
Excerpt from STEPPING STONE



STEPPING STONE IS A
CONTEMPORARY
LESBIAN ROMANCE BY
KARIN KALLMAKER.

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BLOGTASTIC!

Looks like Hollywood's most eligible bachelor is having the birthday of a lifetime. We've got pics of girls girls girls enjoying the festivities, and the party has hardly started! They've gone wild for Hyde Butler! What's Selena Ryan doing here, you have to wonder. She plays for the other team. If H.B.'s the church, maybe S.R. is changing her religion?

We'll be posting pics all night and tomorrow a round-up of who was zooming who!

CHAPTER ONE

There are three kinds of Hollywood parties—brawls, benefits and bright lights. As a rule, when an evening had all three, Selena Ryan attended them in that order. After a polite appearance at a brawl, she could be gone before the police were necessary, still stay awake during the speeches lauding everyone's favorite charity of the evening, and arrive at the strut-posture-and-pose after the A-list had sated the paparazzi.

She showed her invitation to the security guard at the foot of the long driveway, then shaded her eyes as she navigated her Prius between parked cars lining both shoulders of the private road. After she'd been sitting indoors all day, the burnt orange sunset made her eyes water. During her cautious negotiation she was passed by blue-vested valets hoofing it up the hill to the turnaround for the next sports car or Mercedes haphazardly abandoned by eager partygoers. Adding to the logjam were a number of limos disgorging A-listers, who immediately went inside, and D-listers, who gawked and lingered in the driveway.

She rolled to a halt behind the queue of cars, and a young man quickly tried to open her door. He tried again, obviously not used to finding the doors locked.

His cursory "Welcome, madam," was spoken through the window as she lowered it.

"I park my own car," she said firmly. When he didn't withdraw his extended hand she added, "Would you point me toward the reserved area?"

She'd exceeded his English, but a familiar stocky figure wielding a clipboard waved him away. "Evening, Ms. Ryan. If you'll wait just a minute, we'll have you into the rear garage access."

"Thank you, Mr. Garcia, sir, I appreciate it. How did that Perkins party end up last week?"

"I thought for sure there'd be paramedics, but the young man's grandmother shut it down at midnight by

cutting off the bar.”

“That’ll do it every time.” The car in front of her moved forward, and she turned into the narrow access once the helpful Garcia unhooked the chain and gestured her through. Anyone who went to enough A-list parties got to know the security detail. Garcia-Zimmer Security was at the top of her list when savvy, discreet services were needed. Kim hadn’t even needed to call ahead—Selena Ryan’s name on the guest list had cued him to allot her space in the rear.

As she got out of her Prius she was aware of the buzz of the night security lighting overhead. The shadows in the rear of the house were long, and by the time she had locked the car and made her way up the stairs to the garden level, moths had fluttered to the glowing glass. Moths had always mildly upset her, and she’d had more than enough English at UCLA to draw the obvious analogy between the moths and the starlets gathered in the bright lights poolside. Beyond them, the long curving line of beach to the south had not yet taken on its night colors, but within an hour there would be nothing but black velvet studded with jewels of light as far as the eye could see. Looking west from the pool level, the Pacific was deepening to indigo.

She opted for the long way around the pool, taking another flight of stairs to the main level of the house. She’d find her host, wish him a happy birthday, express her continued interest in adding his name to the cast of

Barcelona, then mingle for exactly fifteen minutes before returning to her car.

From the vantage point above the pool she scanned the guests, not immediately sighting Hyde Butler. There was plenty of eye candy, though. More than one tanned and perfectly trim starlet had already decided that Hyde's birthday gift was an unobstructed view of her body. If the swimsuits were off before the sun was down, a brawl it would be, no question about it. Around the naked starlets was a circle of muscle-flexing males. The nudity didn't bother her, but the use of a supine woman's flat stomach to snort lines of coke did.

That this particular event on an abnormally humid Malibu evening was going to devolve into a brawl bothered her even more. Hyde Butler was a rising star noted for rugged good looks that sold magazines and tickets. Two anomalies had caught Selena's attention: Hyde was thirty-eight, a little old to be breaking into the movies; and surprise of surprises, he could act. He had the kind of face and ability that would bring him parts for the next forty years—but he had to survive the first three years in Hollywood. Everyone from old friends to his agent to whoever was producing his next action flick was backing the Hyde Butler horse, and anything Hyde wanted, Hyde would get. Younger heads had succumbed to the many temptations of newly initiated stardom, but she had hoped Hyde was old enough to have seen the tricks and treats for what they were.

She was aware of eyes watching her as her heels clicked across the still-warm Spanish tiles of the expansive covered patio. Some gazes slid past, not allotting any value to the plain black suit—even if it was Dior—or her simple tucked-behind-the-ears bob. Other gazes locked and followed, knowing who she was. She avoided eye contact, taking in the clusters of vivacious men and woman in her peripheral vision and using her ears to separate voices into simple categories of *avoid* and *okay*. She chose the path with least to avoid.

Looking at the party goers she wasn't so sure Hyde was as wise as she had hoped. She was here to encourage him to join *Barcelona*, but no star was big enough to be worth dealing with their addiction issues—not to her, at least. Other producers might roll with, or even encourage it, but she'd never found it easy, and after Jennifer it would be impossible. She hated to write Hyde off, though. They'd talked three or four times, and she hoped the rapport she'd felt hadn't just been his magnetism.

