

(Lily) White Wedding

KJ Charles

A Lilywhite Boys series coda

Susan Lazarus was getting married. Because she was Susan Lazarus, she was doing it with her usual grace and enthusiasm.

“This is stupid. I’m stupid. *You’re* stupid.”

“A maximum of one of those statements is accurate.” James adjusted his tie a fraction. “This marriage ensures your respectability and that of—our child, and is thus a highly sensible decision. I’m marrying you, which is one of the most intelligent acts of my life. You’re marrying me, which I admit doesn’t reflect well on your judgement, but I like to think I’ve worn you down.”

“You didn’t wear me down. You knocked me up.”

“Details.” James came up behind her, looping long powerful arms around what used to be her waist and over her belly. Susan had always been scrawny; she could not accustom

herself to there being so much of her now. Not that it was just her in there.

The baby kicked on cue. The little wretch had its father's strength, or its mother's personality, or both, in which case, as Justin had remarked more than once, God help them all.

She had, with luck, around a month to go. Their first-conceived, all those years ago, hadn't stayed, and nor had the second, three years back. Susan had set herself not to believe that this third pregnancy would go any better than the others, given she was thirty-nine now, old for a first-time mother. And yet here she was, with a round belly, a wildly kicking baby in it, and James Vane waiting to marry her. Funny how things worked out.

"Anyway, marriage doesn't ensure respectability when I'm doing it in this state," she said. "Really, Justin should horsewhip you."

"He frequently does, if only verbally," James pointed out. "And I would like the courts to take into account that I have asked you to marry me at least a dozen times. Repeatedly in our misspent youth, once when you'd just impaled Kammy Grizzard in the testicles, and on an annual basis since, to keep my hand in. If you wanted to be, or at least look like, a maidenly bride, you should have taken me up on the offer six months ago at the latest."

"Complaining?"

"No." James's arms tightened just enough. "I am profoundly grateful to—our child for persuading you when I couldn't."

He always said it that way, with a fractional pause before the words *our child*, as if he couldn't quite believe it. As though

the baby in her belly, their baby, was a miracle and a gift too wonderful for him to comprehend. If Susan was a sentimental woman, that fact might have made her throat tighten every time she considered it, and him, and the way he'd never once let her down since his return to her life, and the adoring father he would be to this baby.

There was far too much sentiment sloshing around in here. She was nearly forty, heavily pregnant, and about to get married in a sensible dress. Nothing sentimental in that at all.

"Well," she said. "If we're doing this, I suppose we should get on with it."

"Are we doing it, Susan? You know very well what I feel, so this is entirely down to you. It always has been. If you don't want to, we shan't."

"Are you suggesting we call it off, now? That would leave a lot of people sitting in a church for no reason."

"People sit in churches for no reason all the time: that's religion. It's hardly our problem."

"Still no morals, I see." Susan leaned back against his warm bulk. "Justin bought a new suit just to walk me down the aisle, you know. He wouldn't want to waste it."

"Is that a good reason to have a wedding?"

"It's the best you're getting." She put her hands over his. "Stop fussing. Let's get married."

James kissed her ear. "I love you too."

He went down to wait for her. Justin came up. He was wearing the new suit, and looked quite distinguished: the

elegant silver waistcoat flattered his luminous grey eyes. Someone with better colour sense than Nathaniel had been involved there.

“All right, ratface?”

“All right, Jus.”

“No second thoughts?”

“James just asked me that too. I don’t know why you all think I’m indecisive.”

“You’ve spent several years *not* marrying him,” Justin pointed out. “Some people might think that indicates uncertainty.”

Susan glared. “You’ve been with Nathaniel, what, twenty-five years or so? Would you have got married in the first five? Or ten?”

“Or at all. Tie myself for good to that overbearing swine? Never.” He sniffed. “Probably.”

“You’re not fooling anyone.”

“Neither are you.” Justin took her hand with the opal-tooth ring. James had bought her (or at least given her, but she was fairly sure he’d paid for it) a sapphire ring for daily wear since opals were fragile. This was the one she needed to wear today. “This is scary stuff, properly scary. I know it is and I’m proud of you, Sukes. And I cannot wait to see Nathaniel play grandfather—he’s going to be ridiculous—so shall we get this done?”

Susan grinned at him, the shifty, amoral man who’d given her a family, a career, her life. “Go on, then.”

