

CHRISTINE POPE

A Little Piece of
Heaven



Just Married





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A Little Piece of Heaven

Christine Pope



PPB

“Destination weddings,” Leslie remarked sourly. She looked out the window, where low hills covered with grape vines gleamed golden in the autumn sun. “Where’d this Napa kick come from, anyway? Pieter’s backyard wasn’t big enough for this shindig?”

“It would’ve been a destination wedding for my family even if we’d held it in L.A.,” I replied, trying to ignore the hairpin the hairdresser had just driven into my skull. At the rate she was going, I’d probably require a pair of pliers to pull out all the bobby pins. Arianna, the stylist, had come highly recommended, but apparently she thought my updo needed to survive gale-force winds instead of the mildest of early October afternoons.

“Well, okay.” Leslie stepped away from the window and brushed at the skirt of her dress. I waited for yet another comment on how much she hated pink—even though my bridesmaids’ dresses were a smoky, understated rose color—but it never came. Instead she crossed her arms and said, “You’re being awfully calm.”

“Would you rather have me turn into Bridezilla?” I asked, and winced as Arianna stabbed yet another anchoring bobby pin into the bun at the back of my head.

“Guess not.”

Actually, I did feel a few butterflies fluttering around somewhere in my midsection, but I knew they were mostly from excitement, not nerves. In less than two hours I’d be married to Pieter. It had all happened so fast that sometimes I thought I must be dreaming, that this couldn’t be happening to plain old Katherine Wheeler from Billings, Montana.

After I’d announced my engagement to my family and the few friends I still had marginal contact with, I’d received a phone call from my Uncle Bret. He’d offered his congratulations, then said, “You’re not marrying him because of his money, are you?”

“God, no,” I’d replied, in tones of horror that must have convinced him I was telling the simple truth. At any rate, the subject had never come up again.

From the outside, maybe that’s how it looked. But Pieter and I knew how much we loved each other, and we didn’t much care what people thought. My mother was ecstatic, my father happy for me if a little more measured in his response to the whole situation. And my brother Alex knew how hard I had to fight for Pieter, so of course he’d asked no such questions. My sister was just glad the wedding had happened quickly enough that she could still be one of my attendants. She was about five months along at this point, so her baby bump was noticeable but not big enough to prevent her from wearing the empire-waisted, surplice-bodice gowns I’d chosen for my bridesmaids.

They numbered just Ellen and Leslie; I’d never seen the point of dragging every friend within a hundred-mile radius into a wedding party. Anyway, I hadn’t been very good about keeping in touch with my college friends after I’d moved to Los Angeles, and Leslie was the only real female friend I’d made there.

Since I knew most of her current grouchiness stemmed from the fact that she and her boyfriend Joe had had a blowout fight right before she was due to come up to Napa for the wedding, I decided to ignore it. Their regular pattern was to fight and break up and then get back together again every couple of months, but as usual, Joe had spectacularly bad timing. From a few choice comments Leslie had dropped over the past few days, I got the feeling there

might not be a reconciliation this time around. I knew I wouldn't shed any tears if that's how things ended up shaking out. She could do a lot better.

"Done!" Arianna announced and stepped away from me so I could survey myself in the mirror.

I'd decided against a veil, and instead had gardenias tucked into the complicated knot she'd composed at the back of my head. The wedding was fairly small as such things went, just fifty guests. Because we weren't having a big ceremony, I hadn't seen the point of an elaborate ball gown-style dress and matching veil. My white silk gown was simple in shape but had exquisite imported lace and the sort of detail that worked better in an intimate setting than in a big church.

"You look beautiful," Leslie said, and this time there wasn't anything grudging in her tone.

"So do you." It was true; she might not like the color of the her gown, but it looked gorgeous against her olive skin, and Arianna had somehow managed to transform her usually unruly layered hair into sleek waves.

She shrugged. "Too bad there's no one here to appreciate it."

I guessed she didn't want to hear any false reassurances, so instead I just gave her hand a little squeeze. She managed a half-hearted smile and then said, "Okay, let's go do this thing."

~* * *~

How Pieter had found the Santa della Oro winery in the first place, I had no idea, but once he'd showed me the images on its website, I'd fallen instantly in love. Tucked away into a fold of the Napa Valley's rolling hills, the winery had a large eight-bedroom house that functioned as both a bed and breakfast and event site, while the actual wine-making took place in a converted barn and its accompanying cellar. At this time of year, the hills were touched with the same gold from which the winery took its name, the vines just beginning to turn red with the first frosts of autumn.

Of course there wasn't room at the winery for all of our guests, so most of the people outside the bridal party were staying at other hotels in the area. My brother could have driven in from Berkeley, but he figured it was better to stay at the winery with the rest of us. If nothing else, his staying there gave our mother a little more time to get used to Joyce, his fiancée.

Truth be told, my mother was so elated about my wedding that she barely seemed to bat an eyelash over the fact that Joyce was Chinese. How long that euphoria would last, I had no idea, but for the time being I was just happy to know there wouldn't be any drama over the whole Alex/Joyce situation.