“Selena! Darling!”

Putting on her best party face, she turned to the voice, offered a cheek to Bertram Glassier—who was too smart and too old to stick around for a brawl—then to his wife, who was young, pretty and wore a rock the size of a golf ball on her third finger. She would want to stay, no doubt. “Bertie, we have to have lunch, seriously. The distribution contract expired and we have

to update the terms.”

He winked, which was always disarming. “I’ll get us a table at Spago’s by the end of the week—”

“Cut the crap.” Selena smacked him playfully on the arm. “Chili dogs at The Pantry. How about Friday?”

He mimed a heart attack. “You always know how to seduce me, Lena.”

The fourth Mrs. Glassier wound her arm around her husband. Selena wanted to tell her she was no threat, at least not in the bedroom sense. Bertie loved smart women, he just didn’t marry them. “You need to remember your cholesterol, honey.”

He gave her an indulgent smile and Selena another wink. “Friday.”

“I’ll bring carrots,” Selena said over her shoulder. She smiled as she drifted away—two of her allotted fifteen minutes had already crossed something off her To Do list. If she found Hyde her time would be well spent.

Instead of Hyde, however, she was confronted by BeBe LaTour. “Selena, don’t tell me you were going to run out without saying hello!”

“Okay,” Selena answered. *I won’t tell you*, she added to herself. She saw agents as necessary participants in the industry, just as producers were. Agents and producers typically saw each other as evil incarnate. Most agents, to her, were in fact looking out

for their clients, but BeBe's track record of looking out for BeBe was the only successful thing about her. Selena was also willing to bet there was more than a mere personal stash of white powder in BeBe's cute little evening bag.

"I know you really want Hyde for your little movie, but the whole world is clamoring for him to blow up their bad guys first."

"There aren't any gunfights in *Barcelona*." She tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear again.

"Yes, well, that's one of our hesitations about him doing it."

Selena gave it one last try. "He could be the next Henry Fonda, you know. An actor who can do a western, a love story, theater."

"Theater!" BeBe threw back her head and laughed, displaying her smooth-as-silk throat and perfectly sculpted cleavage in the process. "There's no money in theater, darling, you know that!"

"If you make Hyde enough money blowing up bad guys, maybe parts where he's not typecast could make him...I don't know...what's the word?" She paused, not bothering to hide her sarcasm. "Happy?"

BeBe gave her a sparkling what-a-bitch-you-are smile. "You are such a dreamer."

"I try," Selena said, moving away. To herself she muttered, "A dreamer with two Oscar nominations, you parasite."

She managed to make her way upstream from the bar, into the house proper. She kicked balloons out of her way as she crossed the vaulted foyer, picturing each of them as BeBe's head. Hollywood wasn't full of BeBe's, thank goodness, and a few of the cheek kisses and brief conversations along her path weren't difficult at all.

"I think he's in the library, showing off some new gadget," someone told her, and Selena decided a room called the library was likely on the second floor of this type of mansion. The stairs were draped with people holding drinks and crowd watching. At the landing she navigated around a guitarist with milky skin and torture in his eyes, singing to a bevy of cute young women, most of whom, she guessed, believed he'd written *Blowin' in the Wind* all by his soulful self.

You're getting bitter about your age, sweetheart, she told herself in BeBe's singsong delivery. She'd felt old all day, not a good thing with the big Four-O two months in her future. How would she feel then? She wasn't an actress, but the cult of youth included all women in this town. Her usual avowal of striving to be as elegant as Lauren Bacall and as accomplished as Edith Head was interrupted by the puzzle of a hallway of closed doors.

She didn't relish the idea of opening doors to look for her host—guaranteed she wouldn't want to see whatever was behind some of them, not at this kind of

party. Fortunately, a burst of laughter drew her to the second door on the right, and she found the library, complete with a fireplace and bookshelves that even contained books. The contents of the mansion had probably been bought along with the building, however, so the collected novels were no indication of Hyde's personality or proclivities. Neither were the Cubist reproductions that adorned the paneled walls, though they underscored his masculinity.

There were a half-dozen beautiful women in the room, lounging on the sofas and side chairs, but Selena didn't look at any of them. Her gaze went immediately to Hyde and stayed there.

Hyde Butler had a craggy, quintessentially American face, framed by sandy blond hair with a touch of world-weary grey. He was riveting on screen and unmistakable in any crowd. When the camera turned off, he didn't, at least not that Selena had seen. He had been married when he was much younger, while still selling heating and air conditioning systems in West Virginia, and though he was constantly interviewed in the trades, she had no sense of really knowing him as a person. Did he even know how to turn off that stomach-tightening, pulse-raising magnetism? She thought of her own sanctum where she could curse if she stubbed her toe, leave her clothes on the floor and nobody ever knew, cry out a frustration, or, more recently, just cry over her stupid, broken heart.

From his lounging position in the corner of a leather sofa, he turned his head as she approached the cluster of seating and locked gazes with her. The brown eyes with green highlights that had graced dozens of magazine covers in the last two years glinted with pleasure, and that look sent an undeniable tingle through her stomach. “Selena! Sweetie! Just who I wanted to see.”

Taken aback, but amused by her own physical response to him, she answered, “Happy birthday, you adorable rascal.” Though the open-necked polo shirt and Bermuda shorts were picture perfect American male style, she wasn’t interested in anything under his clothes, as visceral as the sex appeal was. What was above his neck was vastly more intriguing.

