.

She looked outside again. "Hey, we're in Richmond finally. I live right around the corner, over there." She pointed at a side street.

The Maserati veered, then pulled to the curb in front of a blue condo entrance.

"Thanks a lot," Janet said, fumbling to find the handle. "You've been very nice, really."

Suppressing a smile, he reached over and stopped her hand's futile quest, guiding it to what she was looking for, closing her palm on it. "It was a pleasure."

She opened the door, getting half out in the pouring rain.

"You know," he added as if it just occurred to him, "we should meet again to...swap secrets or something."

“I’m sure you’d rather spend your evenings with your top models.”

Leon grinned. “Hey, a man can grow tired even of the most beautiful women in the world.”

She leaned slightly forward, more to protect her body from the rain, he guessed, than for anything else. “As if you—”

Taking advantage of her position, he grabbed her hand, squeezed it tightly and pulled her half inside. “Take advice from a businessman.” He growled huskily. “Never short-sell your potential. It’s bad for business, your business, and it’s a turn off for men. If you don’t believe in yourself, who will?”

Janet did not pull away immediately, as if uncaring about the rain beating down her back. Only after a while, did she pull free gently. “You know where to find me if you ever feel like talking...or anything else that takes your fancy.” Without looking at him again, she slammed the door shut and ran inside the blue entrance.

* * * *

All through the evening, Leon could not help running over their conversation. Her straightforward attitude had more than just caught his attention since it was a welcome relief from most women’s usually complicated seductions. In all his years he had never managed to get a straight answer from a woman, not even his ex-wife. Yet, this odd creature, who looked remarkably like a cat with her triangular face and huge grayish eyes, had spoken openheartedly, even surprising him with insight that he had believed possible only from one other person. And Janet’s attitude was as direct as her logic, avoiding the coy pretense he had noticed in his secretary the moment he picked her up.

Yes, beautiful and dumb Brenda had dressed glamorously, with striking though unnecessarily high heels, and a belly low neck-

line exposing firm breasts that she flaunted seductively at Leon. Predictably, her first comments had been about his four wheels. "I love cars," she had wanted him to know, "especially the classy Italian design."

"So you're an expert?" Despite his ironic tone, he could not help thinking of Janet's very different reaction.

"I love beautiful things, boss." Her gaze traveled briefly to his crotch before returning to his face.

Her tricks did not fool him for a minute, but today he was not in the mood to play. Something about Janet's freshness made Brenda look artificial and false as bits of conversation continued to run through his mind even during John Spencer's speech about FDC's future.

Obviously disappointed by the unexpected last minute change of company, the dirty old man droned on for hours with his complaints about his financial empire in general, talking only to Leon and ignoring Brenda altogether. Luckily, she held her tongue, her glances running only to the hunter as if to show she did not care about John's treatment. Caught in the middle, Leon tried to be polite to both, while in fact interested in neither. In the end, he could find no valid reason to resist Brenda's open invitations. Returning her home, she seemed like a good way to release the odd tension Janet had left behind.

Predictably, sex did not last more than expected. Leon had long grown tired of women without tastes of their own, passive slaves not always liking what he did but never daring to complain openly. Her loss, he could not help musing as his cock ravaged Brenda's ass without any reaction on her part.

At thirty-seven years old, Leon had ceased worrying about women's sexual pleasure. If they talked to him, he was a willing listener and would have gone out of his way to make the woman feel

as much pleasure as possible. With the man-eater kind though, he was implacable because usually it was just a pose to hide their deep-rooted fear of sex. And being women, they accurately and dishonestly replaced it with an entirely different message. All night, Brenda had provoked him, her eyes and body telling him she was exceptional in bed. ‘Simply try me,’ it challenged. Unsurprisingly though, like most ads, it proved fake. Leon had learned to read between the lines and normally would not have taken up the offer. But a pair of haunting grayish eyes over a petite well-balanced body with a firm ass had played strange tricks on his cock. Of course, Brenda’s body was beautiful enough to arouse any man—despite its cold reactions—for a short while. Maybe too short.

Taking him to the door, Brenda could not resist the usual comment. “It’s been fun.” But her dreamy tone was the same he had learned women used when they lied. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay the night?”

“No thanks, I’m beat. It’s been a really long day and I can’t wait to get home.”

But she had to add one last thing while holding the door open for him. “You know, I’m sorry you had to come all the way here twice. After you left this afternoon, I thought you’d return to the office and we could’ve gone from there together.”

And miss the best damn part of the day? “Well, something came up at the last minute. Good night, Brenda, see you tomorrow.”

He could not wait to return home. In a rush, Leon pushed the Maserati to the limit, trusting on the late hour and lax controls, speeding through the city to reach the ocean. Just breathing the salty air and hearing the soft waves breaking on the shore made him feel better. The silent condo greeted him, a luxurious affair along the coastline, with each apartment having a superb view on the ocean. Looking at it as he turned to park the car, he remembered

that even if he had been indifferent to its many appeals when first moving in, he had soon grown fond of the place, more attached than he cared to admit. Shaking off the memories, he hurried down to the deserted garage and turned off the Maserati. Before stepping out, he glanced automatically at a parking space just across from his, then shook his head and went to the lift.

The surprise waited for him at home where he found the front door unlocked. As his heart skipped a beat, he stepped into the lit apartment, catching sight of the shadow moving across the stairwell. He closed the door noisily and turning, a familiar figure came down the stairs with a huge smile brightening the most dazzling blue eyes the hunter had ever seen in his life. Staring at the epitome of beauty, as the hellish cat had guessed during their drive, Leon breathed deeply, his stomach caving in for the tall, muscled body dressed in the latest fashion with impeccable taste, shiny blond hair catching the flashes from the ceiling. "Hello, sweetie." His husky tone broke the silence. "How's your mother?"

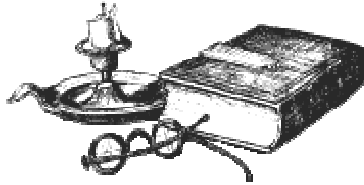
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1965 in Rome, Italy, I soon started my travelling 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 for five teenage years, attending the Crestwood High School where I started my writing career by publishing a short story 'Nostalgia' in the Crestwood Journal. Very thrilled about discovering my new talent, I went ahead during college, writing for the Emory University journal The Phoenix. After my American experience, I moved back to Rome, but still kept living from time to time abroad, spending several months in Mumbay India, a country I always felt very close to in more ways than one.

My writing hasn't always been smooth sailing. I've had long periods off and on, living life rather than writing about it. Eventually though, a personal experience that wouldn't rest forced me to give it voice, so I had to write *Piccolo Crocevia A Cinque* (loosely translated Little Five Points). This set me back on the writing track, but it didn't turn into a career until recently when my insatiable curiosity about people and their relations steered me into writing again, particularly in a genre I wasn't very familiar with, erotica. Today, I write in both Italian and English, mostly fiction of various genres, from fantasy erotica, to mysteries, to plain ordinary life stories.

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