

ROWENA SUMMERS



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WHITE RIVERS

One

The Pollard wedding was bound to be the society event of the St Austell calendar for 1925, Charlotte told her American cousin grandly. Skye had no doubt that Charlotte, in her important role as mother of the bride, would ensure that everything ran smoothly on the day. But from the to-do in the bedroom at the Pollard house on that fine April afternoon, it was hard to credit it.

By then, the grown-ups could hardly separate one screech from the other. The occasion was supposed to be a final fitting for the young attendants, but from the squabbles going on among the three children, anyone could be forgiven for thinking they were in a kindergarten.

Skye Norwood wrenched her daughter away from the strapping arms of Sebastian Tremayne. At eight years old, Sebby was already head and shoulders above her girls, and a champion in the old Tremayne tradition of spouting aggression whenever the situation demanded it.

Above the din, Skye yelled at him in her quick New Jersey voice, ignoring the effect that such bellowing might have on Charlotte's normally ordered household.

"Will you *behave* yourself? Just look what you've done to Celia's dress, you horrible child."

She scrubbed furiously at the grubby fingermarks on Celia's white organdie dress, but the marks wouldn't budge, and would need more attention than she could readily give. Her daughter's wailing voice was loud in her ear.

"I *hate* him, Mommy. He pulls my hair and spits at me."

"I do not spit at you!" Sebastian said, scowling.

"Yes you do, too," Skye's younger daughter Wenna piped up. "I saw you do it, and I hate you too."

She clutched at her sister's hand, her blue eyes large and scared, but full of bravado in their sibling closeness. Their varying expressions couldn't detract from the fact that they were beautiful girls, having inherited the glorious Tremayne looks that went back generations, black-haired and blue-eyed, with a voluptuousness that was evident, even in children. And right now they refused to be cowed by their bully-boy cousin.

Skye pursed her lips. A fine wedding this was going to be for her cousin Vera, if the three small attendants were going to be at loggerheads the entire time. With the whole town of St Austell expected to turn out for the occasion – if the bride's mother was to be believed – it would only show up the younger ones still more. Though not *her* darlings, she amended hastily. Just the abominable Sebby.

The bride-to-be came into the room at that moment, pink-faced and scowling at all the fuss. Skye smiled encouragingly at the young woman in her cream wedding gown with the hem still half pinned up, and the dressmaker scurrying around to finish it.

"The dress looks truly lovely, Vera," Skye said.

"It does, but I don't," her cousin raged. "I'm not made for silks and fancies. I'm too old for all this nonsense, and I can't fit comfortably into a tube of a dress when I'm not built for it."

"Vera, please control yourself," her mother Charlotte snapped. "Thirty is a perfectly proper age to be married, for heaven's sake, and there's nothing that a few extra tucks in the bodice won't disguise. Besides, every bride looks beautiful on her wedding day, and you'll be no exception."

Sebastian was stunned for no more than the briefest moment on seeing the bridal vision enter the bedroom, then couldn't resist a snigger.

"She's too fat for it, and my daddy says she'll waddle up the aisle like a duck."

"Oh, you hateful little beast!" Vera said, reaching out to swipe him. As she did so, there was an ominous ripping sound, and

White Rivers

the dressmaker gasped in horror at this display of temper, and the undoing of her fine underarm seams.

"Mrs Pollard, I really think—" she began nervously.

Whatever she thought was lost as Vera stormed out of the room and into another bedroom, slamming doors as she went. She might be a Pollard by name, but she was certainly a Tremayne by nature, Skye thought feelingly.

Charlotte took control of the situation in as dignified a manner as possible. "I think we'll finish for today. The children's outfits are quite satisfactory now, Skye, and Mrs Finnigan and I will deal with Vera's upsets."

They were dismissed from the proceedings, and once the children had changed back into their everyday clothes, Skye bundled them into her motor car and drove away from St Austell with a heartfelt sigh of relief. No wedding could be as traumatic as this one was turning out to be.

