
THE UNWILLING MRS.

The Brides Series - Book One

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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The Unwilling Mrs.

eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-789-9
Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-790-5
Audio ISBN: 978-1-64563-791-2

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter 1

The lights were shining so brightly on her face that twenty-two-year-old Polly Carrow worried the brightness was melting the Passion Pink lipstick she had over applied on her lips. Still, her smile did not falter; instead, she straightened her back as her mother had constantly reminded her to since she was a little girl and continued to smile. She was the third girl in a row filled with six, anxiously waiting for the results of the Miss Orchid Pageant.

The pageant had been held in their small town of Roseville, Connecticut since 1946 and held every June. On the first Saturday of June, to be exact, before everyone went on vacation to beaches, summer camps, and lake houses. Polly had first participated in the Miss Orchid Pageant at eighteen, soon after she had graduated from high school. She had come in third place and Iris Taylor had won that year. Since then, she had participated every year and always seemed to narrowly lose the crown to less deserving girls.

Still, Polly was no loser and she had been determined to win this year. There was no way she was going to lose this year as well. It would have been too humiliating, and she had done

everything in her power to make sure she would win. She had been dieting since January, and in March, she and her mother had gone to New York and bought dozens of dresses that had cost her father a pretty penny. Her father thought she was vain and silly for spending so much money on a beauty pageant, but he also wanted to make his spoiled daughter happy.

After she had graduated high school, Polly had chosen not to go to college, claiming she had no interest in pursuing higher education. Instead, she had spent the past few years at the mall, at parties, and at the occasional odd job she would quit after a few months.

Now, here she was, dressed in a pastel pink dress that hugged every inch of her curves, making her feel like Marilyn Monroe, with her blonde hair pulled back in tight curls. Her smile never faltered as Mr. Banner calmed down the crowd, in order to present the winner.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a group of beautiful, talented ladies here tonight, but only one will be Miss Orchid. 1957's Miss Orchid is... Miss Polly Alice Carrow!"

A wave of relief settled in Polly's chest and her smile never faltered as she slowly walked toward the stage, careful not to fall in her heels. Jennifer Brown, who had been Miss Orchid last year, placed a white sash around her, with Miss Orchid printed in bright pink letters. The elderly Mrs. Latimer, the mayor's wife, placed a tiara on her golden hair and handed her a bouquet of red roses.

Polly was so happy, she could cry, and her happiness only intensified when she saw her parents on the front row. Dr. Paul Carrow and Mrs. Eloise Carrow were clapping and looking proudly at their only daughter. She had done it. She had become the Miss Orchid of her little town, and in her mind, that was almost like being a queen.

The next morning was Sunday, and in usual Sunday fashion, the Carrow family headed off to their small Catholic church like

they had done every Sunday since Polly was a baby. Polly had chosen to wear a pastel pink dress with white flowers that matched the same shade of pink as her winning gown and showed off her small waist. She had matched it with a white hat, with a great pink bow, and her favorite designer heels.

Polly was hardly listening to Father Michael's sermon; instead, she was pretending not to notice the adoring looks from the young men at church. Although they had always noticed her before, they had started paying more attention now that she was the newly crowned Miss Orchid. In fact, everyone in town seemed to be talking about the new Miss Orchid.

"Are you listening, Polly, or are you daydreaming again?" her father murmured, annoyed. He had never been overly strict with her, growing up, but he was stern when it came to Sundays as a devout Catholic. He had no patience for Polly's daydreaming or flirting during the sermon.

Polly gave him a serene smile. "Of course, Daddy."

Dr. Carrow rolled his eyes at his daughter as he turned around to continue listening to the sermon. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity—Polly could never sit still for very long—the sermon ended. The Carrow family always stayed for a little while after church, to socialize. Her mother went toward her prayer group, while her father quickly found the men, who were eager to discuss a football game or politics.

Meanwhile, Polly found herself looking for her best friend, Collette Monroe, who immediately squealed when she saw Polly and wrapped her arms around her in a huge bear hug. Collette was a tiny woman who barely reached five feet, with pale skin and bright, curly red hair that seemed to bounce even before she started walking.