Although Pieter had lived in Los Angeles for more than ten years and seemed to have a fairly large network of acquaintances if not friends, he'd informed me that his best man would be flying in from Amsterdam. "Wilhelm and I have known each other since our time at university," he said. "I can think of no one else I'd rather have here."

My curiosity had been piqued, since I hadn't met any of Pieter's European associates, but as of the morning of the wedding, Wilhelm still hadn't appeared. His connecting flight had been delayed, but he assured Pieter via a quick call from the airport that he would be in Napa in time for the four o'clock ceremony.

Now, though, I waited with Leslie and my sister in the sun room we were using as a staging area, and tried not to let the flutters of nervousness in my stomach turn to outright anxiety. The clock on a side table told me that it was a quarter to four, and still no sign of Wilhelm.

"Why didn't he leave a day earlier?" my sister asked, after fussing with the drape of the skirt over her stomach for the umpteenth time.

"He was supposed to," I replied. Somehow I kept my tone calm. "But he told Pieter he had business come up that he had to take care of, and so he caught the first flight out the next morning."

At that moment Jessica, the wedding planner, stuck her head in the room. The Bluetooth headset fixed over one ear gave her a cyborg appearance at odds with her impeccable blush-colored suit. "Everyone ready?"

"Well, we are," Leslie said pointedly.

Apparently unruffled, Jessica said, "I know there's an issue with the best man." She looked away from Leslie and over at me. "Do you mind waiting a bit more? Say until fifteen after?"

I didn't hesitate. It was such a short amount of time; I wouldn't forgive myself if I insisted on starting right on the hour, only to have Wilhelm show up ten or fifteen minutes late. "No." I paused, then added, "But if he's still not here by four-fifteen, maybe you should ask Alex if he can fill in."

"Already taken care of. Just hang tight." And she withdrew her head and disappeared.

Despite myself, I could feel a knot of tension beginning to form at the base of my neck. Or maybe it was the weight of all my hair, gathered up into that Gordian knot at the back of my head. At any rate, my sunny feelings from earlier in the day were rapidly starting to evaporate. I grabbed the glass of water Jessica had brought for me earlier and took a gulp.

"I've got something better than that," Leslie said, and produced a champagne bottle from behind her back.

My sister raised a disapproving eyebrow. "Where did you get that?"

"I've been making friends with the caterer."

Ellen rolled her eyes, and I stifled a laugh. So what if the champagne had been intended for the reception? Right now a glass might be just what I needed.

"Bust me out some of that Perrier-Jouet," I told Leslie, and she grinned and began to peel away the foil. Then she aimed it at a corner of the room where there were built-in window seats heaped with lots of cushions. The cork wouldn't do much damage if it hit anywhere in that spot.

But Leslie did such a good job that the cork merely eased its way out of the bottle and fell to the cotton rug on the floor. We didn't have any champagne flutes, but I poured the rest of my water into a potted plant so Leslie and I could share the glass.

After two or three sips, I began to feel a little better. Everything would work out. Even if Wilhelm didn't make it, my brother could stand in as best man, and the rest of the day would go off without a hitch. Still, I wished I could have had Pieter with me while we waited for the ceremony to begin. Stupid tradition, really. I didn't much see the point to keeping the two of us apart the day of the wedding when we'd already been shacking up in our suite here at the winery. True, I had my own room so I could get ready this morning in private, but right now I just wanted Pieter with me so we could share champagne and wonder together what might have happened to Wilhelm.

Also, it might have merely been wedding jitters, but Pieter had been acting a little furtive ever since we arrived at Santa della Oro. True, the whole situation had been sort of stressful because of the extremely short time frame in which we put the wedding together, but somehow I couldn't help wondering if it was more than that. If he were having second thoughts, he would have said something.

Wouldn't he?

I heard a hubbub of voices out in the hall, and then Jessica came hurrying in. "Wilhelm's here! We're going to start in five." She shot a questioning glance at the open bottle of champagne we'd left sitting on a side table, but didn't say anything before she disappeared back out into the hall. I got the feeling I wasn't the first bride to calm her nerves with a bit of the bubbly.

"Drink up, me hearties," Leslie quipped and took a huge swallow of champagne. "The rest is yours."

She handed the champagne to me, and I drank a somewhat more modest amount before setting the glass down on a side table. Good thing, too, because a few seconds later Max, Pieter's assistant who was standing in as groomsman, and a tall stranger entered the room.

I'd never seen any photos of Wilhelm and had always assumed he'd be as fair as Pieter, but this man had brown hair and hazel eyes. But since he was wearing a charcoal gray suit and burgundy tie, same as Max, I guessed the strange man must be our missing best man.

He came straight toward me and said, "A thousand apologies. Delays at the airport, delays at the rental car agency—"

"It's no problem," I replied. "We're just glad you made it." I almost added, *And I'm Katherine, by the way*, but I figured the wedding gown had probably tipped him off as to my identity.

Jessica surged back in, this time carrying my bouquet and with my father in tow. "Places, people!"

Everyone lined up in proper order, Max next to my sister Ellen, Wilhelm beside Leslie. She threw a quick glance over her right shoulder at me and mouthed, *Oh, my God!* Then she gave an appreciative eye roll in Wilhelm's direction before facing forward once again.