For a moment though, she felt a great pang, remembering how vastly different her own had been. Despite the infants still squabbling in the back of the car; despite the way everyone was getting so het up, and the number of times Vera had threatened to call the whole thing off as she failed miserably to lose the extra weight she really didn't have; despite all that, she would have loved a wedding such as Vera and Adam Pengelly were going to have in two weeks' time.

A wedding with all the trimmings, the celebrations after, and the honeymoon trip to follow. A wedding with the good wishes of friends and family, the modest gifts from the Killigrew Clay workers who had known the respected Cornish families for decades, and the newer workers at the associated White Rivers Pottery . . . Skye had had none of it.

Not that she regretted a moment of her secret marriage, even though it had been seen by her grandmother Morwen as a clandestine affair, before she and Philip Norwood went off to France in the war to end all wars, unable to bear being apart. But Granny Morwen had forgiven her in the end, knowing the headstrong romantic that she was; so like the fiery girl she had once been herself. Skye had counted on that.

* * *

Driving along the rough country lanes towards Truro to deposit Sebastian at Killigrew House, Skye became aware of something damp and unpleasant against her neck. She squirmed in the driving seat as she sensed the boy's hot, heavy breath on her skin.

"Please sit back properly, Sebby," she snapped. "You should know how to conduct yourself in a car by now."

"My daddy's going to buy a new one soon," he said importantly. "It'll probably be a Rover, and it'll be much bigger than this one."

"Naturally," Skye muttered, knowing it was wrong to detest a child, but finding it impossible to do much else in the case of this obnoxious boy.

Like father, like son, she found herself thinking, remembering how she and Theo Tremayne had clashed from the moment they met, when she first came from America to meet these Cornish relatives. Arriving for a year, and staying for the rest of her life . . .

So many of those relatives were gone now, she thought with a shiver. As if the war hadn't been hideous enough in killing off so many folk, the terrible influenza epidemic that followed in its wake had seen off thousands more, all over the world. Her own family had lost more than their fair share. Uncles and aunts in Cornwall and beyond, her beloved Mom in New Jersey, and her paternal grandparents in California. They were all gone now. Amazingly, Granny Morwen had defied the threat of the virus, but had gone all the same when her number had come up, as the Tommies used to say.

Skye shivered again, trying to ignore the fatalistic mood into which she was fast descending. It wouldn't do to become morose and depressed when they were all supposed to be looking forward to a happy event. She drew in her breath resolutely.

"Are you sad, Mommy?" she heard Wenna say.

She glanced around at her five-year-old, thumb in her mouth as ever, and her eyes softened. Celia, a year older, was the practical one, while Wenna had an instinctive empathy with other people. It was what her namesake Morwen would have

White Rivers

called fey. Morwen would have *loved* her, Skye thought, for the umpteenth time.

"I'm not sad, honey," she said cheerfully. "I was just praying that Withers will be able to get the marks off that lovely dress for you."

"Withers can do anything," Celia said confidently. "Daddy says she's a maid in a million and we should think of her as a national treasure."

"Does he now?" Skye said, hiding a smile. It changed quickly as Sebby gave a hoot of derision.

"You don't call *maids* national treasures, goose-pot! They're just there to do what we tell them to do."

Skye felt her hands tighten on the steering-wheel. "You really are a nasty little boy, aren't you, Sebby?" she said as coolly as she could, considering how she was seething at such snobbery. "You should be setting an example in good manners to your cousins and your little brother."

"Why should I? Justin's a pampered pig."

Whatever she might have said to that was lost in the screams of laughter from the two girls at his daring, and with such a willing audience, Sebby elaborated wildly on the precociousness of his brother.

It took one to know one, thought Skye dryly, but at least it kept them all amused until they reached Killigrew House. And nobody could blame his mother for pampering young Justin, when she had so nearly died giving birth to him. At forty-four years old, Betsy had left it a bit late, Skye always thought, but Theo had insisted that just like royalty, you needed an heir and a spare, so Betsy had done her wifely duty and produced the second boy.

