



A White Wedding Christmas (Brides and Belles)

By Andrea Laurence



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But Colin Russell isn't a teen anymore. He's all man. And his every touch has her thinking about the F word—*forever*. Working with him on the wedding is more temptation than she can take. Will one long, hot kiss lead this reluctant bride down her own wedding aisle?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Andrea Laurence is an award winning contemporary author who has been a lover of books and writing stories since she learned to read. She always dreamed of seeing her work in print and is thrilled to be able to share her books with the world. A dedicated West Coast girl transplanted into the Deep South, she's working on her own "happily ever after" with her boyfriend and five fur-babies. You can contact Andrea at her website: <http://www.andrealaurence.com>.

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Putting together a decent wedding in a month was nearly impossible, even with someone as capable as Natalie handling things. Certain things took time, like printing invitations, ordering wedding dresses, coordinating with vendors... Fortunately at From This Moment wedding chapel, she and her co-owners and friends handled most of the work.

"Thank you for squeezing this last wedding in," Natalie said as they sat around the conference room table at their Monday morning staff meeting. "I know you all would much rather be starting your holiday celebrations."

"It's fine," Bree Harper, the photographer, insisted. "Ian and I aren't leaving for Aspen until the following week."

"It gives me something to do until Julian can fly back from Hollywood," Gretchen McAlister added. "We're driving up to Louisville to spend the holidays with his family, and working another wedding will keep me from worrying about the trip."

"You've already met his family, Gretchen. Why are you nervous?"

"Because this time I'm his fiancée," Gretchen said, looking down in amazement at the ring he'd just given to her last week.

Natalie tried not to notice that all of her formerly single friends were now paired off. Gretchen and Bree were engaged. Amelia was married and pregnant. At one time, they had all been able to commiserate about their singleness, but now, it was just Natalie who went home alone each night. And she was okay with that. She anticipated a lifetime of going home alone. It's just that the status quo had changed so quickly for them all. The past year had been a whirlwind of romance for the ladies at From This Moment.

Despite the fact that she was a wedding planner, Natalie didn't actually believe in any of that stuff. She got into the industry with her friends because they'd asked her to, for one thing. For the other, it was an amazingly lucrative business. Despite the dismal marriage statistics, people seemed happy to take the leap, shelling out thousands of dollars, only to shell out more to their divorce attorneys at some point down the road.

As far as Natalie was concerned, every couple who walked through the door was doomed. The least she could do was give them a wedding to remember. She'd do her best to orchestrate a perfect day they could look back on. It was all downhill from there, anyway.

"I'll have the digital invitations ready by tomorrow.

Do you have the list of email addresses for me to send them out?" Gretchen asked.

Natalie snapped out of her thoughts and looked down at her tablet. "Yes, I have the list here." Normally, e-invites were out of the question for a formal wedding, but there just wasn't time to get paper ones designed, printed, addressed, mailed and gather RSVPs in a month's time.

"We're doing a winter wonderland theme, you said?" Amelia asked.

"That's what Lily mentioned. She was pretty vague about the whole thing. I've got an appointment with them on the calendar for this afternoon, so we'll start firming everything up then. Bree, you're doing engagement photos on Friday morning, right?"

"Yep," Bree said. "They wanted to take their shots at the groom's motorcycle shop downtown."

Natalie had known Lily a long time, but her choice in a future husband was a surprise even to her. Frankie owned a custom motorcycle shop. He was a flannel-wearing, bushy-bearded, tattooed hipster who looked more like a biker raised by lumberjacks than a successful businessman. Definitely not who Natalie would have picked for her best friend, and she was pretty sure he was not who Colin would've picked for Lily, either.

He seemed like a nice guy, though, and even Natalie could see that under the tattoos and hair, the guy was completely hormone pair-bonded to Lily. She wouldn't say they were in love because she didn't believe in love. But they were definitely pair-bonded. Biology was a powerful thing in its drive to continue the species. They could hardly keep their hands off each other at the engagement party.

"Okay. If that's all for this morning," Bree said, "I'm going to head to the lab and finish processing Saturday's wedding photos."

Natalie looked over her checklist. "Yep, that's it."

Bree and Amelia got up, filing out of the conference room, but Gretchen loitered by the table. She watched Natalie for a moment with a curious expression on her face. "What's going on with you? You seem distracted. Grumpier than usual."

That was sweet of her to point out. She knew she wasn't that pleasant this time of year, but she didn't need her friends reminding her of it. "Nothing is going on with me."