I fought to keep from chuckling, and I felt rather than saw my father shake his head. Wilhelm was definitely a good-looking man, but he was no Pieter. But if he provided some eye candy to distract Leslie from her current relationship woes, all the better.

The sound of Pachelbel's *Canon* drifted down the hallway, and Jessica nodded at Max and Ellen. They exited the sun room, and I smiled a little at the image of Max, the out and proud

of it gay man, escorting such an obviously pregnant woman down the aisle. Wilhelm held his arm out to Leslie, and she took it right before they disappeared down the hallway as well.

Finally, it was my father's and my turn. Jessica handed the bouquet to me and smiled. "It's your moment," she said, before stepping out of the way so I could walk through the door and into my future.

A burgundy runner covered the wooden floor and continued on into the courtyard where the ceremony would take place. We followed it into the warm afternoon air, and past the watching ranks of friends and family.

They were all a blur; the only face I saw clearly was Pieter's as he waited for me in the open space beyond our guests. He didn't show any sign of cold feet—if he'd wanted to put the brakes on things, it was a little late for that now. His preoccupation must have had nothing to do with the wedding. A business deal, maybe? With Pieter it wasn't always easy to tell.

I told myself I needed to stop thinking about what might or might not be happening with Pieter's business. This was the most important day of my life, after all. I lifted my chin and looked across the space between us to where he stood. A canopy of leaves and grapevines shielded him from the sun, but his blue eyes shone clearly even in the shade.

The minister and my father traded the ritual words, and then he went to take his place next to my mother. I advanced a few steps until I stood next to Pieter. Through the words that followed, the solemn repetition of a rite so familiar and yet so utterly strange when you're the one standing in front of everyone and taking those vows, his gaze never left me. It wasn't until the minister said, "You may now kiss the bride," that the contact was broken. Not that I minded, because Pieter's mouth came down on mine, and the touch of his lips was as new and as miraculous as the first time we had kissed.

It still didn't seem quite real that the man who accompanied me back down the aisle was my husband, or that the new platinum band gleaming on his ring finger meant he had tied himself to me forever. We had only a few precious seconds to ourselves, seconds in which we shared another of those soul-shattering kisses, before Jessica and the photographer descended, and we were sucked into all the hubbub of photos and congratulations.

Eventually, though, the almost magically efficient catering staff cleared away the seats and set up the tables for dinner while the rest of us crowded the winery's dining room and drank cocktails and snacked on an alarming number of canapés. How all this happened so seamlessly, I really didn't know, but I suppose that's why Pieter hired Jessica in the first place. Really, the whole wedding had come together in record time; I gave Pieter some vague idea of what I might like for the reception, and somehow he and Jessica translated my gauzy imaginings into the wine-country fairyland that awaited us when we all trooped back out to the courtyard.

The head table had been placed under the canopy, which now glowed with little white fairy lights. More grapevine garlands decorated the high stone walls, and arrangements of twined branches hung with grape leaves and glass candle holders set off each table. I heard low murmurs of admiration as people took their seats. I gave Pieter's hand a quick squeeze in thanks. He smiled down at me.

"You like it?"

"Like it?" I shook my head. "I love it. I love this whole place—it's just like heaven."

His smile deepened. “I’m glad...more glad than you could know. I did want this day to be perfect.”

“It is.”

We took our places at the head table with the rest of the wedding party. I grinned a little as I saw Leslie deep in conversation with Wilhelm; she gesticulated with her martini glass and said, “A Bugatti Veyron? Really?”

I missed Wilhelm’s reply, as Pieter pulled out my seat for me at the same moment. But I sent a questioning look in my husband’s direction as he sat down. I asked, “Exactly what does Wilhelm do? Is he another shipping heir?”

“No.” Pieter’s mouth quirked a little. “There aren’t quite as many shipping heirs in the world as you might think. His business is cars—specifically, restoring and dealing in classic and antique automobiles. I believe he does quite well at it.”

Talk about your matches made in heaven. Then I shook my head at myself. Married barely an hour, and already I was trying to make sure all the unattached people around me achieved the same blessed state. Still, at the very least it seemed Leslie had a dinner partner who shared some of her passions.

Dinner was just as sublime as the setting—filet mignon in a wine reduction, or grilled ahi for those trying to avoid red meat. Reserve vintages from the winery were served along with the meal. I didn’t know much about wine, but the cabernet tasted amazing to me, and I told Pieter as much.

“This place is an undiscovered jewel,” he said. “I had intended to bring in wines of my choice if I didn’t care for the offerings here, but they do produce a rather spectacular cabernet.”

“I’m glad you found it.”

His gaze met mine, and he raised his glass to me in salute. “I’m glad I found you.”

Heat rose in my cheeks, but I raised my glass as well and said, “Maybe we should send the people at Craigslist a thank-you note.”

He laughed then. All around us people began tapping on their own wineglasses, and we had to lean toward each other and trade a kiss—not that either of us minded too much.

Wedding receptions share familiar patterns. Ours was no different. Wait staff cleared the food away, and people danced under the stars. Champagne circulated. A cake was cut.