She came out from the house as soon as she saw the car arrive, Justin at her heels like the plump little butterball that he was. Betsy had grown fat and cumbersome over the years too, and there were plenty of rumours that Theo now found his earthier pleasures at Kitty's House, the bawdy abode along the coast from St Austell. Skye closed her ears to such talk. There had been enough scandal and gossip about various family members over the years for her to care about

hearing any more. And anyway, she really didn't want it to be true about Theo and his totties. She liked Betsy, even while she despised her a little for being so spineless. After marrying the bombastic part-owner of Killigrew Clay, Skye had to admit that Betsy had done little more than produce the two irritating sons who were destined to walk all over her. Or perhaps she just liked it that way. Some women did, apparently, and there was no accounting for folk, as Granny Morwen used to say.

"So how did it go at Charlotte's, me dear?" Betsy asked in her broad Cornish voice. "Did she keep all of 'ee in order as usual, in her prim and proper fashion?"

It was Sebby who answered. "She's a ladypig," he said, which started Justin off, and after a startled moment of awe at this insult to a grown-up, started Celia and Wenna off as well.

Betsy looked at Skye in desperation. "Why Theo insisted that Sebby should be a pageboy I'll never know. He looks a proper fright in velvet and frills, and your two will be perfect little angels, while this one—" She cuffed him gently about the ears, which had no effect at all, except to send him running indoors, still laughing, with Justin following on chubby little legs.

"It's tradition, Betsy," Skye told her. "You know what sticklers they all are for that. Besides, I'm sure he'll be all right on the day."

"I wish I had such confidence, then. But at least Theo will be there to see to him if he starts his tantrums, and 'tis to be hoped that if Lily's chief bridesmaid, she'll stand for no nonsense. Are you coming in for a spell?"

"No, we're off home. Philip will be back soon, and he likes me to be there."

"You've got a good man there, me dear."

"I know it," she said, trying not to notice the wistful note in Betsy's voice. "Anyway, the children's outfits are done now, so we'll see you on the day of the wedding."

"Oh ah. Though I dare say you'll be seeing Theo afore that. He's fussing over summat at the clayworks now."

"Oh?" Skye was instantly alert. "Not trouble, I hope? Things have been going so smoothly lately."

White Rivers

Betsy sniffed. "Well, you know what they say. When things go too smoothly, summat's bound to go wrong. And Theo's got a habit o' stirring things up, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I had, as a matter of fact . . ."

"Anyway, I don't think 'twere trouble exactly. Summat to do with exports and the like. He were more excited than upset, I'd say, but you know I don't take much heed of business dealings, not having the head for it," she said vaguely.

She wished Betsy would stop talking and let her get away. The girls were getting tired and fractious in the back of the motor now, and there was a sudden chill in the late afternoon air. She longed to be home, inside the house called New World, and to chat over the day's events with her husband.

Skye still adored Philip with a passion, and she knew that her feelings were reciprocated, but lately she had to admit that he had changed. He had always been a serious and a deep-thinking man, as befitted a college lecturer, and she had loved the discussions they had had over the years on so many different topics. It didn't matter that the discussions were sometimes more than heated. He treated her as an intellectual equal, in a way that so many husbands never did.

But lately, he had become more introverted, more tetchy and pompous, and – if she dared to put it into words – trying to run her life more than she cared for. Whether it had anything to do with the lingering legacy of the near-fatal head injuries he had suffered in France, she had no idea. They had certainly scarred him mentally as well as physically for a very long time, and she had been generous in understanding and overlooking any outbursts of anger. But in the seven years since the war ended, his manner seemed to have got worse instead of better.

Of course, it could also be put down to age. He was fifty-one now, eighteen years older than herself. It had never bothered her before, and being brought up with older parents, she had loved his maturity, but sometimes lately . . .

"Daddy's home, Mommy," Celia said, as they neared their own house. Philip's car stood outside, and Skye felt her heart sink. She shouldn't feel uneasy because he was there before

her, but it was true what she had told Betsy. He liked her to be at home waiting for him, and his attitude if ever she was not seemed to reduce her standing as a woman – and women had been fighting for their rights for long enough now for Skye to resent the feeling. There was a limit as to how long you could be sweet and understanding . . .