He rose, saying, “Out with the lot of you, you sorry gits. I want to have it off with Selena.”

There was grumbling from the assorted starlets as they exited, giving Selena curious looks. They were no doubt running their database, and coming up with the right last name. The word “lesbian” on the MySpace page in their brains was at odds with Hyde’s playful, effusive hug. They wanted to dislike her for monopolizing Hyde, but on the other hand, Selena was an even more likely ticket to a part than he was. The lingering glances were for both of them.

She returned Hyde’s hug, and tried to gauge if he was high. The feigned British accent was decent, but

not like him, as he was proud of his southern drawl and didn't mask it except when required by a role. After he let go of her he kicked the library door closed and returned to sprawl elegantly on one of the sofas. "Help me, Obi Wan Kenobi. You're mah only hope."

She chose a deeply cushioned chair opposite him, settling comfortably, legs crossed. In a skirt and heels she wasn't about to sprawl. "What can I do for you?"

"Work a Jedi mind trick on BeBe. She is dead set against me doing *Barcelona* but I loved the script. Charming bad guy, dead at the end."

"I think her issue is with your compensation. We're not going to make millions in the worldwide DVD market."

He sat up slightly, not the least bit high that she could see. "BeBe has done well for me so far."

"Look, Hyde." Selena chose her words carefully. "BeBe and I are natural enemies in this process, but I'm not going to be an effective sub-agent against her. That's not going to get you what you want, and it won't get me what I want."

"What do you want?" He was back to lolling, but there was nothing casual about the question.

"To make a good picture, and show the world that Hyde Butler is not a pretty face capable of only one kind of role. That makes me look like an insightful genius. I believe—and the director believes—you can play Elgin to perfection. Instead of six months out of

your life, I'm asking for six weeks, tops. It films here in L.A. at the Carlisle, and two weeks on location in Spain. This is a little picture, as they say."

His drawl peeked out in his voice, and Selena hoped it meant he was relaxing. "But could be a good one, the kind that gets me the blockbuster parts that are more than dawg-run-point-shoot."

"I want you to have a long career," Selena added, surprising herself.

"What you're really asking is that I trust you over my agent."

"I guess so, yes."

"Why should I?"

"I'm not in it for the money." It was an answer she often gave to the same question during negotiations. Once again, to her surprise, she added, "And I'm not in it for your body, for something to stick up my nose or blowing my own horn in the trades at the expense of yours."

"In other words, you really don't belong in Hollahwood." He sat up again, and turned to look at her directly.

God in heaven, that face, she thought. A dozen other male stars flitted through her head and she couldn't think of one who had those chiseled features combined with eyes that glowed with emotion. Right now it was uncertainty, and a touch of suspicion. He's an actor, she reminded herself, and it's possible none of

what's in his eyes is real.

She said, "I've been told that more than once. But Hollywood is where I can find actors idle for a month or two out of their schedules and squeeze my little pictures into their lives." She leaned back on the sofa, loosening her jacket.

"Why don't you take that thing off and have a drink?"

His lifted eyebrow and the flirtatious angle to his denim-clad leg brought a low chuckle from her before saying, "Mr. Butler, are you trying to seduce me?"

"Clever woman." He rolled to his sandaled feet. "I was serious about the drink if you want one."

She slid out of her jacket as she watched him open a cabinet to reveal a small bar. The room was getting stuffy and the rose silk blouse was going to go limp before she made it to the next party. "I'm serious about the movie—just a club soda."

"Twelve step?"

She noticed that he only poured a club soda for himself as well. "No, but it's going to be a long night. What about you?"

"Solidarity. I've got a little brother who got all the vices. I promised him I'd make it every day he did. I like a whiskey as much as he does, it just doesn't affect me the same way."

"If he got the vices, did you get the virtues?"

He gave her the highball glass full of ice and sparkling soda before resuming his former half-supine position on the sofa opposite that allowed him to gracefully balance his own glass on his chest. “Depends on what you consider virtues.”

“Justice, prudence, hope, charity, restraint, courage, faith...”

“Then, no, I didn’t get all the virtues. There are a few things I have no restraint whatsoever about. Selena, honey, can we just cut to the chase?”

It was her preference, most of the time. “It *is* going to be a long night, so just tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I want to trust you. I want to trust that if I take a chance on this little film, you’re not going to let me look like a fool who overreached in a character role.”

She nodded her understanding. “I’ve hired the best director I can, Eddie Lynch.”

Hyde nodded. “He won an Indie Spirit Award, right? For *Royal Candide*.”

Selena nodded. “Eddie and I—no one affiliated with Ryan Productions—has any interest in doing a project that the talent later finds an embarrassment. I make you look bad, I don’t get chances with the next Hyde Butler to cross my path. I make sure my stars and crew are proud of our work.” She paused to take a cooling sip from the glass and to break the intensity in her voice. “I don’t suffer prima donnas, but I promise you access to me, direct access, if you have concerns.

For what anyone's word is worth in this town, I give you my word."

"Just like you gave your word to Jennifer Lamont?"

The glass almost slipped out of her hand. She caught herself, knew she couldn't help the angry flush that rose from her shoulders and swept up her neck. She made her jaw unclench by sheer force of will. "Surely you've been in this town long enough to know that gossip has its own life. It rarely represents the truth."

"I have. But the papers agree you locked her out of a picture, and broke the contract. The union protest was mysteriously silenced."

