

Title: A Servant of Duty

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OFF Prompt: *10. A man/woman receives notice from an attorney that some previously unknown relative has left him/her the bulk of their estate . . . as long as [s]he complies with a single condition.*

Rating: G

Notes: WC—731. A snippet of a universe I never really got into, I guess. But I'm revisiting it. Revamping it. Setting is somewhat-Regency England. Jiggered the prompt a bit too.

His escritoire faced the south gardens, the hedge mazes stretching out in his line of sight. His father had appointed the library thus, 2 stories of leather-bound books and masculine elegance, set directly opposite his mother's sitting room. He'd admired that about his father; that he would be so close to the woman he loved, even after she died. Anton could remember his father letting the door to the sitting room open late at night when all good sons would be abed, can remember him standing there in the doorway, staring into the dark.

Anton breathed out a small sigh and barely resisted the urge to run his hands through his hair in frustration. Six months dead and his father's ghost continued to haunt his days. Here in the library was the strongest feeling. He paused there, in the center of the room that was now his and took it all in: who his father was and who he was trained to be. Anton Crosarme, the fifth Viscount Berrisford, was nothing if not faithful to his duty.

He doffed his jacket, laying it across the back of the leather settee before sitting at the desk. His mind wandered the mazes outlined before him as the weight of his responsibility grew on his shoulders. Thoughts swirled inside his mind as minutes turned into hours. Luncheon came and went with hardly a whisper of food. The servants walked lightly past the room, not daring to disturb the master unintentionally.

Until Leigh had no other choice. The impeccably mannerly butler cleared his throat at the man before him, still the image of the boy he remembered—hair tousled and in his shirtsleeves, sullen and adrift. Anton roused himself to sigh.

"A visitor has come calling, milord. A Mister Joss Ferrier, of Winton and Stocks." Leigh paused. "They were your father's attorneys, I believe."

"Indeed," Anton murmured. "Send him in."

"Very well, my lord." He backed out of the room, hoping futilely that his emphasis on the boy's position would perhaps give him a nudge toward decorum and propriety when entertaining a guest, such as it was. After a moment, Mr. Ferrier was ushered into the library to greet a still discomposed Anton.

A humble clerk, Mr. Ferrier opened with his apologies. “My condolences, my lord. Your father... he was a good man. Kind. He will be greatly missed, to be sure.” He coughed slightly and flushed to the thin roots of his nondescript hair. Perhaps the Viscount wouldn’t like to hear about his father so soon?

Anton gave a sharp nod. “He was. A very great man.” He changed chairs then, gesturing for Mr. Ferrier to join him on the long settee. “Am I to understand you are here on some matter of my late father’s, then?”

“Quite, your lordship,” he replied briskly, producing a sheaf of papers. As he shuffled through them with a shrewd eye, he continued. “IT appears that we were remiss in informing you about a particular codicil—aha, there it is—pertaining to you in your father’s will.” He handed over the sheets, indicating the section he was referencing. “It was, of course, quite bad of us not to notice, but as soon as we realized, I was sent over direct to inform you...”

“Betrothed?” Anton bellowed. “What does he mean, betrothed?”

“I believe her name is Emilyanne Doyle, sir. You are affianced.”

“I see that much, you fool!” he snapped at the currently withering man. “Why the bloody hell didn’t someone inform me?”

A thick silence encased the room, sharp with the tension radiating from Anton as he paced to and fro like a caged tiger. Mr. Ferrier began gathering his scattered papers into some semblance of order, ready to make his escape. Whatever happened to not harming the messenger?

After a moment more, he collected himself and stood. “Forgive me, sir, if this news has brought you distress.” He plunged onward, ignoring the indelicate snort of his client. “I believe your father did this in your best interests in case he died. It is not all that uncommon. If you have further concerns, however, please direct them to our office. If you’ll excuse me...” He bowed his head sharply and departed the room as quickly as his feet would carry him.

Betrothed? Anton rolled the word over in his mind, still gobsmacked. What had his father done?