

Leslie Bega can go from kitten to tigress in a blink, which probably explains how the once gawky charmer (yes, that was her on the late-'80s sitcom *Head of the Class*) pulls off the complete 180-degree turn needed to catch the eye of Tony Soprano this season on *The Sopranos*.

"She's a half-Italian, half-Cuban wildcat who stirs up lots of trouble," Leslie explains about her character, Valentina, the latest looker to strain the wiseguy's marital vows. "If she tangled with Tony's wife, it wouldn't be pretty. There's nothing she wouldn't want to explore, especially sexually and sensually. She's up, and down, for everything. Tony has definitely met his match in her."

Prior to being crowned a Mafia princess, Leslie graduated valedictorian from Los Angeles' Le Lycée Français (which, we think, translates as "snooty French school") before turning her attention full-time to acting. Capitalizing on her dance training, she took the occasional dubious film role (testing the

Take a sneak peek at Tony's new girlfriend, Leslie Bega. Oh, crap—here he comes!

Sultry New Soprano

human tolerance for Day-Glo, she appeared not only in *Breakin'* but also in *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*), worked her way up through episodic TV by appearing in such shows as *Martial Law* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, and eventually broke into higher-profile fare like the movies *Get Shorty* and *Lost Highway*.

To maintain focus between gigs, Leslie engages in the soothing art of horticulture. "I like to work in my garden naked," she says nonchalantly, as our tape recorder mysteriously bursts into flames. "The neighbors can't see, but FedEx men have their own time schedules, and when they decide to drop off a package, what's a girl to do?" And if pruning the azaleas doesn't do the job, she heads to the nearest firing range. "When Kelly Hu and I first went there together, I got hooked. I realized everything we do in life is like a target, and you need energy and focus to hit that target. I just graduated to an M-16, and the first time they handed me one with 10 rounds in it, I hit the target dead-on with all 10." So does she keep an arsenal at home? "Actually, owning a gun would go against what I believe in," she explains. "Shooting targets is nothing like shooting something living, which I'd never do. Besides, guns require lots of maintenance, and I have a lot going on."

From nerdy sitcom star to pistol-packing mama, Leslie

proves to be a tough woman to label. "I'm a dichotomy," she confesses. "On one hand, it's easy for me to project a confident appearance, but I'm a nimrod when it comes to meeting someone I like. I'm very playful, yet if I get deceived, I get jealous. Maybe it's the Latin blood in me, but suddenly it's, like, crack that whip!"

A self-styled "serial monogamist," Leslie says she likes to "spoil and be spoiled. I've spoiled men rotten with everything you can possibly fathom, fulfilled every possible desire and fantasy they can ever dream of." But, as she's currently single, surely there are fantasies yet to fulfill? "Whipped cream immediately comes to mind," she laughs, "especially since I don't eat dairy. How about in a spaceship, floating and weightless...with whipped cream?"

Although under a gag order not to reveal any pertinent *Sopranos* plot details—like whether or not Valentina will be napping with sea life by season's end—Leslie will state clearly that, despite her tendency toward extreme behavior, her dalliances with bad boys end offscreen: "A relationship has to have a foundation of friendship. If you care about your friend, then you have trust. If you have trust, there are no inhibitions. They say that nice guys finish last, but I don't believe that. I find that nice guys are much more fun." So be nice, *capiche*? ☒

BY STEPHEN REBELLO
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'I've spoiled men ^{rotten} with everything you
can possibly fathom.'





Photographs, Robert Maxwell; styling, Rita Rago; set design and props, Jeff Andrews for TFP Design; hair, Steven Lake for luxe; makeup, Hiromi Inoko for luxe

‘I like to **work**
in my garden **naked.**’