It had cost her a bundle and been worth every penny. Hyde—and the gossip machine—had no idea what else she'd paid. "Do the papers agree that I have never commented on the matter?"

"They do."

"That fact is not changing today. I have no comment to make. If that's a deal breaker, so be it." Relax your posture, she told herself. Take a deep breath. Shake it off or you'll get a headache.

"The papers agree that you and Lamont were a couple."

She shrugged and reached for her jacket. "If that's a deal breaker, too, so be it."

"Why should it be? Not like you and I are ever

going to end up in the sack and be bitter about it by morning. I've never met her, either."

"Then what's your concern, Hyde? What aspect of my ability to honor a contract I make with you, and honor my word, troubles you?" She took a long draught of the cold soda before folding her jacket over her arm.

"The gossip blogs say that she signed on to a multi-picture agreement with the understanding she had project approval, and your lawyer told her it was play when you said, like it or not. After she balked and dumped you, you had the film editor excise half her performance from the last picture."

Unable to keep the sharp edge from her tone, she said, "You left out bribe all zillion members of the Academy to boycott her at the Oscars."

His shrug was almost lazy but Selena abruptly focused on the muscles along his neck—he was as tense as she was. Bucking his agent to take on a project was one thing, but to take on something that was risky to his public persona, something that could either be brilliant or make him look like a fool and a hack, was another.

He wants to be a Henry Fonda, she realized. If I screw this up for him, I ruin that dream. Her voice softened. "One thing I have learned is that you can't say or do anything when nobody else has any vested interest in the truth. So I choose silence whenever I can." She smiled and rose to her feet. "The older I get the more time I need for make-up, so I don't need reasons to

avoid looking at myself in the mirror.”

His lopsided smile was a heart melter. “Do what celebrities do—hire someone for the make-up and you never have to see what you’ve become.”

He followed her to the door and they paused. She didn’t need to warn him that a dozen camera phones were likely pointed at it, waiting for them to emerge.

“Well, thank you, Selena. Thank you for talking to me instead of telling me not to worry my pretty little head about such things, of *course* nothing I could do could *possibly* turn out bad, I’m just too *talented* for that.”

He had BeBe’s nuance down pat. With a steady look, she said, “To that idea I have only one word to say: *Ishtar*. I promise you, Hyde, I will not let you make the worst film of your life in the prime of your career.”

He nodded. Drawl back in full force, he said, “I’m pretty sure which dog hunts here, Selena honey.”

She could listen to him say her name all day. “You are such a charming southern boy.”

He laughed politely, and opened the door. The insta-gossip-uploads would have pics of them sharing a laugh, unmussed, unremarkable except that any picture of Hyde smiling was hot property in the blogosphere.

She walked away, head up and doggedly keeping her lips from showing a bitter twist. She was so invested in tamping down her rage at the mention of Jennifer Lamont, that she was backing her car toward the gate

before she fully realized she was actually in it. Calm down, she warned herself. Don't let her win anymore, just let it—

She yelped and slammed on the brakes at a loud thud and cry at the passenger door. She saw a flash of a pale face, masses of golden hair, the torn neckline of a little black dress. The woman began pounding on the window.

“Please, please, I need help. I just want a lift. I need to get out of here. Please, please...”

Selena paused with her hand on the door lock. Her safety instructors had drilled her over and over on this scenario. Deets would slap her silly if she opened the door. She had enough money and her own company insured her plenty, and that made her a kidnapping risk.

She lowered the passenger window just a little. “What's wrong?”

The woman pressed her face to the opening. “Please, just a lift. He...he—I have to get away. I don't want any trouble, but I have to get away. I didn't know he was like that. Please, just help me.”

“Who?” Again, her hand hesitated on the button to unlock the door. Then she came to her senses. If she honked three times, short, Garcia would come running. “I'll get help.”

“No! Just get me out of here. I don't want anyone to see me like this.”

She raised her cell phone. “I'll call the police.”

“No! You can’t—I, he, he gave me something. I don’t want to get tested by the cops.”

All plausible reasons, which was why the scenario was a favorite with kidnapers. But who would do something that audacious behind the lines of the security people? A kidnapping would have been better launched in the road just outside the gate. Trusting her judgment, but still prepared to honk the horn for help, she shifted the car into park, checked the mirrors for anyone else lurking, then opened her door and put one foot out so she could stand up and talk to the woman over the hood. “Who are you talking about?”

“Him. Mr. Big Star. Look what he did to my dress! And what he did to me was...I would have said yes. But he didn’t want yes.”

“Are you taking about Hyde?” She flushed with anger for the second time that night. Her voice cold, she said, “What exactly did Hyde do?”

“He was—I should have known better than to come to a party like this! My mother warned me, but I thought I could protect myself. He caught me off-guard.” She pushed back her hair making her face finally fully visible.

“Who are you?” The woman looked familiar now, but not live—Selena had probably seen that face on an audition feed of photographs, scanning through actors sent over for a recent casting call that read, “Female, age twenty to twenty-five, crowd shot, speaks.”

“Well, I go by Vivienne Weston. Can we just go? I don’t want to make trouble for him.”

Weston had taken the time to clearly enunciate her name before resuming her quavering, uncertain delivery. The leg supporting Selena’s weight trembled as a bolt of pure rage swept through her. Her own voice was shaky as she asked, “When did this happen?”