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Alec looked around the church as they waited. Everyone else was seated. He and Jerry were at the back, Jerry waiting to stand as James's groomsman, Alec with him in Cara's place. Long-dead Cara, whose fierce determination had put in motion the events that led to him being here today, with Jerry, at Susan and James's wedding. She would be pleased about that, he thought.

"I want to draw this," he murmured to Jerry. "For the papers."

"Draw what?"

"The whole thing. 'Extraordinary Wedding In High and Low Society'. The *Illustrated* would bite my hand off. We've got the Marquess and Marchioness of Cirencester, the Earl and Countess of Moreton, a private enquiry agency, some decent working men, a clutch of suffragists, and a music-hall troupe. It's quite the composition."

"Don't forget the pack of sweaty crooks," Jerry said. "One of them being the groom."

"There are no crooks in this congregation," Alec said firmly. "Stan is an honest clock-repairman, James is an honest businessman, and you—"

Jerry grinned at him. "Don't push your luck."

It was an odd gathering, anyone would admit. The Cirencesters, heads of the Vane family, and the Moretons, with their twin boys and Lady Penelope in tow, were all well-dressed and elegant, adorning the wedding party with their

social standing. The presence of so much nobility more than made up for the absence of the groom's father, who had not been invited.

After the lords and ladies, and the well-born Nathaniel Roy, the party plummeted rapidly down the social scale. The music-hall contingent was the most noticeable thanks to their flamboyant appearance. Miss Christiana, Pen Starling, Pen's floppy-haired stage designer, and Phyllis and Gregory from the Jack were all very much dressed to the nines, though not in the usual way for a wedding. The most you could say for the private enquiry agents was that they were suited: Mark always looked as though he was in shirtsleeves and braces, whatever he was actually wearing. Emma's children had been washed and brushed up but it hadn't lasted; Clem and Rowley were neat but couldn't be called elegant; two of Susan's suffragist ladies sported trousers; and Stan Kamarzyn had a permanent 'sweaty crook' quality, doubtless thanks to the years of practice.

Jerry looked marvellous, but then he always did to Alec's partial eyes. He'd made an effort himself, more to match Jerry rather than because Susan would care. Possibly too much effort, because the stage designer chap kept glancing round at him.

It seemed like curiosity rather than any more specific interest. People were still sometimes curious after his spectacular family scandal, and they did occasionally look at him in unwelcome, prurient ways, at least until Jerry looked at them. His unblinking and unfriendly stare made almost anyone avert their gaze; occasionally a particularly stubborn starrer forced him to lift an eyebrow, which was equivalent to anyone else's lifted fist. Alec hoped the floppy-haired character didn't stare.

He was sitting next to John Garland, Susan's new enquiry agent, which reminded Alec. "Did you say those two were together?" he murmured to Jerry.

"Who?"

"Garland and the one with the hair."

"Littimer. Yes, God forfend the Lazarus agency should recruit anyone conventional."

A conventional recruit might have objected to Miss Lazarus living in sin, or asked questions about her guvnors, or given Pen Starling or Miss Christiana a hard time when they visited, or commented on any of the wide variety of unsavoury pasts attached to the agency. That would have been unpleasant, mostly for the recruit in question when Susan disembowelled him. Garland seemed to have survived the last couple of months in her employ, so he must be a reasonable man.

The organ struck up. Everyone got to their feet in a rustle of cloth and a flurry of coughing as James strolled in, looking really rather fine in a new suit. He grasped Alec's hand, and nodded at Jerry. "Got the ring?"

"Sold it last night," Jerry assured him. "Aren't you supposed to be nervous? You look intolerably smug."

"I am," James said. "This is years of hard work finally paying off. Come on, gentlemen, we need to get this done while the baby is still on the inside."

They walked down the aisle, Alec and Jerry peeling off as they approached the altar, and then Susan came in, plodding heavily up the aisle on Justin Lazarus's arm.

She was plainly dressed, because she didn't like finery, and at her stage of impending motherhood, anything fancy would look like a sack with frills. But her hair was elegantly coiled, studded with her favourite moonstone pins, the severe expression she usually adopted at moments of stress broke into a smile as she looked up at James, and Alec found himself biting back a sudden unexpected sob. He glanced over at Jerry, who smiled back with the real warmth he rarely showed in public, and gave him just a flicker of a wink.

