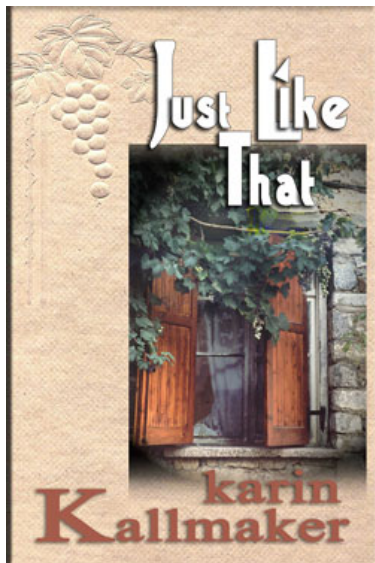

Excerpt from JUST LIKE THAT



JUST LIKE THAT IS A
CONTEMPORARY
LESBIAN ROMANCE BY
KARIN KALLMAKER.

INSPIRED BY JANE
AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND
PREJUDICE.

PRINT AND EXCLUSIVE
EBOOK FROM:



KARIN'S BOOKS AT BELLA:

[PAPERBACK](#)
[EBOOK](#)

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL
Uncorrected proof

CHAPTER ONE

“Everybody knows that a single woman with good money is in want of a wife.” Jane waded out of the pond and stood dripping on the old blanket they’d tossed over the soft, early spring grass.

The outrageous statement succeeded in banishing Syrah’s drowsiness. “You? Wife material?”

Jane shook water out of her hair. “I figure if a woman’s making steady green and she’s in her forties, never been engaged, maybe even still a virgin, then she needs a wife.”

“You mean she needs you.” Syrah plucked a grape from the fist-sized cluster on the blanket next to her.

“Same thing. Are those good?” Jane peered dubiously at the bright green fruit, then picked one for

herself.

Syrah bit the bottom from the grape she'd chosen and managed to keep a smile on her face. "I think so."

Ever trusting, Jane popped the grape into her mouth. Syrah allowed the laugh she'd been holding back to escape her lips, then clapped her hands to her throat, trying to soothe her own outraged glands.

"You lying sack of potting soil—it's sour!" Jane made a threatening gesture with her arm that Syrah laughingly avoided.

"Yes, I know. And it's good, don't you think?"

"You're trying to poison me. Gods-on-the-vine, that's painful."

Syrah passed over her water bottle to make amends for the lack of warning. "It's too early for ripe. You of all people should know that. Take a little sip and then let it roll around in your mouth. Just think about it. That grape and thousands like it, this fall, next year, ten years from now, will taste like today, this sky, the breeze, those soft clouds, the hint of fog maybe tonight." Tipping her head back, Syrah closed her eyes to the rolling vista of checkerboard greens as she savored the layers of flavors still assaulting her taste buds. "These grapes will be our memories in a bottle."

"Like a painting, but drinkable." Jane passed back the water bottle, then shimmied into her boxers. "I'm afraid I've got more than wine on my mind."

Jane tended to put her clothes on before she was

dry, and today was no exception. As she watched her friend try to wrangle her tank top down her still wet torso, Syrah had no trouble recalling a hundred similar afternoons. A swim in the pond, a bask in the sun, snacks purloined from Bennett's kitchen—a beautiful May lunch hour was worthy of nothing less. Syrah arched her shoulders into the sun. A few minutes more and she'd get dressed, too. "Is there more than wine to life?"

"Yes. A love life. A hot woman with a warm body and an inventive spirit. That's what's on my mind. I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of being your date at the Spring Fling."

Syrah's eyes flew open. "You mean you don't want to go with me this year?"

Jane flopped down on the blanket, her shirt stuck to her back. "Well, yeah, I do, now that you're back for good. It sucked going alone. I hope you had fun in Europe, because I was bored out of my mind without you around."

"But enough to go thinking of yourself as somebody's wife? What's gotten into you?"

"The old Netherfield place finally sold, and I've heard rumors about the woman who bought it."

"Rumors fly fast around here." A breeze tickled over her nearly dry breasts and Syrah rolled over to reach for her tank top. "She could be straight."

"No. Definitely a dyke. And femme, so, hey, I'm

thinking she needs a wife like me. I've got all the qualifications. I can fix stuff, dance, like to talk and think sex is really fun. My only strike is the money thing."