“Just now. He...I got away and I just need your help for a few minutes. A ride to a bus stop or hotel where I can get a cab.”

Slowly, jaw clenched, she said, “But Vivienne, in solidarity, we should confront him. Just tell me what he did.”

The penny still hadn’t dropped for Weston. Tears standing in her eyes, she assumed an ashamed, grieved, shy look that almost worked. “Do I have to spell it out?”

“As a matter of fact, you do. I want to know exactly what lies you are going to spread about Hyde so I can give him the grounds to sue you for malicious slander.”

She had the pleasure of watching Vivienne nearly jump out of her skin when she hit the horn three times. The little bitch didn’t care whose reputation she ruined. She was just like Jennifer, just another--

Garcia’s voice rang out. “Is there a problem, Ms. Ryan?”

“Yes, there is. Ms. Weston here is alleging sexual assault against Mr. Butler. She claims it just happened, and I know, with my own eyes, that Mr. Hyde has been

surrounded by guests or in my company for quite some time. What I don't know is if she was just hoping to get into the gossip mill or hoping to make me feel so sorry for her that I gave her a part."

Weston's bravado failed her. "I didn't say he'd raped me."

"No, actually, you didn't, you just said drugs and sex against your will. Playing innocent and I-didn't-really-mean-anything-by-it won't work with me because I'm not a court of law. I don't have to give you a chance to explain your side and consider being merciful." Her inner warning bells were telling her to shut up, but she rushed on. "I get to squash you like the termite you are. You've ruined your party dress for nothing."

Weston was clearly astonished that her ploy hadn't worked. She also clearly didn't think it could have any downside. "But—oh come on. I know lots of girls who did the same thing, and they all got jobs out of it, so why are you being difficult? It was just a joke."

"I don't have a sense of humor. People like you have ruined it. By nine a.m. you won't have an agent. If you're still living anywhere in the area by noon, you won't have a SAG card."

"You can't do that, you bitch!"

"Yes, I can." Selena actually had no idea if she had that kind of pull with the actors' union. Probably not, but Weston was a stupid, dangerous little girl. "What

you tried to do to Hyde Butler I can, and will, do to you.”

Garcia had moved around to Weston’s side of the car. Two more members of his detail were standing at the rear of the car, blocking the most likely paths of escape. “You’re leaving, and with an escort, miss. If you don’t come willingly, I will call the police and you’ll leave with them.”

“Fuck off!”

Can’t anyone in this town buy a vocabulary? Selena abruptly felt weak, so she settled back into the driver’s seat. When she put the car into reverse everyone cleared out of her way.

Her usual pleasure at the vista from the heights of the Malibu hills was lost in a flurry of ranted expletives. She vented until she ran dry, then tried to let the distant twinkling lights of the Ferris wheel on the Santa Monica pier wash away some of her anger. Making movies was about fantasy and magic—it was supposed to be *fun*. But it brought out the worst in so many people, their evil, manipulative, selfish worst, and mostly those people didn’t care who they hurt. They thought all that mattered was what ended up in front of the public. She wanted to feel sorry for them, because they believed they were only as good as their last box

office. The insecurity of most performers was mammoth. Trouble was, they didn't stop at themselves. They thought the world ran on box office numbers and billing rank. Someone like her could tell them there was so much more to it than that, but they wouldn't listen. They'd go right on digging a hole they would never climb out of. Then they would want someone like her to rescue them.

When she'd calmed enough to speak evenly, she left a message for Kim, first to tell her to follow-up on breakfast Friday with Bertrand Glassier, then detailing the Weston incident. Kim would put her on the No Work list. Every production company had one for their own reasons. *Blackmailer* was such an ugly word, but that's what their list would say next to that woman's name. There was little point in a euphemism. It was all such a distraction from making movies, trying to sort the Westons out of the process.

Feeling somewhat calmer, she turned east, and hoped unrealistically for decent traffic. Her on-board navigator picked a route for her based on traffic flow feeds. Slowly making headway, she spent the next thirty-five minutes listening to messages from Kim and Alan and answering back to their voice mail. Finally tapping off the Bluetooth speaker, she heaved a sigh of relief as she cleared the 405 and traffic picked up through Beverly Hills. Climbing above the basin once again, she switched off the navigator because she knew the way to the Spelman's home. The quiet in the car

was welcome.

She passed inspection at the community gate and again parked, but this time there were no obvious valets, just the unobtrusive presence of security personnel. The lane was thick with trees on both sides and wooded areas separated the houses. Too old to be what passed for mansions these days, that was still the right word to her. Complete with columns and second floor balconies, they were brilliantly white against the wooded hills behind them, stately and calm. Ahead of her, a well-known power couple—both lawyers—had parked and were strolling to the main door like any ordinary couple would on the way to a friend's party.

She let herself relax. Ellen and Alex Spelman were hosting a gathering of compatible people for congenial conversation and wonderful dining. Over dessert they would tell their friends how much they cared about—Selena pulled the large Ziploc out of the box on the passenger floorboard. Kim had written *Spelman* and the date and time in Sharpie. The invite was visible through the plastic. Oh yes, over dessert Ellen and Alex would tell them about the West Africa Girls' Empowerment Movement.