Then at last it was time to say our good-nights and make our way to the suite that waited for us. Jessica had been very thorough in her preparations. Red rose petals lay scattered across the wine and gold damask comforter, and candles flickered from almost every surface. The air smelled of vanilla. A bottle of champagne waited in a silver bucket, accompanied by a pair of Waterford flutes.

Pieter took the champagne and went to the open window. “Make a wish,” he said, just as his deft thumbs loosened the cork and sent it shooting off into the night.

I want to always be as happy as I am now.

A champagne flute in each hand, he approached me as I waited at the foot of the bed. “You’re very quiet.”

“Just drinking it all in, I guess.”

He nodded and handed me one of the flutes. “To the future.”

“To the future,” I repeated and took a sip. We’d served very good champagne at the reception, but this was even better. I looked over at the bottle where Pieter had replaced it in the silver bucket and squinted a little to read the lettering on the label. Cristal. It figured.

“Something amuses you?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied. “Or maybe everything. I’m trying to decide if I should pinch myself to prove that this is all real.”

“Oh, it’s real.” He set down his glass on the padded bench beside us, then took my glass from me and placed it next to his. “So very, very real.”

His fingers found the zipper at the back of my gown and pulled downward. Cool night air caressed my suddenly bare flesh as the dress slid to the floor in a slither of silk and lace. A second later, my strapless bra lay next to the gown. Pieter’s hands closed around my breasts, his skin warm against mine.

I gasped but managed to say, “Your turn,” even as I reached out to undo his tie and work my way down the buttons of his shirt.

I loved his chest, the firm muscles under the warm tan, the light sprinkling of pale hair, now golden in the glow of the candles around us. So natural to lean forward and press my lips against his skin and feel the heat of his flesh.

By now we’d begun to know each other better, to understand the rhythms of our bodies. He knew that one secret spot to kiss, the place right where my neck met my shoulder. I gasped as his mouth touched the sensitive skin and closed my eyes as he continued downward to give equal attention to an aching nipple.

At the same time I reached downward to undo his belt buckle, and then the button and zipper of his pants. Soon his underwear had joined my gown and bra on the Oriental rug.

He was more than ready, his cock hard against my searching fingers. I slid my fingers over his shaft, teasing, reaching down to caress all of him. His breathing quickened, and I dropped to my knees, eager to take him into my mouth.

I needed the taste of his flesh, his warmth and strength. His hands caught in my hair, working at the pins Arianna had placed there earlier, and suddenly the whole heavy mass of it came loose. Then he took me by the shoulders and pushed me down onto the rug, his fingers wrapping around the little satin ribbons on either side of my thong so he could pull it free, even as he sank to the floor next to me.

Our bodies joined, moving together with the ease of familiarity. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him close, feeling him deep within my core. I needed him there, filling me. Completing me.

So much heat, even though the window had remained open to the cool October night. My veins seemed to have turned to rivers of fire, all flowing to the center of my body. I rocked against Pieter; every thrust of his flesh into mine seemed further proof of the rightness of our joining.

The climax washed over me, powerful as a Pacific rip tide. I muffled my cries against Pieter's shoulder, then felt his body spasm as he came. We collapsed against each other, gasping together like two swimmers who had just barely made it back to shore.

After a moment he gave out a little groan and rolled over onto his back. Then he chuckled and said, "Usually you're not so concerned with being quiet."

"True. But since half my family is just down the hall..."

"I see your point."

I sat up and realized the afterglow wasn't quite enough to hide the fact that the rug was actually a bit scratchy. "Do you think we could try the bed next time?"

"Of course." He got to his feet, and then bent down and lifted me from the floor. I gasped, trying not to laugh as he attempted to hold onto me with one arm as he wrangled the comforter with the other. Rose petals went flying in all directions.

With little ceremony, he dropped me into the center of the bed. "Better?"

"I don't know," I replied, and cocked my head to one side as if considering his question. "Get down here with me, and I'll try to make a final determination."

"If you would like." He sat down and pulled the covers over us. "I suppose I should have closed the window."

"Probably. But now that I've got you here—"

With that I reached out and pulled him against me, just so I could show him exactly what I wanted to do now we were in a proper bed....

~* * *~

A bird outside the window apparently decided it was high time we lazy humans were up and about. I turned over on my side and threw a bleary scowl in its direction.

"You never shut the window," I told Pieter, who had his head burrowed under a pillow.

"Mmm."

Since it didn't look as if he was going to be mobile any time soon, I climbed out of bed and went over to the window and pulled down the sash, then twitched the curtains into place so they would block some of the morning sun. The bird let out an irritated tweet and fell silent.

"It's a beautiful day," I said. This was in fact nothing more than the simple truth; I'd caught a glimpse of gold-dappled vines and hazy hilltops before I pulled the curtains closed all the way.

"Mmm."

I got back into bed and lifted the pillow from Pieter's head. "Maybe we shouldn't have drunk that second bottle of champagne."

He blinked, then smiled up at me. "Never."

It *had* been awfully good champagne. “Well, the birds are up, but I don’t know about everyone else. I don’t suppose they have room service in this place.”

“Regrettably, no. But so far I find that to be its only shortcoming.”

“That’s true.” I paused and glanced around the room, at the judicious mix of antiques, the warm plaster on the walls, the Arts and Crafts–style paintings. “The website didn’t do it justice. I feel a little sad that we’re only going to spend another day here, although of course I’m really looking forward to Paris.”