"You're an artist. You get to have no money. I'm not an artist and I've got no money either."

"You have a vineyard. A very large, old vineyard."

"Belongs to my father."

"And will be yours one day."

"A long way in the future, I hope." Syrah couldn't help the flicker of concern she felt thinking about her father. He wasn't as physically vigorous as he had been before her sojourn in Europe. "Meanwhile, gas money can break the bank."

"Good paint costs more than gas." Jane idly shooed away a buzzing bee.

"Besides, you won't be the only one checking out the new woman in town, you know. Move into this neighborhood and everybody thinks they automatically own you." Syrah didn't mean to sound bitter. She'd not been so popular when she'd left. But the four years in Europe had somehow reactivated her as dating material, and the fickleness irked her. She was the same woman now as she had been then.

"It wasn't that way in France?"

"Not really." Syrah yanked her tank top over her head and shoved her dark, not-quite-dry curls over her shoulder.

“From your e-mails I gather that you had a line out your door.”

“For fun, yeah. I don’t know what’s with California since I left. There is a positive mania to get married. I don’t just mean the piece of paper. I thought the drive to pair up was bad before I left. Hell, it was one of the reasons I left. I don’t need a wife and I don’t want to be anybody’s wife, either.”

“And all those fun French girls didn’t want to settle down?”

“They were fun and that was the whole point. But I’m home now.”

Jane was quiet for a moment and Syrah appreciated the restraint. There was no point in rehashing the scorching European summer that had decimated last year’s wine harvest and left this year’s in doubt, or the undeniable reality that Ardani Vineyards needed another Ardani on the premises. Her father could still tell which hillside had birthed any given grape, but his energy for supervising crews and maintenance had definitely waned.

She drew on her panties and shorts, squinting into the hot sun that danced along her skin. The pleasure in it was so sharp that for a moment she could not breathe. She had thought she’d love Europe, the independence especially. She certainly enjoyed herself, and enjoyed a small amount of respect from the vintners she worked for from season to season. But she had pined for the Napa Valley sun and the blazing blue sky. Since her

return to the States in December she had waited through the long, wet winter for the glorious spring to arrive. No matter the reason she had come home, this was home. She wasn't going anywhere else again.

"I think," Jane finally said, "that I am tired of pleasing myself."

Syrah glanced up surprise. "But you've always prided yourself on pleasing the ladies."

"That's not what I mean." Jane stretched her long neck and closed her eyes. "So I have a good time one night with some lovely Chiquita up for the weekend from San Francisco. She goes home happy and I've certainly had a blast. Dinner and breakfast have been had and it makes me think about lunch."

"Lunch?" Syrah sat up to slip on her sandals, letting her hair hide her smile.

"Don't laugh." Jane was frowning into the sun. "Maybe it's hormones, maybe it's that, like you, I'm finally looking back on thirty. But I don't know. I feel like I want to make somebody's entire day wonderful. Not just dinner, bed and breakfast. I want twenty-four-seven. To mean something to somebody all the time."

"Just because some woman has moved into the area doesn't mean she's your type. What if she's got no brain? No style? What if she doesn't get Jane the Artista?"

"Some artist." Jane shrugged and Syrah was surprised at the downward turn Jane's mouth had taken.

“An artist,” she repeated. “You create. You have flair and substance. French women would spread you on a cracker and gobble you up.”

“I don’t want to be someone’s trophy. I want...oh, hell, I don’t know what I want. I know what I don’t want. I don’t want another summer of lunches by myself.”

Syrah couldn’t think of a response that made sense of Jane’s abrupt abandonment of the very life she’d been striving to perfect since high school. What had happened to the cocky butch who had once declared, “Happiness is putting her to sleep so you can wake her up”?

She found the keys to the truck in her pocket and gathered the grapes and bottled water. “It’s got to be nearly one.”

Jane grunted and scrambled to her feet. “Drop me at the job site?”

“Sure. Want to have a burger or something tonight?”

“Okay.”

Syrah nearly said that she’d gotten more enthusiasm from Hound the last time she’d said “burger” to him, but she resisted. She and Jane had been friends too long for a temporary fixation with romance to interfere. “I’ll pick you up after the tasting room closes. I’m pouring until six.”