For a moment she wondered fleetingly how her cousin Lily would react to such a situation. Lily Pollard was a declared and defiant feminist, devoted to the ideals of the Pankhursts and women's suffrage. She had been persuaded very much against her will to be chief attendant for her sister Vera's wedding. Lily had decided against marriage for herself, having seen too many women and babies living on a pittance when their menfolk hadn't returned from France, and she voiced her opinions far too loudly and publicly for her mother's peace of mind.

But Skye forgot them all as she stopped the car and opened the doors, and her two girls went running towards the front door where their father was waiting for them now. Skye went to him quickly too, putting her arms around him, and pushing aside the thought that he looked far older and more careworn today than his years warranted.

"I'm sorry, honey, we couldn't get away from Betsy. You know how she rambles," she said apologetically.

"And her brat gave you a miserable time as usual, I dare say," he said sourly.

"Sebby was no worse than any other time," she told him carefully, wondering where all his tolerance had gone. He used to have so much . . . She often thought it was a good thing he didn't have to tutor infants, or plenty of parents would be complaining at his lack of patience.

"And that says it all," Philip uttered. "But I wondered what was keeping you. Theo's been and gone, fidgeting as usual over something he wouldn't deign to explain to me, since you're his business partner, as he was sure to remind me. He'll call back this evening. I felt obliged to invite him to supper but thankfully he declined. I dare say he's got more agreeable business to attend to along the coast."

White Rivers

"Philip, please—" she warned, seeing how the girls were intent on his every word. She saw him frown.

"There's no use cushioning children from the facts of life, my dear."

"There's no reason to destroy their innocence too soon, either," she retorted.

Sometimes she wished she could keep them cocooned in that childhood naivety for ever, however foolish it might be. There were so many ugly and wicked things in the world, and once their Pandora's Box was opened, there was no turning back to innocence. She wished the thought had never entered her mind.

"I think you had better see to your son," Philip was saying coldly now. "He's been screaming in the nursery ever since I came home, and calling for you repeatedly. Nanny's getting flustered. It's not fair on her at her age."

"It's what we pay her for, isn't it?" Skye was stung into replying, recognising her own burst of snobbishness, and unable to avoid it.

"What *you* pay her for, my dear," Philip said, stalking off with the girls towards the drawing-room as they chattered to him about their afternoon at Aunt Charlotte's.

Skye stood with her hands clenched for a few moments, mentally counting to ten and back again. The word *Pig* came into her head at that moment, and for once she identified totally with the obnoxious Sebby Tremayne's description of whoever he hated at the moment.

Quickly, she went upstairs to the sounds of infant screaming, pushing such unworthy thoughts out of her head. Of course she didn't hate Philip. She loved him. It was just that sometimes he stretched her feelings of love to the utmost.

The baby was still exercising his lungs when she entered the nursery, his face a furious scarlet with exertion as he stood up rigidly in his cot and rocked the sides with all his might. Nanny was standing by with a bottle in her hand, its milky splashes all over her apron being the evidence of how many times young Oliver Norwood had flung it back at her.

"I can't do nothing with him today, Mrs Norwood," she

began in a fluster. "He's cutting his back teeth, and they're making him that fretful it troubles me to see it. I've rubbed his gums with oil of cloves, but it don't do no good at all."

"It's all right, Nanny," Skye said soothingly, as the buxom woman eyed her anxiously, clearly afraid she would be blamed for not being able to cope with a two-year-old. "Come to Mommy, honey, and we'll have a cuddle."

Oliver's arms had already reached out towards her, and Skye picked him out of the cot, feeling his hot little body still twitching from the effects of the sobs. His blue eyes were swollen with tears, and she hugged him tightly to her, uncaring how his steamy little person creased her fine beige linen frock.

"You go off and see to the girls' tea, Nanny," she said now. "I'll stay with Oliver and try to calm him."

She sat with the child in the rocking-chair by the window, crooning to him softly until the tears subsided. His dark hair was plastered to his head, but gradually the angry little face became less fraught, and his eyelids drooped.

"Poor baby," Skye whispered, seeing how one side of his jaw was redder than the other. "It pains us to get our teeth, and it pains us to lose them, doesn't it?"