“So you would like to come back here?”

I answered without hesitation. “Absolutely. Maybe for our first anniversary?”

“Oh, I think we will be able to come back whenever we want.”

Something in his tone made me shift my position and focus fully on his face. “What do you mean?”

“As it happens, I bought the winery.”

The words took a few seconds to sink in. “You *what*?”

“I bought Santa della Oro. It seems they have not been in the best financial position—not surprising, considering the economy—and were looking for a buyer. I made them an offer yesterday while you were having your hair done.”

Just like that. I didn’t know too many people who could go out and buy a winery with the same nonchalance someone else might pick up a bottle of wine to go with dinner, but that was Pieter all over again. He loved to surround himself with things of beauty; it didn’t surprise me all that much to discover that Santa della Oro was something else he might want to add to his collection. This revelation also explained his earlier preoccupation. Even Pieter, who was notoriously hard to ruffle, might feel a little strained while trying to juggle wedding preparations and a real estate deal at the same time.

“You don’t know anything about wine making,” I pointed out.

“True. I want the owners to stay on to manage the place. Cabernet such as theirs shouldn’t be tampered with. But this—” he made an expansive gesture toward the room surrounding us— “this is ours. They will keep the room available at all times, so that we can come here whenever the mood strikes us.”

Once we were engaged, I had stopped having to wonder exactly how much money Pieter actually possessed. He had been very clear as to his net worth, since he wanted to keep no more secrets from me. So I knew he could have paid cash for the winery and not even blinked. But still...

“That’s quite the gesture,” I told him. “All I got you was a pair of cufflinks.”

He laughed then and opened his arms to me. I went to him at once and nestled into his chest, feeling the slow beat of his heart against my cheek and the strength of his embrace. Strange as it might sound, I found it somehow reassuring to know we could come to this place of beauty whenever L.A. got a little too crazy or we just wanted a change of pace. Maybe it was just my Montana-bred need for a glimpse of the open sky every once in a while.

And Pieter, bless him, had recognized that need in me and had gotten me the one thing I hadn't even known I wanted. Here in Napa, the place where we had pledged to spend the rest of our lives together, we had a little piece of heaven we could always share.

About the Author

Christine Pope is a native of Southern California and has worn various hats in the publishing industry, including editor and graphic designer. She's also a die-hard romantic whose own true-life love story has convinced her that love will always win out.

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Chapter One

The number glowed on the computer screen, its pixels flickering in front of my tired eyes. I resisted the urge to reach up and rub my eyelids. That wouldn't change what I was looking at.

One hundred and sixty-seven dollars. Oh, and let's not forget the fifty-nine cents. That fifty-nine cents could make all the difference when the rent came due four days from now.

The familiar panicky sensation started somewhere in my midsection, followed by a tightness in my throat. It was a feeling I still associated with those hideous moments back in my high school geometry class when I had to work out a particularly knotty theorem on the board. Back then, though, the worst thing that happened to me was a sneering remark from the trollish ex-Marine who taught geometry at my school and who made my sophomore year a nightmare. Unfortunately, landlords can threaten you with a whole hell of a lot worse than sneers.

I couldn't give in to the panic. There had to be something. Anything.

I sat up a little straighter and tried to ignore the rivulet of sweat that trickled down my back. The ceiling fan overhead did its best. It was no match for Southern California in late August, though. We'd had hot days back in Billings, but nothing like this. The last week felt as if Glendale had somehow slipped into one of the outer circles of hell. My apartment had a pretty decent wall A/C unit, but I just couldn't afford the electricity right now.

To distract myself, I drank some of the ice water I had gotten from the fridge a few minutes earlier, then turned back to my laptop and typed in the URL for a well-known free site that offered everything from patio furniture for sale to high-end tech jobs. Of course I wouldn't bother to look for anything in the tech sector—my brother Alex was the family's one computer genius—but the site did have a "gigs" section. Maybe I could find something there.

There wasn't much. Places that asked for "hostesses," but I'd heard that was just double-speak for escorts. Someone wanted an artist's model for forty an hour, but when I clicked on the link, I only found a note that said the position had been filled. Too bad; somehow, taking my clothes off didn't seem quite so offensive if I were doing it in the name of art.

Then I saw it. *Office Assistant, \$2K per week.* I blinked, sure I'd misread the entry. After all, I'd been staring at the screen for what seemed like hours, and my eyes felt as if someone had run over them a few times with twenty-grit sandpaper. The ad had to have said two thousand per month, not week. Why the hell would anyone pay more than a hundred grand a year to have someone file their papers?

My fingers shook a little as I clicked the mouse. Sure enough, that seemed to be pretty much what they wanted...at first glance, anyway. Basic office work, typing 40 wpm, Microsoft Office, light phones. Nothing harmful there. But then the last phrase of the ad stopped me short: *Additional duties as required.*

Well, that sounded innocuous enough. But was it? “Additional duties” could cover a pretty broad range, after all. My suspicions seemed confirmed when the instructions told me to send a photo along with the resume. Come on—if the ad were legitimate, would the person who’d placed it give a damn whether I was homelier than the backside of a mule as long as I could do the work?

