

Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 1:

Amelia Frye glanced at the Van Cleef & Arpels watch on her wrist. The delicate gold hands pointed to 4:45 PM. Fifteen minutes until the New York City Marriage Bureau closed for the day.

Her thumb unconsciously picked at the already frayed skin beside her index fingernail. It was a nervous habit, one she thought she had kicked years ago.

Clerk Sullivan, a kind-faced woman with salt-and-pepper hair, poked her head out of the office for the ninth time. Her eyes were full of a pity that made Amelia's stomach clench.

"Maybe it's the traffic, dear," Ms. Sullivan offered, placing a cup of lukewarm water on the small table beside Amelia's chair.

Amelia forced a smile that felt like cracking plaster. "Yes, New York traffic is always terrible."

Her gaze drifted to the poster on the wall. A beaming couple, with the words “Happy Marriages Start Here” printed in cheerful script beneath them. The irony felt like a physical weight on her chest, making it hard to breathe.

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A vibration buzzed from her handbag.

Her heart leaped into her throat. Kayson.

She fumbled for her phone, her fingers clumsy and cold. The screen lit up, but the name flashing wasn't his. It was “Leo Foster.” Kayson's assistant.

The last flicker of hope inside her died, leaving a cold, dark void. She took a sharp breath, the air stinging her lungs, and answered the call.

“Ms. Frye,” Leo's voice was polite, professional, and utterly detached. “My sincerest apologies. Mr. Edwards has an urgent situation. Ms. Carlisle twisted her ankle during a rehearsal, and he had to go to her immediately.”

Kamila Carlisle.

The name was a familiar poison, seeping through the phone and directly into her brain. It was always Kamila. The reason for the first missed anniversary, the third missed birthday, and now the ninth missed promise.

Amelia said nothing. She simply ended the call.

The phone's screen went black, reflecting her own pale, numb face. She looked like a stranger.

She opened her message thread with Kayson. Her thumbs moved with a strange, detached precision.

"Kayson Edwards, we're over."

Send.

Then, without a moment's hesitation, her finger found the option: "Block and Delete Contact."

A profound silence filled her head as she did it. The giant stone that had been crushing her chest for years finally rolled away. She could breathe again. The air, once thin and sharp, now felt full and clean.

She stood up so abruptly that the chair scraped against the linoleum floor with a screech.

Ms. Sullivan jumped, her expression shifting from pity to alarm.

Amelia walked to the clerk's desk and placed the untouched cup of water down gently. She looked Ms. Sullivan directly in the eye, her voice clear and steady in a way it hadn't been in years.

"I've decided. I'm not getting married."

Ms. Sullivan's mouth opened, but no words came out.

Amelia added, more to herself than to the clerk, a vow whispered into the sterile office air. "Not ever again."

With that, she turned and walked out of the Marriage Bureau.

The cold November wind hit her face, but it didn't chill her. It woke her up.

She pulled out her phone again, scrolling through her contacts to a name she had saved seven months ago. A number she had never called.

She remembered the man. Kayson's biggest rival. He had cornered her at a gala, his blue eyes full of mocking amusement, and said something utterly absurd to her.

At the time, she'd dismissed it as a provocation, a way to get under Kayson's skin.

Now it was her only option.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she pressed the call button.

The phone rang only once before it was answered. A deep, magnetic voice cut through the city noise.

"Who is this?"

Amelia closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let the words rush out before she could lose her nerve.

"Mr. Thornton, what you said seven months ago... does the offer still stand?"

There was a beat of silence on the other end, followed by a low, dangerously amused chuckle that sent a shiver down her spine.

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