She coasted the truck down the incline from the

pond, braking carefully to keep dust from billowing in their wake. Jane opened the gates as they made their way to the shady back road. The tires finally crossed onto packed dirt and she punched on the CD player as they increased speed to the public road that would get them to Jane's current job site. With the windows rolled down and Stevie Nicks bawling a witchy song they might have still been in high school.

The green-smudged hills and canopies of trees had not changed since then. Neat rows of vines lined both sides of the winding road. Rieslings in the sun, Syrahs in the lee of a curving hill, Pinots tucked into the shade—none of it had changed. The annual cycle of budbreak, leaves and harvest were only temporary. What was underneath—the vines—were as permanent in her mind as the soil itself.

She watched Jane heft a roll of irrigation hose after greeting her boss, then tromp into the atrium of a new office building. Syrah didn't care for the impersonal glass-and-mirrors architecture, but at least they were putting in a lot of greenery, keeping Jane employed for that much more of the spring. The job would end and her friend would haul out her paints and go back to her first love. That was what Jane had done for the baker's dozen of summers since high school. She hadn't changed, Syrah told herself. Not Jane. Not anything.

"I'm back," Syrah called out as she dropped her keys into the bowl next to the back door. Hound

promptly greeted her with snuffles all around her knees, fanned her briefly with his tail, then he gracefully reclaimed his bed, curiosity assuaged.

There was no human response, however, and a quick check of the tasting room confirmed that it was empty. She headed around to the patio overlooking the sunny hillside that curved down to the road. With a grin, she beheld her father in mid-snore. The glider had always been his favorite place for a quick doze.

Setting the grapes down on the seat next to him, she tiptoed back to the tasting room to turn the door sign to Open. In a few weeks, early in June, they'd be open all day. A noon dip in the pond would be only a memory until September.

She tidied the bar, frowned over the tasting listing—why were they still offering the best reserve? Its reputation was growing and she thought it was time to put it away. A bang from the kitchen announced Bennett's arrival so she went in search of a snack. Sour grapes and a few crackers hadn't dented her hunger.

"You'll never guess the news I heard." Bennett set out a container of her homemade tapenade just as Syrah opened a box of sesame crackers. "News that you should be overjoyed with, I might add."

Syrah dug up some of the chopped olives and sighed happily as she savored the delicious blend of garlic and pesto. "Netherfield has been bought."

"How did you know?"

“Jane told me.”

“Jane.” Bennett’s eyebrows joined into a single line. She slapped Syrah’s hand away from the tapenade. “Get a plate. Honestly, all the years I’ve tried to teach you some kind of manners. Jane doesn’t know anything about it. I’ve been asking around and the new owner is apparently some businesswoman with money—retiring in her forties, a lady of leisure. Get a napkin.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“She’s very pretty, everyone says, and agreeable and has already offered to host a Wine for March of Dimes get-together once the house is habitable again. There are already people there working on it.”

“Jane should offer her services for landscape design. She’s good enough to do it on her own. It’s that artistic flare she has.”

Bennett finished with the last of the groceries and rinsed her hands. Another thing that had not changed, Syrah mused. Bennett’s hands were as strong and gnarled as they had always been. Those hands had mesmerized Syrah as a girl, watching their hard strength turn out lighter-than-air pie crusts and biscuits. “You are the most eligible woman in the area and this very afternoon you need to go over to Netherfield and see about meeting the new owner.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Don’t you even want to know her name?”
Bennett gave Syrah the look that suggested Syrah must

be ill not to have demanded that piece of information at the outset.

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Tomatoes squished between Bennett’s fingers, pulp and seeds falling into a bowl while the beautifully ripe flesh headed for the cookpot. “Perhaps I won’t, if you’re being snippy. You are very tiresome sometimes. All I want is to see you happy and settled.”

“Bennett, you’ve never been settled and I think you’ve been happy.”

“That’s me, not you. I never was the settling kind.” She rinsed her hands again with an air of finality.

“Maybe I’m not either.”

Bennett snapped the lid on the tapenade shut. “I knew your mother, and you are just like her. Some people are meant to go around in pairs, and Jane Lucas should have nothing to say to a woman like Missy Bingley.”

“Why not? A woman named Missy seems exactly like Jane’s type.”