I knew I should just hit the “back” button and move on. But something stopped me. For a long moment, I just stared at the computer screen. A hundred grand. I would have been happy with a third that amount. With that sort of salary, I could work one week and then quit if things got weird. At least then I’d have enough to get myself past the first of the month. After all, how much could I really do to compromise myself in just a week?

And I did have a good head shot, one I’d had taken when I thought I might try to make some quick money as a model. Unfortunately, I’d found out quickly enough that unless you were over five foot nine or more and weighed about a hundred pounds wringing wet, the legitimate modeling agencies didn’t want to talk to you. Also, whenever I told someone at an agency that I was twenty-four, they sort of shook their heads and gave me a pitying look. Scary that I was already considered over the hill before I even hit twenty-five. And even if I’d been desperate enough to go the swimsuit route, most of the places booking those sorts of models wanted typical California blondes. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, I just hadn’t fit the profile.

My failed foray into modeling had at least left me with a few good photos, and copies of them stored in jpeg format on my hard drive. I selected what I hoped was the best one, then pulled up my resume and gave it a quick scan. Everything looked all right. Before I could lose my nerve, I clicked on the “reply to” link on the ad, plunked in my standard cover-letter verbiage, and attached the resume file and the digital copy of my head shot. Then I hit “send” and closed the response window so at least I wouldn’t be faced with physical proof of my idiocy.

Great move, Kat, I thought. Probably all you did was give some creep jerk-off material. Talk about your easy ways for getting free photos of pretty girls. Well, all I’d sent was a head shot; it wasn’t as if I’d given whoever had placed the ad a picture of me in a bikini or something.

I pushed my chair away from the desk and stood up to get myself some more water. The bareness inside my refrigerator seemed to mock me, but I tried not to look at the empty spaces between the containers of yogurt and the one slim quart of milk as I reached in to pick up the pitcher of purified water that sat on the bottom shelf. Even though the filters for the pitcher weren’t cheap, in the long run it was still more economical than buying bottled water. I refilled my glass, and then replaced the pitcher on the bottom shelf. Thank God I’d never acquired a taste for diet soda. Water was a lot cheaper.

I hesitated, pausing between the dining room table that held my laptop and the crowded area which passed for a living room in my studio apartment. A neglected paperback mystery waited for me, laid face down on an arm of the sofa, but I knew I’d never be able to concentrate on its contents. No TV, unless I was willing to put up with the slightly staticky local channels; I’d had the cable turned off two weeks ago. The hum of the refrigerator and the whirl of the fan weren’t enough to fill up the emptiness of the little apartment.

What the hell had I been thinking? Was I really desperate enough to have answered the sort of shady ad that would have been right at home in the back pages of *L.A. Weekly*, next to

the ones where couples trolled for the missing third in their threesomes and “massage therapists” advertised their dubious services? Had I completely lost my mind? Well, maybe the person who had placed the ad wouldn’t even get my reply. Things got lost in cyberspace all the time. Or even if he’d gotten it, I probably wasn’t the type he was looking for. A few of the modeling agencies had accused me of being too “girl next door,” whatever that meant. At any rate, I knew Los Angeles had to be full of young women who were much more likely candidates for the position than I was.

The phone rang and I started, spilling some water on my hand from the over-full glass I held. I muttered a curse under my breath, set down the glass, and picked up the handset, giving a quick glance at the readout of the caller ID as I did so. *Pyramid Imports*, it read, and gave a number in the 323 area code. I tried to recall if I’d submitted a resume to a company with that name, but even though I’d been applying all over the place lately, it didn’t sound familiar.

“Hello?” I said.

A man’s voice, precise, with just the faintest hint of an accent I couldn’t place. “Katherine Wheeler?”

“Um, yes.” Wow, that sounded brilliant.

“I received your resume and photo, and would like to schedule an interview. Are you free tomorrow morning at ten?”

Gee, let me check my busy social calendar, I thought, but even though my heart had begun to beat faster as I realized who the mysterious caller must be, at least my voice sounded calm enough as I responded, “Yes, I’m free.”

“Good. Let me give you the directions.” He gave me an address only a few miles from where I lived, in an area dominated mostly by warehouses and light manufacturing. Well, that made sense, if he really was running an import business.

“I’ll see you then, Mr.—” I trailed off; he hadn’t told me his name.

“Van Rijn,” he replied. It rhymed with “wine.”

“Ten o’clock then, Mr. Van Rijn.”

“Excellent.” And he hung up.

I continued to stand there for a moment, staring at the handset I held, until it began to emit an irritated-sounding busy signal and I slowly replaced it in its cradle. Well, that appeared to be that. It seemed the mysterious Mr. Van Rijn didn’t have any problems with brunettes after all.

Now all I had to do was select an outfit for the interview that would convey just the right mixture of responsibility and style. The weather was too hot for a suit, even if I had owned one. If nothing else, scrutinizing my meager wardrobe might help to distract me from thinking I had just made a very big mistake.