Also in the Ziploc was a jeweler's box where Kim had stowed a glittery necklace and matching bracelet and earrings to dress up Selena's business day attire. There had been no time to change. She loosened the collar of her blouse so the necklace showed, slipped the

bracelet on her wrist, swapped out the earrings and stuffed her cell phone and keys into the last thing in the Ziploc, a suede evening clutch. There would be no photographers here, so she left on her simple day heels. She would have a complete head-to-toe change for the last party, but for this one, at least, she got to be comfortable.

She was glad she had made some effort, because as usual she had forgotten that Ellen Spelman's décor surpassed the skill of most decorators. Her hostess hadn't adopted a Mediterranean motif that smothered visitors with elegant trappings, rather, simple whitewashed and papered walls with family photos, small rugs over sandstone tiles and windows open to the evening breeze made her feel like she was visiting someplace where people lived happily. As a child, her father had driven them past houses like this and promised that someday they'd be that kind of family.

Dinner, served at a long, scrubbed wood table decorated down the middle with coils of grapes still on the vine, was elegant, tasty and simple, with a crepe orange dessert and pinot grigio noble that vastly improved her mood. While she couldn't exactly say she was among friends, these were not people of whom she had reason to be wary. She was the only film industry person there, just as the lawyers were the only ones from their profession. There was no reason to talk business or flex rival muscles. Interesting, congenial conversation that avoided politics and religion, touched

on art and theater, the economy, stories of travel, amusing anecdotes...it was soothing, and reminded her that there was a great, big world outside Hollywood, filled with nice people, all of whom had their own stresses, concerns and lives.

Just for the pleasure of the few hours' diversion she would have written the Spelmans' a large check, but their story of the struggling missionaries who were learning how to evade the black marketeers and war lords who took anything of value, was truly moving. With clandestinely delivered seeds and instructions, girls were being given a chance to grow a small garden, which led to barter and food. How she could not afford to fund a thousand packets of seeds?

As she was leaving, Ellen Spelman gave her a hearty kiss on the cheek. "You've lost weight again, Lena, and it doesn't look good off you."

"If I ate here every night that would change." She squeezed Ellen's hand affectionately. Their mutual work on a fund raiser for the Getty Museum had cemented a friendly, if not close, rapport.

"How is it going—Madrid? That's not right, is it?" Ellen's height had always given her a regal air she could use to freeze almost anyone in mid-step, but when she smiled she became anyone's favorite grandmother.

"*Barcelona* is the name of the movie. And it goes well. I hope to have a dynamite cast listing." She briefly mentioned the two other projects under the

management of her two associates. “So Todd will be in Hong Kong for some time yet.”

“I loved hosting that investor’s party for *Royal Candide*. And we all did well from it, too.”

“The same could be true for this one—if I think so, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Splendid.” She kissed Selena on the cheek again. “Give us all another reason to go to the Oscars.”

With Ellen’s cheer lifting her spirits, it wasn’t so hard to find the energy for the drive to West Hollywood. The traffic had calmed considerably, though it still snarled in the logical places for a warm Friday night, so she avoided the malls and clusters of sports bars and theaters.

Just outside WeHo she pulled into Betty’s Diner. It was truly a neighborhood place where no one expected to meet up with anyone famous, though on occasion it happened. She grabbed the dress bag that Kim had hung in the back seat of the Prius, and headed into the bathroom, which she knew was Spartan, but clean.

The owner, familiar with Selena’s quick changes, didn’t seem to be working, and Selena caught an odd look from the young woman carrying plates to her

customers. No matter. She made a beeline to the restroom, unzipped the bag to find a silky, frilly electric blue cocktail dress, a quiet Donna Karan number no member of the paparazzi would comment on, for good or bad. The jewelry she had already put on matched—Kim had reliable taste in such things—and all that was left were suede pumps to complement the evening clutch. After refresher touches to her make-up and a quick comb through her hair she felt assured she would make no one's best or worst dressed list.

She pulled the waist of the dress tight by pinching several inches at the back. Ellen was right. She would go back on the protein shakes, as Kim had suggested last week. She'd put on a few pounds at the beginning of her two years with Jennifer. Happiness did that, apparently. Those pounds were gone, and she didn't like the expression on her face when she thought about Jennifer. She traced a crease around the corner of her mouth. It didn't look like a laugh line. That one belonged to Jennifer, all right.

On her way out of the diner she paused long enough at the counter to ask the obviously startled waitress for an iced tea to go. Given the way she fumbled snapping the cover on the tea, she hadn't been doing the job for long. Selena idly hoped the regulars would be back the next time she had a hankering for late night waffles. She paid for the tea, left the change and hurried back to the car.

There was no need to deal with valets for this party. She had a parking pass at the nearby Design Center—being a big donor had its benefits. It wasn't a far walk to The Joint, a two-story warehouse-style dance and hangout that had become popular for rock album release parties. As expected, the sidewalk was roped clear in front of the entrance, and both paparazzi and stargazers crowded against the ropes to see if anyone of interest arrived.

An older woman arriving alone, and that late, was never interesting, and Selena smiled to herself as only a few flashes went off. She paused to answer a familiar reporter's open-ended question about how she was feeling about her next project. She gave a standard pat answer and went inside to the overheated cacophony of the party.

The smell inside the club hit her first. The lingering pleasant memory of Ellen Spelman's dining room, redolent with basil and orange, was instantly blotted out. With the poor ventilation, the mix was too many bodies in too little space combined with too much cologne, all seething in a base of alcohol. Sometimes the smell was intoxicating, just right, and sometimes it was nauseating. Tonight it was in the middle, but heading toward nauseating as the air grew increasingly sticky.