Drawers were being opened and examined with increasing agitation. “I don’t know why you persist in being so obtuse. Jane is a very nice girl but she’s eccentric.”

“You mean she works with her hands.”

“If you insist, yes. I know she calls those paintings art, but it might as well be mud she’s slapping onto the canvas. Cheaper than all that wasted paint. She is hardly

suitable as a partner for someone like Missy Bingley, who I'm told is extremely cultured and affable.”

Syrah knew better than to argue. Bennett had lived all her life in the valley and had spent the majority of it ruling the Ardani household with her iron fist. Not for the first time Syrah marveled at the traditionalist values that kept Bennett going to mass three times a week but somehow blended with her staunch loyalty toward all things Ardani. She'd play matchmaker between two lesbians and go to confession for having brought about such an event, then sleep like a baby.

Syrah was rescued from further comment by her father's tread outside the kitchen door. He held the bunch of grapes Syrah had left for him in one hand and looked both sleepy and pleased at the same time.

“What did you think?” He hoisted the bunch at Syrah.

“They'll be some of the best Gewürz' we've had in a while.”

He grinned. “You got that right. Not a lot to mellow them yet, but the early rain brought the peach blossoms on early and the overtones will be there.”

Bennett bustled between them. “Netherfield has been bought, finally, and Syrah refuses to go and meet the woman. A very wealthy woman, I must say, and an asset to the community.” Bennett relieved Syrah's father of the grapes, plopped them into a bowl and hurried out to the tasting room to leave them on the bar. The swinging door between kitchen and tasting

room allowed Bennett's continuing remarks to arrive in bursts. "You would think...can't be single forever...Jane Lucas indeed...suitable and eligible...never see thirty again..."

Syrah watched her father pat his pockets. As usual, his glasses were in his breast pocket, which he checked last. "There was a letter in the post last week that I didn't understand. Found it this morning and thought I should ask you." He put the glasses on his nose and repeated the patting process until a folded envelope was discovered in his back pants pocket. He unfolded the enclosed letter and reviewed it with raised eyebrows before handing it to her.

"Mr. Anthony Ardani, Chairman of the Board.' Huh?" Syrah gave her father a puzzled look. Chairman of the Board? "We regret that your lack of response to pressing concerns of Ardani Vineyards, Incorporated, creditors has required the retention of a consultant appointed by the court to examine and recommend a course of action for the resolution of shareholder concerns." She scanned the rest of the letter, growing increasingly confused and dismayed. "Dad? When did we become a corporation?"

He shrugged. "A few years ago. While you were away. It seemed like a good idea. They all invested money and then we could borrow to renovate the bottling and replace the large barrels. I bought the Tarpay fields they auctioned, too. Didn't cost me a dime."

“But, Dad...”

“Everything will be okay, pumpkin.”

“But, Dad, these people who signed the letter, they own more of Ardani than you do. They’ve hired someone to tell us how to run our business and if we don’t do what this consultant person says—” She glanced down at the final line in horror. “Creditors may choose to call their loans due, resulting in the forced sale of assets sufficient to repay the debts.”

“That’s the part I don’t understand.” He regarded her with faint worry clouding his brow.

“Our land, the winery, that’s what they mean by assets, Dad.”

“But I didn’t sell those to anyone else.”

“You gave away shares.”

“Yes, but I didn’t sell anything.”

Syrah closed her eyes. “They became the same thing when you incorporated.” With a rising feeling of dread, she added, “You’re the smallest shareholder, it says here.”

“But I’m Chairman of the Board.”

“Oh, Dad...” She sank into a chair at the kitchen table.

“There’s two cars pulling in,” Bennett announced as she re-entered the kitchen. “One’s a Mercedes.”

“I’ll pour,” her father offered.

Syrah nodded numbly. She read the letter again and tried to take in the situation. She didn’t know much

about corporations, but it seemed like very bad news when a judge was involved in making decisions about a business's future. The voices from the tasting room washed over her, the familiar rise and fall not providing any comfort. Finally she quit the kitchen for her father's office and sat down at his desk with a sick feeling in her stomach.