"Polly! Everyone is talking about you; they're all talking about how you're the new Miss Orchid! Oh, Pol, you looked so beautiful last night. You looked just like a princess or a movie star. The whole town is talking about it. Oh, Polly, can you imagine if

you became the next Miss America, or you could be a movie star—"

"Collette, you're talking too loud. "Polly tried to hide a smile as an elderly lady gave them a dirty look. Her friend had a habit of talking loudly and fast whenever she was excited. To be honest, Polly was excited too. Ever since she was a little girl, she had loved being the center of attention and enjoyed people fawning and doting over her. Maybe it was the consequence of being a spoiled only child, but Polly liked the attention. "Have people really been talking ever since I became Miss Orchid?"

Collette gave another squeal. "Oh, Polly, you are going to be the most popular girl in town. I just know it! All the men our age have already started looking at you. Did you see Brian Thomas—"

"Ladies."

Polly and Collette turned around and saw a handsome young man with blond hair and dashing blue eyes. Polly felt her heart skip a beat when she saw Palmer, and she could feel her palms getting sweaty so she demurely wiped them on the back of her dress. She could not let Palmer Winthrop see her sweaty hands. She would just die of embarrassment.

Polly had had a crush on Palmer ever since she had turned thirteen-years-old, and he had been the main reason Polly and Collette had joined the Youth Group. Palmer had started attending Yale four years ago and was planning on completing his master's degree there as well, but he came back to Roseville each summer. Polly was convinced he grew more handsome each year. She just wished she didn't turn into a stammering dummy every time she saw him.

"Hello, Palmer." Polly was surprised she could make the statement without acting like a complete fool, but she could feel her skin becoming warm, and no doubt her pale skin was minutes away from becoming red. "Welcome back from Yale."

"Thank you." Palmer smiled brightly, and his teeth were so

straight and shiny, it reminded Polly of a celebrity's smile. "I heard you are our new Miss Orchid, Polly. You are going to be pretty busy this year, with parades, ribbon cutting ceremonies, and photographers taking pictures of our very own beauty queen."

"This beauty queen can hardly wait," Polly replied coolly. "Dresses, shoes, and I still need to find my perfect red lipstick." She smiled. "I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"Not at all," Palmer said, smiling. "I enjoy hearing about lipstick as much as any man. Polly, would you like to go to a dance at the American Legion club with me on Friday night?"

Polly bit back an excited gasp and instead, did what her mother had instructed her to do whenever a man flirted with her. She batted her eyelashes and widened her pretty blue eyes. "Oh, Palmer, I would love to, but I will have to convince Daddy and Mama, especially since the club is halfway across town. They are so terribly old-fashioned. I crashed my car last week, and they are convinced I get myself in trouble wherever I go."

Palmer winked at her. "Let me sweet talk them. I am sure I can convince them and assure them I can protect you. I'll pick you up on Friday at seven; wear something pretty. Have a good Sunday, ladies."

Both girls stayed silent as they watched Palmer go speak to Dr. and Mrs. Carrow. When he was safely out of earshot, Collette let out a low and excited squeal as she started hugging her as if she had just won a million dollars. "Oh, Polly, you are going on a date! You are going on a date with Palmer! And that night is going to be perfect, and then he is going to ask you to go to be his girlfriend, then you'll get married and have a house by the sea *and* have a ton of babies—"

Polly burst into giggles as she returned Collette's hug. "Palmer. Palmer Winthrop asked me to go dancing with him. Palmer!" She let out another squeal. "What am I going to wear?"

There is my navy-blue dress that shows off... well, everything, or my yellow dress that makes my breasts look heavenly—"

"Or you can just buy a brand new dress," Collette blurted out as the girls turned toward where Palmer was speaking with Dr. and Mrs. Carrow. Mrs. Carrow looked pleasantly surprised with their conversation, while Dr. Carrow was frowning in slight disapproval. "I'll go with you, Polly. We'll make a day of it, and I'm sure Mrs. Carrow will let you borrow her Tiffany diamond earrings your dad gave her for their anniversary."

Polly smiled at her oldest friend since childhood and squeezed her hand. "Let's find me the perfect dress."