She waved off the first cocktail waitress who spotted her without a glass in her hand. It was part stubbornness and part practicality. Drinks dripped, and

her dress was silk. Also, a watered down club soda on a night like this was \$20, including the tip. She had just written a check for a hundred club sodas and wouldn't miss the money, but it stuck in her craw to pay so much for so little. There was a difference between generosity and stupidity, and she hadn't amassed the money she had by not being careful how it was spent. During her growing up years, her own producer father's income had been boom and bust, and she remembered the lean times, vividly. She probably never would take money for granted. It was also a handy way to end a conversation, claiming the need to go and find a drink.

The food tables were no temptation. A photo with a drink in one's hand was one thing, but there was hardly a day when an unflattering photo of a celebrity with a fork halfway to her mouth or in mid-chew didn't get posted online with speculations about her weight gain. Camera phones all over the room were pointed at the buffet and she wanted no part of it.

The music was too loud to use voices to guide her through the club, but Levi Hodges was likely in a rear upper floor conversation zone, guarded by his entourage. The narrow stairs were lined with photographers from vetted news sources, all snapping away. Again, a woman of no intrinsic face-value fame, unaccompanied, was of little interest. She made her way around the knot of people at the top of the stairs, cutting through the hopefuls to the front of the informal queue. All were trying to make eye contact and

get a few words with any member of the band, though most would be looking to connect with Levi, just as she was.

She gave her name to one of the gatekeepers and waited. There was no reason to bluster or push through. Film and rock didn't crossover that much, and she wasn't sure she'd recognize the name of every mover and shaker in the music industry either. Levi had been given her name by his agent and she was expected.

She watched him cock his head to hear what was whispered, then he glanced at where she was patiently waiting. A moment later, he left his particular group and reached out to shake her hand as she joined him inside the circle of chairs and love seats. Flashes went off. They air kissed cheeks while the strobes kept popping.

"Over here," he signaled. "Sorry I couldn't get away this afternoon to see you. We head for Spain tomorrow for our first gig."

"I understand," she assured him. She joined him on one of the loveseats as it was rapidly vacated by a couple of groupies. "Your agent said you're free to thumbs up or down my idea."

"Yeah, Greg said if I was go, you'd make a decent deal. But I'm not a soundtrack kind of composer." Comfortable in a snug tee promoting the new tour, faded namesake jeans and worn leather boots, he stretched out his long, lanky legs.

“I have a composer for the soundtrack. What I need is an inspiration.” She leaned closer as the music changed to something even louder. “*Barcelona* is about a charming con man after his biggest score. While the movie is his story, and how he’s trying to con both his latest girlfriend and his wife into thinking he’s going to give them both what they want, as well as running his con, it’s also about Barcelona. One legend says the city was originally founded by Hercules. It’s very, very old. It’s also the capital city of the Catalonian government, and he’s trying to con people who are raising money to create a nation independent of Spain. But it’s also a new city, with a rebirth of artists and musicians—skateboarders love it. There is nothing like it on this continent.”

His eyes told her he was following, but she had only a few more seconds to grab him. “I need a Bruce Springsteen.”

One eyebrow lifted. His lopsided smile reminded her of Hyde Butler’s. She couldn’t recall an evening when she’d encountered quite so much male charm. His attractive, low voice took on a note of laughter. “That’s very flattering, but I don’t think anyone compares me to The Boss.”

“Your first tour gig is in Barcelona. I’m looking for a song with a statement about survival, because our hero is like the city—still standing in spite of history. Worn down, still proud, clinging to a sense of humor,

surprising, being reborn, not entirely safe, a culture within a culture. It's an unusual, wonderful place, Barcelona.”

“So how does that make me like Springsteen?”

“His song ‘Philadelphia’ set the tone for the whole movie. The movie had a wonderful score by the kind of composer I just can’t afford, but the one I have is solid and gifted. We need something to anchor his work. Find us a rhythm, a sound of a younger beat, beyond the surface. A feeling about the city to a foreigner, some words, then hear what he’s working on and see if it leads to a song.”

He rubbed long fingers over his stubbled jaw.

“Kind of thing that would play over the end credits?”

“Or the opening credits, like ‘Philadelphia’ did. That’s the director’s call.”

She watched him shake back his long blond hair as he thought it over. His band’s last two albums had gone platinum, with room to spare. Their concerts sold out on the day the tickets went on sale. He wanted for nothing, and had no reason to take on something else. Except, perhaps, the same reason Hyde Butler had—he was more than his current gigs allowed him to be.

“Tell you what. When we’re there, if something happens, it happens. I’ll let you know.”

“That’s all I hoped for,” she said. Well, a commitment would have been ideal, but the way his agent had left her to sink or swim on her own pitch had

made her realistic about her chances. She wanted a firm foothold into the 18-25 demographic that made up his fan base, and her intuition said he would put a spin on the sound that would elevate her composer's work.

There were more photographs as they parted, and she heard Levi telling a reporter that they might be working together on a film. No doubt tomorrow Levi would be the lead role or *somesuch*, reported faithfully in the blogosphere and then picked up by the print trades. By the time they cast the movie a street buzz could be flying, the kind that kept her future market looking for the release date.

And everybody wondered what a producer did. She skipped back down the center stairs and decided her evening had been well-spent enough to deserve a real drink after all. A glance across the sea of heads revealed a few faces she recognized. At the bottom of the stairs she glanced around for a waiter, then turned toward the bar.

In spite of the noise, her ears saved her. She heard *that* voice. The one she never wanted to hear again and had spent far too many hours hoping she would. Without hesitation she spun in place and headed for the door. Please, she prayed, let no one take a picture of Selena Ryan hightailing her ass out of a club the moment she realized Jennifer Lamont, her ex and supposedly wronged former talent, was in the place.

Her smile felt brittle, as if her face was going to

splinter any moment. She sketched a flirtatious wave toward a cluster of faces, as if she saw someone she knew, was waylaid for several seconds to kiss cheeks with a woman she recognized only as a best supporting actress nominee from years past, and was safely out the door. She did not want to go back and find out if Jennifer was with someone new, and wasn't the least bit curious whether she'd switched back to women again. She counted her steady steps all the way to the car, working backward through her To Do list, through the day, through all the conversations, decisions, what she'd eaten for lunch. Detail by detail, she buried her anger under layers of work until Jennifer Lamont didn't exist anymore. She had never loved her, never trusted her, and had never felt all four inches of Jennifer Lamont's stiletto heels buried in her back.

After a numb return drive to Beverly Hills, she punched in her personal code at her gate, and drove forward once the old wrought iron had parted. Like many of its neighbors, the high fence had a high-tech security system along the top and at each access. As the gate clanged shut behind her she felt the need to be Selena Ryan slip away. Now she got to be tired and hungry. She'd gotten home without crying and without ranting herself so wide awake she wouldn't sleep for

hours.

Her headlights swept over the first story of the house and she gave it her entire attention. The old-style Spanish showplace had been built by a 1920's studio executive, but was small by today's standards. Its real beauty was an acre of grounds crusted with orange trees. Her production offices used seven of the eight bedrooms, and the common areas met many needs for entertaining and small media events. The centerpiece great room had been built for film screenings and she still used it for that, albeit with completely modernized equipment. She loved where she lived and where she worked, and that it was paid for. No one could ever take it away from her and she should count her blessings.

She circled around to the back, pulling the car into the garage. She left it unlocked so Kim could easily retrieve the clothing bag, netbook and paperwork in the morning. She gathered up her personal belongings, making sure she had her iPhone. God, she was tired, and now she felt it.

The pool was inviting in the moonlight, but she wasn't tempted. She walked its perimeter to the pool house where she gratefully unlocked the door and stepped into the cool interior. As the door locked behind her she let everything she was carrying slip from her hands to the wicker chair just inside the door. In a few steps she had kicked off the suede pumps and peeled the dress off as well. In the morning she'd take it

back to Kim for cleaning and eventual return to her “bedroom” in the main house. It was a room she never slept in.

Instead, she had the pool house, and it was all hers. Expanded to three times its original size, the low ceiling, open transoms and patio flagstones combined to keep it cool in the summer. A press of a button heated the floor, which made it quickly cozy if temperatures turned cold on days she was home. Careful attention to the space had let her add all the amenities she might need. What she loved best about it was that no one else, not even a cleaning service, came inside on a regular basis. It was her space, and when she was in it the only access to her was her phone; not one member of her staff would ever disturb her for any reason. Once her phone was off, she was off the grid, even if only for a few hours a night.

Nobody knew that sometimes she left her clothes on the floor, and didn't do the dishes for days. Nobody to comment on the overstuffed divan where coffee stains, a clutter of pencils and bound scripts, and the indented cushions made it clear where one person did a lot of reading. The last person aside from her to be inside had been a plumber, and before that, Jennifer. There was no one to gossip that Selena Ryan sang in the shower and swore when she did her morning yoga routine. Nobody to report that maybe her favorite coffee wasn't holistically organic fair trade, and that she had a penchant for Snickers bars. Right now, there was

no one to see her hands shaking and the sheer effort it was still taking not to relive every bitter moment with Jennifer, especially the one when she'd known it was hopeless. She'd given Jennifer all that she could, and in the end, it wasn't enough. Because by then Jennifer wanted something else. Jennifer would always want something else, and more of it.

She quickly showered, shampooing out the smell of the club. Her hair might be a dull brown, but at least it gave her no trouble. A cursory slather of moisturizer on her face was all she could manage before she pulled back the sort, light blue covers and climbed into bed. She switched on the foot warmer and pulled a body pillow close, molding it to her arms and hips. Drowsiness washed over her as the sheets warmed to her body. Eyes closed, she put everything out of her mind. Right now her job was to sleep so she could tackle another day tomorrow.

Warm. Home. A last fumble with the alarm clock to make sure it was on. Everything in its place. Safe. Nothing, she felt nothing. Nothing missing, nothing wanted...

BLOGTASTIC!

We were right, boys and girls! Just last night we said that handsome dude Hyde Butler and shocker rocker Levi Hodges were being stalked by indie girl about town Selena Ryan. Pics below! She bagged them both. Production is very hush hush. Maybe Brokeback Ballad? We wish we had a pic of Serene Selena and ex Jennifer Lamont at the same party last night! Sapphic reconciliation? Can we watch?

Meanwhile, H.B. had quite the birthday party. After the 90210 9-1-1 the beautiful people fled the scene. Check out this cutie, carrying off a bottle of A+ agave as her souvenir. From what we heard, we should check the delivery rooms in nine months. Will there be baby Hydes all in a row?

Excerpt from STEPPING STONE



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