He'd refused all help she'd offered with business details when she'd arrived home last December. Instead, they spent the winter examining the winery equipment while he imparted long lectures about the mix and barreling, as well as the health of the slowly evolving vines. Business was booming, he'd explained, and it certainly seemed like that was so, based on the shipping she supervised, and it had recently become legal to ship wine to individuals across state lines. Crews for planting, culling and weeding were running smoothly and on schedule. The excess from Tarpay Chablis grapes were already assigned to the big mass-market winery. It was destined to be the best season Ardani Vineyards had ever had.

She lifted the most recent water bill and was confronted by a legal-looking document titled, "Receivership Update."

It was too much to take in. She glanced out the window at the rolling greens and soft golds of the fields she'd known all her life. This vineyard had been owned by Ardanis for more than one hundred years. The vines didn't belong to a bunch of banks and businessmen in

New York.

She shuffled papers, trying to locate anything helpful. The fax machine whirred on and off again and she retrieved an order from an upscale market in Napa. In the tray under the new arrival were papers that had been faxed in this morning.

They announced that somebody named Toni Blanchard would be calling to make arrangements for a site visit. The phone chose that moment to ring and Syrah could only stare at it in horror. She let it switch to voice mail as she went in search of her father.

The customers, bearing bags sagging enough to contain at least three bottles each, were heading out the door.

She proffered the papers and waited while her father again located his glasses.

“Who is this woman? The name is familiar.” He glanced at Syrah. “A woman, at least, pumpkin.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that helping us out.”

“Oh, I remember.” He gave her a relieved smile. “A feature in Inc. a couple of years ago, the issue we were featured in. This is very good news—this is Bill Blanchard’s daughter. I probably still have the article.”

“Bill Blanchard?”

“An old, old friend. We went to Oregon together. He decided to become a lawyer and now he’s a judge.”

Knowing her father’s packrat propensity, Syrah

wasn't surprised when he produced the magazine. He couldn't find the tax returns from last year if he had two weeks to look, but a magazine that had mentioned their wine three years ago he could locate in two minutes.

Page forty-nine featured a breathtaking photograph of the vineyards from the tasting room and a short article about Ardani wines. Just opposite was one of the magazine's profiles. The short article detailed the rising star of Toni Blanchard, corporate turnaround specialist.

Her father peeled away the yellow sticky note that had served as a bookmark, revealing the photograph underneath. "She looks like a nice woman."

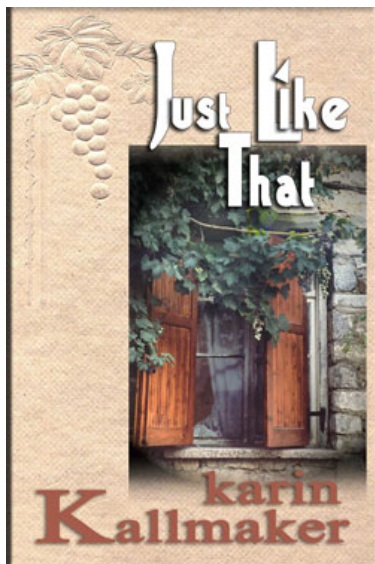
Dark hair twisted at the neck and East Coast stylish, Toni Blanchard gazed out from the page with an expression Syrah could only describe as haughty. If the toes on her shoes had been any longer, they'd have curled like some court jester's. Everything about her dripped wealth and superiority. "She's never set foot on anything but concrete," Syrah said.

"She's smart and she'll be on our side. Bill will do us right—decent fellow, very decent. I'll give him a call, how about that?"

The phone rang and Syrah again let it go to voice mail. She could imagine the affected voice that went with the cold expression on Toni Blanchard's face, and she had no desire to hear it right now. She wasn't reassured in the least by her own father's forty-year-old college friendship with this woman's father, not at all.

Feeling as if she'd eaten lead, she dragged herself back to the office and began sorting papers in earnest. The situation couldn't be as bleak as it seemed.

Excerpt from **JUST LIKE THAT**



JUST LIKE THAT IS A
CONTEMPORARY
LESBIAN ROMANCE BY
KARIN KALLMAKER.

INSPIRED BY JANE
AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND
PREJUDICE*.

PRINT AND EXCLUSIVE
EBOOK FROM:



KARIN'S BOOKS AT BELLA:

[PAPERBACK](#)

[EBOOK](#)

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL