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There was only one other car in the parking lot when I pulled up to Pyramid Imports at five minutes until ten the next morning. I didn't recognize the vehicle; the crown logo on the rear roof pillar meant nothing to me, since I'd never been much of an expert on cars. Still, it didn't take an expert to figure out that, whatever it might be, the shiny dark-blue automobile was European and obviously very, very expensive.

I swallowed, then released the seatbelt and brushed at my silk blouse, hoping it hadn't gotten too wrinkled on the short trip over. This job had more than just its salary going for it—the commute was only about four miles. And in Los Angeles a short commute was just as valuable a perk as a good dental plan.

My faded silver Corolla looked even more decrepit in contrast to the gleaming piece of machinery that sat two parking spaces away, but at least it was reliable. My parents had given me grief for not buying American. Typical. Despite its shabbiness, the little Toyota had never given me a moment's trouble, which was more than I could say for the Chevy Silverado that was my father's pride and joy. That thing seemed to be in the shop for something or other every few months.

Clutching the little vinyl portfolio that held my resume, I forced myself to exit the car and approach the front door. The building itself was quite nondescript, just a one-story structure with a tinted plate glass window and a plain dark green door. A matching awning shaded the big window. The words "Pyramid Imports" were set into a brass plate next to the door, but other than that, the place gave no hint of the sort of business which might be conducted there.

Just the kind of place that's a front for illegal activity, I thought. Maybe he's a drug smuggler, or a weapons dealer. Or, given the nature of the ad I was answering, it seemed entirely possible to me that Mr. Van Rijn of Pyramid Imports might be the leader of a gang of white slavers....

I gave a mental shake and told myself to stop being an idiot. Besides, I'd made a point of emailing Leslie Silverman, one of the few friends I'd made here in L.A., to tell her about the interview and to set up a tentative date for later that night to watch a rom-com DVD and share some cheap takeout. If I didn't show up, I knew Leslie would be on the case at once. Her sleuthing abilities rivaled the LAPD's for thoroughness. Leslie seemed to know everyone.

The entrance to the building had a buzzer set into the stucco beneath the brass nameplate, and I pressed it. An electric chime sounded somewhere within the interior. After a few seconds, during which time I practically had to grind the heels of my stilettos into the cement walkway to keep myself from bolting for the car, the door opened.

Bright blue eyes bored down into mine. That was my first impression of him—eyes of an intense azure shade I hadn't seen since I'd left Montana. Fair hair, cut close. Features craggy rather than handsome.

He did not smile when he saw me. "Miss Wheeler?"

"Yes," I said.

He nodded and stepped aside, allowing me to enter the reception area. I wasn't sure what I had expected—the standard-issue putty-colored office furniture that had been pretty much universal at the places I'd temped during the past few months—but this place was anything but standard. The receptionist's desk was a huge mahogany monstrosity that looked as if it

had been airlifted directly here from a chateau in France, and landscape paintings hung from the walls. Instead of the usual overhead fluorescent lights, art glass sconces glowed from between the paintings, and a green-shaded banker's lamp sat on the desk, set off a little from an enormous cinema display.

"Your office is lovely," I said, since even the short silence that had sprung up felt awkward. Then I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. I was here on a job interview after all, not making a social call.

He merely nodded again, and then said, "Your resume?"

Feeling relieved that he'd gotten down to business almost at once, I undid the little piece of elastic that held my portfolio shut and pulled out my resume. Of course, he already had a copy, but it was just standard etiquette to give a prospective employer a better version printed on nice paper.

A diamond winked from his pinky finger as he took the resume from me. Nothing ostentatious, unlike some of the rings I'd seen men sporting around town—just a simple band of white metal that looked like silver but was probably platinum, set with that single bezel-mounted diamond. It spoke of the kind of money that didn't need to announce its presence, just like the expertly tailored dark suit he wore. I hoped he wouldn't be able to tell that my cream silk blouse and brown tweed pencil skirt had been purchased off the clearance rack at Loehmann's.

He gestured toward the oversized monitor on the desk. "A simple test in Office, if you please."

I looked at the computer. My heart sank a little. "I'm afraid I've never worked on a Mac before."

"You will find that the Microsoft Office software is virtually identical to the PC version."

Knowing it would only look bad—well, worse than it already did—if I continued to protest, I sat down on the leather desk chair and followed the prompts on the screen. Van Rijn was right; except for the buttons to minimize windows and having to use the Command button instead of the Control one the way I was used to, there did seem to be very little difference. And thank God, the test was simple enough, since it covered basic document setup and word-processing functions, none of the messy mail merge I'd had to struggle through at my last temp job.

As I worked away, Van Rijn watched me silently, arms crossed, his impassive expression giving me no indication whether my efforts met his approval. Even when the automated test finished and flashed a score of ninety-nine percent, he showed little reaction, save a brief nod.

Not knowing what else to do, I folded my hands in my lap and waited. Maybe next he'd want a typing test. He certainly didn't seem too inclined to conversation.

The linen paper of my resume made a whispery crinkling sound as he turned it over in his hands. "So you have been doing mainly temporary work?"

His English was very good, but I could tell from his clipped accent and the way he phrased things that he was not a native speaker. I'd never heard his last name before, but I'd Googled it the night before and determined it was Dutch. I'd also attempted to research Pyramid Imports, but all I'd found was a starkly elegant single Web page with the company

name, address, and phone number in shimmering gold letters against a black background. There was a secondary address in Amsterdam, along with one of those strange European phone numbers that seemed to contain far too many digits for my eyes, but nothing else.