Gretchen crossed her arms over her chest and gave Natalie a look that told her she was going to stand there until she spilled.

"Christmas is coming." That pretty much said it all.

"What is this, *Game of Thrones*? Of course Christmas is coming. It's almost December, honey, and it's one of the more predictable holidays."

Natalie set down her tablet and frowned. Each year, the holidays were a challenge for her. Normally, she would try going on a trip to avoid all of it, but with the late wedding, she didn't have time. Staying home

meant she'd have to resort to being a shut-in. She certainly wasn't interested in spending it with one of her parents and their latest spouses. The last time she did that, she'd called her mother's third husband by her second husband's name and that made for an awkward evening.

Natalie leaned back in the conference room chair and sighed. "It's bothering me more than usual this year." And it was. She didn't know why, but it was. Maybe it was the combination of all her friends being blissfully in love colliding with the holidays that was making it doubly painful.

"Are you taking a trip or staying home?" Gretchen asked.

"I'm staying home. I was considering a trip to Buenos Aires, but I don't have time. We squeezed Lily's last-minute wedding in on the Saturday before Christmas, so I'll be involved in that and not able to do the normal end-of-year paperwork until it's over."

"You're not planning to work over the shutdown, are you?" Gretchen planted her hands on her hips. "You don't have to celebrate, but by damn, you've got to take the time off, Natalie. You work seven days a week sometimes."

Natalie dismissed her concerns. Working didn't bother her as much as being idle. She didn't have a family to go home to each night or piles of laundry or housework that a man or child generated faster than she could clean. She liked her job. "I don't work the late hours you and Amelia do. I'm never here until midnight."

"It doesn't matter. You're still putting in too much time. You need to get away from all of this. Maybe go to a tropical island and have a fling with a sexy stranger."

At that, Natalie snorted. "I'm sorry, but a man is not the answer to my problems. That actually makes it worse."

"I'm not saying fall in love and marry the guy. I'm just saying to keep him locked in your hotel suite until the last New Year's firework explodes. What can a night or two of hot sex hurt?"

Natalie looked up at Gretchen and realized what was really bothering her. Colin's rejection from the night of the engagement party still stung. She hadn't told anyone about it, but if she didn't give Gretchen a good reason now, she'd ride her about it until the New Year. "It can hurt plenty when the guy you throw yourself at is your best friend's brother and he turns you down flat."

Gretchen's mouth dropped open and she sunk back down into her seat. "What? When did this happen?"

Natalie took a big sip of her soy chai latte before she answered. "I had too much chardonnay at Lily's engagement party and thought I'd take a chance on the big brother I'd lusted over since I'd hit puberty. To put it nicely, he declined. End of story. So no, I'm not really in the mood for a fling, either."

"Well that sucks," Gretchen noted.

"That's one way of putting it."

"On the plus side, you won't really have to see him again until the wedding day, right? Then you'll be too busy to care."

"Yep. I'll make sure I look extra good that day so he'll see what he missed."

"That's my girl. I'm going to go get these email invitations out."

Natalie nodded and watched Gretchen leave the room. She picked up her tablet and her drink, following her out the door to her office. Settling in at her desk, she pulled out a new file folder and wrote *Russell-Watson Wedding* on the tab. She needed to get everything prepared for their preliminary meeting this afternoon.

Staying busy would keep Christmas, and Colin, off her mind.

Colin pulled into the parking lot at From This Moment, his gaze instantly scanning over the lackluster shrubs out front. He knew it was winter, but they could certainly use a little more pizzazz for curb appeal.

He parked and went inside the facility. Stepping through the front doors, he knew instantly why Lily had insisted on marrying here. Their box holly hedges might have left something to be desired, but their focus was clearly on the interior. The inside was stunning with high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, tall fresh flower arrangements on the entryway table and arched entry-ways leading to various wings of the building. Mom would've loved it.

He looked down at his watch. It was a minute to one, so he was right on time for the appointment. Colin felt a little silly coming here today. Weddings weren't exactly his forte, but he was stepping up in his parents' place. When he'd married a year and a half ago, it had been a quick courthouse affair. If they'd opted for something more glamorous, he would've let Pam take the lead. Pam wasn't interested in that, though, and apparently, neither was his sister, Lily.