"Who is that?" Elijah Robinson raised a dark eyebrow and turned to his father, John, who had just been finishing a conversation with Father Michael. When John looked confused, Elijah tilted his head toward the pair of pretty, giggling girls. They had been squealing ever since a young man, whom Elijah was sure was named Palmer, had said his goodbyes.

John smiled as he responded, probably due to the fact that even though Elijah had moved to Roseville a few months ago, this was the first time he had shown interest in the fairer sex. It was no secret, especially to Elijah, his parents, John and Juliet, were desperate for him to marry and even more eager for grandchildren. Unfortunately for them, if it wasn't a newspaper or book, Elijah wasn't interested.

When he had first moved to Roseville from New York, after breaking up with his fiancée, his parents—and all the ladies from the church who had daughters of marriageable age—had introduced him to girl after girl. Although Elijah had been polite to them, he had denied going further than a polite conversation after church.

"The young lady with the red hair is Collette Monroe, and

the beautiful blonde is Polly Carrow. She is Dr. Carrow and Mrs. Carrow's only daughter, a very nice girl from a respectful family." John tried to hide his eagerness. "She just became the new Miss Orchid. Should I introduce—"

"No," Elijah responded curtly as he turned his attention away from the two girls, but he could still hear their excited giggles. He fought the urge to stare back at the young lady known as Polly. He had seen her in church a few times, but this had been the first time he had really paid attention to her. He wondered how her voice sounded when she wasn't giggling and how her perfume smelled. "I was just wondering. They are a tad loud. It's not appropriate."

"They are young girls. Honestly, son, sometimes you act like you are the middle-aged father."

Elijah rolled his eyes. He knew he could be a little uptight and serious, but the last thing he needed was for his parents to start pestering him to date.

"Are you sure you don't want me to introduce you? She really is a sweet little darling."

"No, Father," Elijah said firmly. "I was simply curious, that's all, with all of the ruckus they are making. Besides, Polly is a little young for me. It wouldn't work out."

"You don't know that," John pointed out as they started exiting the church. "Your mother and I married when she was nineteen and I was twenty-four, and we made it work. Marriage takes commitment, Elijah. Not to mention, love and understanding and a whole lot of patience. You are twenty-nine years old; don't you think it's time you found yourself a nice wife? A partner? Being a bachelor might be fun now, but there is no guarantee it will be fun when you are fifty. I know what happened with Cynthia was rough—"

"Could we please talk about something else?" Elijah interrupted as they reached his car, slightly ashamed of how rude he was acting. He opened the door for his father. "We should hurry,

Mother will be arriving at the airport any minute now, and she will be cross if we're not there."

"How do I look, Mama?" Polly put on her best smile, the smile that had helped her obtain the title of Miss Orchid, as she walked down the stairs. She was wearing a strapless pale green dress, with tiny yellow ruffles adorning the waist and bottom part of the dress. The dress had cost her a fortune, and she was sure her father would be angry when he saw the bill, but Polly could always come up with an excuse later. She had used her curlers on her blonde hair, so it fell in loose waves and was held back with a pearl barrette.

"You have some pink lipstick on your cheek," Mrs. Carrow said as she quickly wiped it away. She fumbled with her hands as she fixed the pearl earrings she had let Polly borrow for the occasion. "I just wish Palmer had taken you out to the opera or out to dinner for your first date. A dance at the Legion for a first date seems tacky, but according to you, it's perfectly normal, so what do I know?"

Mrs. Carrow seemed more nervous than Polly, and Polly couldn't blame her, since she was nervous too. She had dated a bit since graduating high school, with boys she had met at church who were equally as shy as she was. On those dates, they had just kissed, held hands, and maybe gone to the movies. This was an official grown up date. Now Polly just hoped she didn't sweat through her dress. The doorbell rang, and both she and her mother exchanged excited giggles.

"Now, Polly, remember to always keep a smile on your face; no one wants to be with a Debbie Downer. Do not slouch; it's unladylike. When you dance, let him lead. I know you can be stubborn, and I know we live in a modern society, but get it through your head, Polly, the man always leads—"

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"Ladies, are we going to have this young man wait outside all night?" Dr. Carrow asked dryly, not caring about the mother and daughter fussing.

"Of course not, Daddy." Polly smiled sweetly as she straightened her dress. "I'm ready. Open the door. I don't want to keep my date waiting, after all."