**Chapter 1: DUTIES**

## ****Morning****

## \*ughh my head\*. Jessica groans into her head trying to wish away the headache that formed from last night’s partying. ‘‘ this is the last time i let Nelly convince me to drink with her, where is my phone??’’. She fumbles around it and finds it only to see a text from her dad, ‘‘ we need to talk’’. Shit

Jessica gets out of her Audi r3, her prized possession and gift to herself as she has a firm belief in getting what she wants without anyone’s help. She stares out to look at her parents house; it’s been a while since she has been here; too many weird memories.

She stands wondering what caused the text because it s not a usual thing for her dad to text her, especially with such ominous tone which made her quite uneasy. The last time she felt this way was during a meeting with a client as an insurance broker and honestly, it’s the absolute worst feeling to experience when completely hungover. Someone better be dead or something.

“You’re joking,” she said flatly, staring at him across the table.

Frank Carter, retired Marine turned corporate logistics consultant, didn’t joke. His eyebrows drew together the way they always did when he was deadly serious. “No, Jessica. This is real.”

“I’m twenty-eight. Not eighteen. You can’t just—arrange a marriage like I’m a stock merger.” Now she kinda wishes someone was dead instead.

Her mother, always the peacekeeper, spoke gently. “It’s not like that. We’re just asking you to consider it.”

“Consider marrying someone? Like it’s a college elective?”

‘‘mom say something’’, her mother looks away in resignation. Great.

Her father’s tone hardened, “you’re not listening,this isn’t just about you. This is about both families.”

Jessica opened her mouth to argue, then snapped it shut. Something about his expression—a mixture of guilt and iron resolve—made her pause.

“Who is it?” she asked warily. “Some son of a business partner? Some rich guy who needs a green card?”

Her mother flinched. “Jessica.”

Her father sighed, then said the name.

“Mark Bennett.”

Time froze.

Jessica blinked. “I’m sorry. Did you just say Mark—Bennett?”

“Yes.”

“The same Mark Bennett who locked me in the chem lab closet during junior year and said it was ‘for science’?”

“The same one,” her mother said, eyes darting nervously between them.

“The same one who started a betting pool about how long my second-year internship would last?”

Her father’s expression didn’t change. “Yes.”

Jessica stood. “Absolutely not. No way. Over my dead, cold, rigor-mortised body.”

“Sit down,” Frank said quietly.

And she did—out of habit more than obedience. Mark Bennett. Of all the arrogant, smug, maddening people on Earth—her father wanted her to marry him?

“I haven’t spoken to him in years,” she said. “And the last time we did, I believe the words ‘unbearably smug jackass’ were used.”

Her mother gave a weak smile. “You were very… colorful.”

“He was worse, and I don’t regret it” Jessica muttered.

“Mark has grown up a lot,” her father said. “and so have you.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “So, what? You expect us to just sign a prenup and skip down the aisle like this is some kind of fairy tale?”

“It’s not a fairy tale,” her father said sharply. “It’s business.”

Jessica stared at him. “So I am a stock merger.”

“No. You’re a woman we’ve trusted to handle herself, and that’s why we’re not forcing you. This is your responsibility to the family. We are giving you an opportunity to represent and uphold the family values ”

“How noble” she muttered.

But deep down, she knew what this was about. Her father had spent the last ten years rebuilding the family’s logistics company, and the Bennetts had one of the most powerful transport chains in the southern U.S. It wasn’t just about marriage—it was about legacy. If this alliance was rejected, the other family would feel insulted and she is not about to ruin years of work that her father has put in by throwing a tantrum. It’s not like she has a boyfriend or anything.

And Mark? Of course Mark would agree. He probably thought this was another challenge to win. Another trophy to put on his mahogany office shelf.

Jessica’s blood boiled.

“If I say yes,” she said slowly, “what’s the timeline?”

Her parents exchanged a look.

“Three months,” her mother said. “We want the wedding by August.”

Jessica glanced at the date on her phone. June 3rd.

“You want me to marry my high school nemesis in three months?”

Her father’s eyes didn’t waver. “Yes.”

Jessica leaned back, heart pounding. It felt surreal; this kind of thing simply didn't happen in her world. She clearly remembered the jerk taunting her, spreading rumors she'd become a "cat lady." How truly ironic that Mark now has to marry one. Her phone buzzed just as she was about to tear into them about their "arrangement."

It was an unknown number: "Guess we're getting hitched. Try not to murder me before the vows." She stared at the message, her stomach churning, the timing absolutely terrible. Her reply was swift: "No promises."

**She can’t believe the nerve of this dude, how they got him to agree is definitely beyond her but then again his ego probably did it’s magic.**

**Jessica deciding to take a walk around the house , ended up at her old bedroom; memories of the her childhood running through her brain as she tries to make peace with the expectations of her family weighing on her. She rubs her temple feeling a headache coming on; of all the reasons they called her home, it’s to tell her she is getting married. Tears threatened to escape but she blinked through them rapidly; she is not going to go about this sulking and she is definitely not going to cry about it; She’d just have to suck it up, face it head-on and deal with it just like any other challenge.**