“Yes, I worked mainly with Apple One,” I replied, naming the temp agency that had been recommended to me when I first came to Southern California. And they really had done as good a job as they could; it wasn’t their fault the economy seemed to be taking a header directly into the garbage. “I’ve been a receptionist, and I also had a six-week placement as assistant to the vice president of marketing at a local furniture company.” That had been a great gig, and I had hoped the girl I was covering for would decide to extend her maternity leave. No such luck, though—these days, most people needed two incomes to get by, and Courtney had come promptly back to work as soon as her state-mandated six weeks were up.

“You will find this to be a quiet situation, for the most part,” he said. “I travel a good deal. I require someone to watch the office, answer the phones, generate any reports I might require, maintain the files, and be here to receive deliveries. You should not find it too taxing.”

“I shouldn’t?” I asked. It was hard to tell for certain, but had he just offered me the job in about the most oblique way possible? “That is, did you need to ask me anything else before—”

“No,” he cut in. “Your experience is adequate. Your test results are better than those of any of the other candidates. When can you start?”

Now was the time to ask about those “additional duties” he’d mentioned in the online ad, but somehow I found I didn’t have the courage to broach the subject. The dismal balance in my checking account seemed to prevent me from saying anything except, “Oh, right away, if you need me.”

“I do,” he said, and for a second it seemed as if he really focused on me. Those blue eyes were sharp as laser beams. Then he went on, “Tomorrow morning should be fine. Can be here at nine a.m.?”

“Of course,” I replied automatically, although my head was swimming. It wasn’t supposed to work this way, was it? After all, you went in for an interview, delivered your spiel, then went home and sweated it out while the employer involved decided whether or not you fit the position. You didn’t have a job handed to you with all the ease of a takeout order...especially a job that paid more than both my parents made in a year.

But that seemed to be how Van Rijn was handling this particular situation. He added, “We can take care of the necessary paperwork in the morning. I have a meeting now I must attend.”

“Well—thank you very much, Mr. Van Rijn,” I said. Usually in the past this had been the point in the conversation when my new boss told me it was fine to address him by his first name, but Van Rijn made no move to do so.

“You will be paid biweekly,” he said. “I regret my operation is small, and I cannot offer you direct deposit as so many other employers do these days. This should not be a problem?”

I shook my head. Some sort of betraying dismay at the wait for my paycheck must have crossed my face, though, because he gave me another one of those scalpel-like stares and asked, “You are in some difficulty?”

Heat flooded my cheeks, but I forced myself to meet his gaze. “Work has been a little spotty lately.”

Without speaking, he went to the desk, unlocked the top drawer, and pulled out a ledger of large business-sized checks. Then he retrieved a pen from his inside breast pocket and filled out the check before tearing it off the pad and handing it to me. “An advance on your first week.”

He’d given me the entire two grand. Rent, electricity, phone, gas—all taken care of with one week’s pay. Voice shaking a little, I said, “I don’t know how to thank you, Mr. Van Rijn—”

“You will do good work for me. That is all the thanks I require.”

I gazed up into his face. Maybe as time went on I’d get better at reading his moods. Right then all I could see was a sort of blank courtesy. Certainly there was nothing in his expression to make me think he had intended any sort of subtext in his reply.

“You can count on me,” I said, and flashed him a quick smile. That smile usually had a definite impact on the male half of the population, but Van Rijn only gave me a brief, abstracted nod.

“No doubt I shall. But now I must be going—”

“Oh, right. Of course.” I rose from the desk chair and gathered up my purse and portfolio, along with the precious check. A quick glance at my watch told me it was barely ten-thirty. Plenty of time to get to the bank and deposit the money so it would have time to clear before I wrote my own rent check. “Tomorrow morning at nine, then.”

He said, “Tomorrow, yes.” Then he moved to the door, holding it open so I could walk past him, out into the light and heat of a muggy August morning. Under the glaring sun, my little Toyota looked shabbier than ever. I thought I saw Van Rijn give it a quick, disapproving glance, but maybe I was just imagining things. At any rate, he nodded at me once more before he disappeared back inside the building.

And that, it appeared, was that. I retrieved the car keys from my purse and got into the Corolla, wincing a little as the overheated interior surrounded me. The air conditioning had crapped out at the beginning of the summer, and I’d never been able to scrounge together the funds to fix it. Well, I had the money now, although maybe with a salary like I was going to be pulling in, it might be better to just buy a new car altogether instead of putting any more money into this one. My thoughts danced with possibilities. What a difference having money made! Right now I was so grateful toward Van Rijn that even the possibility of certain “additional duties” didn’t faze me.

Not that I was too worried about those extracurricular activities now that I had met him. He seemed too impossibly correct to ever make an improper advance. No, most likely those “additional duties” meant such depraved acts as picking up his dry cleaning or fetching his lunch.

The hot air streamed in through the open car windows, and suddenly I threw back my head and laughed as a new song came on my car radio. Yes, right then I really did love L.A.