If she'd had her way, she and Frankie would've gone down to the courthouse, too. There was no reason to rush the nuptials, like Colin and Pam, but Lily just wanted to be done. She loved Frankie and she wanted to be Mrs. Watson as soon as possible. Colin had had to twist her arm into having an actual wedding, reminding her that their mother would be rolling over in her grave if she knew what Lily was planning.

She'd finally agreed under two circumstances: one, that the wedding be at Natalie's facility. Two, that he handle all the details. He insisted on the wedding, he'd offered to pay for it; he could make all the decisions.

Lily intended to show up in a white dress on the big day and that was about it.

Colin wasn't certain how he'd managed to be around so many women who weren't interested in big weddings. Pam hadn't wanted to marry at all. Hell, if it hadn't been for the baby and his insistence, she wouldn't have accepted the proposal. In retrospect, he realized why she was so hesitant, but with Lily, it just seemed to be a general disinterest in tradition.

He didn't understand it. Their parents had been very traditional people. Old-fashioned, you might even say. When they died in a car accident, Colin had tried to keep the traditions alive for Lily's sake. He'd never imagined he would end up raising his younger sister when he was only nineteen, but he was determined to do a good job and not disappoint his parents' memory.

Lily was just not that concerned. To her, the past was the past and she wasn't going to get hung up on things like that. Formal weddings fell into the bucket of silly traditions that didn't matter much to her. But it mattered to him, so she'd relented.

Colin heard a door open down one of the hallways and a moment later he found himself once again face-to-face with Natalie Sharpe. She stopped short in the archway of the foyer, clutching a tablet to her gray silk blouse. Even as a teenager, she'd had a classic beauty about her. Her creamy skin and high cheekbones had drawn his attention even when she was sporting braces. He'd suppressed any attraction he might have had for his little sister's friend, but he'd always thought she would grow up into a beautiful woman. At the party, his suspicions had been confirmed. And better yet, she'd looked at him with a seductive smile and an openness he hadn't expected. They weren't kids anymore, but there were other complications that had made it impossible to take her up on her offer, as much as he regretted it.

Today, the look on her face was a far cry from that night. Her pink lips were parted in concern, a frown lining her brow. Then she took a breath and shook it off. She tried to hide her emotions under a mask of professionalism, but he could tell she wasn't pleased to see him.

"Colin? I wasn't expecting to see you today. Is something going on with Lily?"

"Lots of things are going on with Lily," he replied, "but not what you're implying. She's fine. She's just not interested in the details."

Natalie swung her dark ponytail over her shoulder, her nose wrinkling. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, she told me this is my show and I'm to plan it however I see fit. So here I am," he added, holding out his arms.

He watched Natalie try to process the news. Apparently Lily hadn't given her a heads-up, but why would she? He doubted Lily knew about their encounter at the engagement party. She wasn't the kind of girl to give much thought to how her choices would affect other people.

"I know this is an unusual arrangement, but Lily is an unusual woman, as you know."

That seemed to snap Natalie out of her fog. She nodded curtly and extended her arm. "Of course. Come this way to my office and we can discuss the details."

Colin followed behind her, appreciating the snug fit of her pants over the curve of her hips and rear. She was wearing a pair of low heels that gave just enough lift to flatter her figure. It was a shame she walked in such a stiff, robotic way. He wouldn't mind seeing those hips sway a little bit, but he knew Natalie was too uptight for that. She'd always been a sharp contrast to his free-spirited sister—no-nonsense, practical, serious. She walked like she was marching into battle, even if it was a simple trip down the hallway.

After their encounter at the engagement party, he'd started to wonder if there was a more relaxed, sensual side to her that he hadn't had the pleasure of knowing about. He could only imagine what she could be like if she took down that tight ponytail, had a glass of wine and relaxed for once.

He got the feeling he would know all about that if he'd accepted her offer at the party. Unfortunately, his rocky on-again, off-again relationship with Rachel had been *on* that night. As much as he might have wanted to spend private time with Natalie, he couldn't. Colin was not the kind of man who cheated, even on a rocky relationship. Especially after what had happened with Pam.

After realizing how much more he was attracted to Natalie than the woman he was dating, he'd broken it off with Rachel for good. He was hopeful that now that he was a free man, he might get a second chance with

Natalie. So far the reception was cold, but he hoped she'd thaw to his charms in time.

He followed her into her office and took a seat in the guest chair. Her office was pleasantly decorated, but extremely tidy and organized. He could tell every knickknack had its place, every file had a home.

"Can I get you something to drink? We have bottled water, some sparkling juices and ginger ale."

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