It was a swift ceremony, without delays. The bride did not promise to obey, surprising nobody. Susan Lazarus became Mrs. James Richard Vane, if only legally, and everyone headed out for the wedding breakfast, which rapidly became a riot.

An hour or so in, Alec had a glass of champagne in one hand and a glass of gin in the other, neither of them his first. He'd been chatting to Christiana, who had been hauled off by suffragists; he glanced round for company and saw the floppy-haired one whose name he'd forgotten again.

"Hello," said that individual. "Are you Alec Pyne, the artist?"

"I am, yes. And you're—?"

"Barnaby Littimer. I do stage design at the Grand Cirque for Mr. Starling. I was hoping to talk to you about your work but apparently Miss Lazarus has banned shop talk on pain of pain."

"I think that's mostly for the enquiry agents, but better not to take the risk," Alec agreed. "It's nice to meet you. You're here with John Garland, yes?"

“Keeping him company. It might be a little daunting otherwise. This seems a very tight-knit group of people, if a rather oddly assorted one.”

There was just a slight question there. Alec said, “Susan has a lot of good friends.”

“Like the best man.”

“He’s an old friend of James.”

“John observed that,” Barnaby said. “Actually, he thinks he’s met Mr. Vane before.”

John Garland had used to be a hotel detective, and knew perfectly well who Jerry was; it was entirely likely he’d recognised James as Templeton Lane, late of the Lilywhite Boys (in the sense of being officially dead). That had always been a possibility, and was indeed a large part of the reason Susan had offered Garland a job.

Alec met Barnaby’s eyes and read nothing there but mischief and gin. “He may have done,” he agreed. “Or possibly James has just got one of those faces.”

Barnaby looked at James Vane, a bulky six foot four of long-armed muscle, with his striking blue eyes. “Yes, one could easily mistake him for anyone. I hope he and Miss Lazarus—Mrs. Vane—are very happy.”

“Miss Lazarus until further notice, I suspect.”

“Noted. Thank you.” Barnaby paused. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something, if I may.”

“Mmm?”

“Well, the best man—I don’t actually know his surname, nobody seems to use it.”

“Jerry? What about him?”

“Does he have a dog?”

“A what?”

“A dog.”

“Does *Jerry* have a *dog*?” Alec demanded, needing full clarification.

“Yes.”

“No. Why?”

“Merely a theory, albeit one of which I am finding it very hard to let go,” Barnaby said. “Cat?”

“Also no.”

“Nothing else? A parrot? Oh God, not a rabbit?”

Alec was unsure whether to laugh at his sudden look of horror or demand an explanation. “Not so much as a goldfish. I need to know why you ask.”

“Insatiable curiosity,” Barnaby said frankly. “It’s absolutely none of my business. It’s just that I met, er, Jerry at Christmas, you see, in circumstances which—”

Jerry had slipped the civilised leash for a while, and enjoyed himself thoroughly. Alec had heard all about it. “I know the circumstances. I’m not sure how you concluded he has a menagerie at home from that.”

“I didn’t, really. It was more thinking about the peculiarities of affection. How one person might be an absolutely blood-curdling terror to the outside world but a Prince Charming to his beloved, say. That sort of thing.”

Ah. Alec downed his champagne, for strength. “Are you asking whether a... blood-curdling sort of person might actually be entirely different with their loved ones? Kind, gentle, affectionate, compassionate?”

They both glanced over at Jerry, who was talking to Susan. He said something, brows angling steeply. She cackled like a witch.

“Well, yes,” Barnaby said. “Because it would be quite reassuring, if true. Is he?”

“Well, looked at by most people’s standards— In his own way, which is very individual— You see, the thing is, when you understand—” Alec considered where he was going with this, and gave up. “No. No, he really isn’t.”

Barnaby looked at him, wide-eyed. Alec shrugged. “I just like my blood curdled, I suppose.”

There was a tiny pause, then they both started laughing at once. “Oh, well, fair enough. As long as everyone’s happy,” Barnaby said. “Can I get you another drink?”

“Let’s both get one, and I’ll introduce you to people. Jerry, even.”

“Oh God, no, I don’t think—”

“On better terms,” Alec assured him. “Since you’re part of the family now.”

“Am I? That would be”—he searched for a word “—nice? It’s quite an *interesting* family.”

Alec slipped an arm through his, and led him over. “Barnaby, you have no idea.”

THE END