She traced her finger around the curve of his cheek, thinking that even two-year-olds didn't have everything made easy, and wishing she could have the toothache for him. There must be something she could give him to ease it, but none of the doctor's remedies did any good. There ought to be some other way, some other method . . . For a second or two, her head spun, and her heart thudded, as a crazy alternative churned around in her brain. There was an old witchwoman on the moors who could concoct ancient potions that were reputed to cure all ills, the same as any quack doctor professed to do at the annual country fairs. The woman they called Helza . . .

"If you hold him that tightly, you'll crush him to death," Skye heard her husband's voice say beside her.

She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts she hadn't heard him come into the nursery, but as she lay the sleeping Oliver

White Rivers

in his cot again, she registered that Philip looked less irritated now. As she straightened, smoothing back her fashionably bobbed hair from where it curved around her chin, he caught at her hand.

"I'm sorry, my love. I've had a stinger of a day at the college, but it wasn't fair to take my frustration out on you the minute I saw you. Can you forgive me?"

"Don't be silly," she said, twisting around until she was in his arms. "There's nothing to forgive."

And if there was, it was too sweet a moment to brood on it. She forgave him readily, the way she always did. Besides, there were always other things to think about. There was her cousin Theo, and why he wanted to see her so urgently.

One thing she was sure about was that Philip hated to be excluded from any meetings between herself and her cousin, but short of seeming to patronise him by suggesting he sat in on it and said nothing, she didn't know what else to do. He had never been overly interested in the clayworks, but the pottery was a different matter in his eyes. That was creative work and not manual labour, grubbing about in the earth.

She had never had any doings with the clayworks until coming to Cornwall, either, she thought, almost defensively. But she had known of it and loved it almost from the day she was born, simply because her mother had instilled in her the love of Cornwall and her intricate family background. And being the inquisitive person that Skye was, in the end it had been inevitable that she should see it all for herself.

"What are you sitting there smiling about?" Philip asked her over supper, when the children were in bed. "Are they private thoughts, or can anybody share them?"

"I was just thinking how lucky we were to have met on the ship coming over from New York, and how our lives would have been changed if we'd never met at all."

She hadn't really meant to say all that, and she wished she hadn't when she saw the small frown on Philip's face. Ever since coming home from the dress fittings at St Austell she had the feeling he had something to tell her, and she guessed that it was nothing to do with her cousin Theo.

"I had a letter from Ruth today," he said abruptly.

Much as she tried not to react, hearing the name was like dashing a tumblerful of cold water into Skye's face.

"Another one?" she asked, as mildly as she could.

Philip threw down his napkin with a gesture of impatience. "For God's sake, Skye, Ruth and I have known one another since childhood. You can hardly expect me to forget she ever existed."

"Nor that she expected you to marry her, and had every right to do so," she added swiftly.

She chewed her bottom lip, not wanting to be reminded in this way of the shipboard romance that had sprung up so innocently between herself and the handsome college lecturer. At least, it had been innocent on her part – but not so innocent on his, since he already had a fiancée waiting for him on the Falmouth quayside on that fateful day when Skye had set foot in Cornwall for the first time.

The sensible part of her told her not to be so petty over Ruth, and that friendships between men and women were perfectly natural. But the fiery, passionate part of her recognised her usual upsurge of tension, and the rapid, sickening heartbeats that told a different story.

It was all so long ago, and she had never truly stolen Philip from Ruth. It had been Ruth who had realised what was happening, and given him up, but Skye sometimes suspected that Philip had carried the guilt of his betrayal around with him all these years. Especially now that Ruth had begun corresponding with him again.

"What does she want this time?" she said, before she could stop herself.

"Jealousy doesn't become you, my dear," he retorted.

"I'm not jealous!" she exploded, knowing that of course she damn well was. "Why on earth would I be jealous of a—"

"Deaf woman?"

Skye felt her face flame, and she snapped back at him. "How dare you accuse me of such a thing! I was about to ask why I should be jealous of a successful teacher of deaf children? Ruth has turned the tables on her disability, and I admire her