

A Rose by Any Name

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*An epilogue to The Gentle Art of Fortune Hunting
and A Thief in the Night*

Hart was in the rose garden when his man informed him that visitors had arrived.

He wasn't expecting anyone, couldn't think who might be coming, and didn't want company anyway. He was busy removing all the withered blooms, because Robin was coming home this evening after a week away with James Alphonso, and Robin loved roses. Hart wanted him to have the most spectacular possible display; more, he wanted Robin to know that he'd spent hours out here making it beautiful because Robin also loved it when Hart did things for him. Not material things—for a gazetted fortune hunter, he was the least acquisitive man Hart knew. But when he realised he'd been in Hart's mind, that Hart had thought about him and worked for him, when he saw proof he was loved, and the joy of it was clear on his face...

Henry coughed. "The visitors, Sir John?"

Damned intruders, when he had better things to think about. "Who is it?"

“Lord Arvon, sir, and another gentleman.”

“Never heard of him,” Hart muttered ungraciously. Henry frowned in silent reminder that a lord demanded attention. Hart bowed to the inevitable. “Show them into the drawing room, I suppose.”

He washed his hands, put on a coat despite the summer heat—another thing to resent about visitors—and stomped through to the dining room, where he saw two men. One was a usual-looking sort of fellow with light brown hair. The other was much more striking: tall, dark, handsome, and vaguely familiar.

“Hartlebury,” the latter said, with his hand out. “I thought it was you.”

Hart didn’t immediately take it. He was still trying to place the fellow. “Do I know you?”

“Carteret. Miles Carteret.”

It didn’t ring a bell. Hart turned to the other man. “So you’re Lord Arvon?”

“No, I am,” Carteret said. “My father died.”

“Ah. My condolences.” He felt obliged to shake the still-extended hand at that. “How do I know you?”

Carteret—Arvon’s—face tensed a little. “We used to play in the same hells. Lady Wintour’s, and the Cockpit.”

That unlocked the memories. It had been seven or eight years ago, perhaps, and Carteret-as-was had been a lot more youthful-looking then. Well, he would, but it seemed to Hart that his face was marked with more than just the passage of time. He’d been a wild, reckless young man, Hart thought, one of those who wagered too much, too fast, too carelessly.

Rakish, laughing, always in the middle of a crowd, and very obviously setting a course to disaster.

Hart hadn't been his friend, or anything like it. Carteret had been far too handsome and popular for that, and Hart didn't like careless spenders. They'd merely occupied the same spaces for a while as Carteret gamed his way to perdition, and then he'd vanished, as that sort of gambler often did when the debts of honour became insurmountable. Hart had a vague idea he'd enlisted, which if true was better than lurking in some foreign boarding-house drinking himself to death.

And here he was: older, sporting a title, and a weatherbeaten look, and lines around his eyes and mouth. Hart had no interest in a dissipated Captain Sharp who doubtless hoped to borrow money on the strength of old acquaintance and a new name. He had roses to dead-head.

“Well,” he said. “Arvon, then. What is it you want?”

The other man's brows went up, as if he'd heard the challenge. Hart glanced at him. “I don't have your name, sir.”

“It's, uh, Lackland?” He accompanied that with a hopeful look.

Hart preferred people who were rather more certain of their own names. A shifting surname indicated a shifty character in his experience. Granted, Robin had gone by several names in his time, and now used one he freely admitted (to Hart at least) that he and his sister had made up, but Robin was different because he was Robin, and therefore entitled to leeway that Hart didn't feel inclined to extend to this pair.

“Mr. Lackland,” he repeated without enthusiasm.
“Well?”

The visitors exchanged a look. Arvon said, “We are in search of someone. We’ve been looking for him for a while, and we’re hoping you may be able to help.”

“In search of someone? Who?”

Lackland replied this time. “When I knew him, he went by the surname Frank. Robert Frank.”

“I don’t know anyone of that name.”

“No, well, he might not go by that now. For perfectly good reason!” Lackland said hastily. “It was a difficult situation, no blame attached to anyone, only it means I don’t know what name he is going by now, which makes it rather difficult, obviously—”

“Shush,” Arvon told him. “The situation is, Hartlebury, we need to find this man, we’ve been looking for over a year, and frankly we’re clutching at straws. For various reasons, it seems remotely possible he may now be working for you, so we’ve come to ask. We’ve won against worse odds,” he added, to Lackland’s address rather than Hart’s.

It sounded reasonable enough, but the hairs were prickling on Hart’s neck. Robin’s career before he came to London had been short but destructive. He’d told Hart some of it, including the lover he’d robbed and the bridges he’d burned. He’d changed his name for fear of the past catching up with him. If these men were coming for vengeance—

“I told you. I don’t know a Robert Frank.”

“But you know a Robin Loxleigh,” Lackland said. “We wondered if that might be him.”

Hart gave him the chilliest look he could muster. “Loxleigh is my representative for sales, and shortly to take on the management of my Tring brewery. He is not running about the country under a false name.” He refrained from

suggesting that ‘Lackland’ might profit from Robin’s example there, but only just.

Lackland’s face was tense. “All the same, could I see him?”

“He’s currently travelling on my behalf. If you want to leave your card, I will have it passed to him.”

“Does he not live here?”

Hart changed his expression from ‘not friendly’ to ‘highly unfriendly’. Lackland’s eyes widened. “He lodges here, yes. That doesn’t mean I know when he’ll be back. I very much doubt he’s the man you want, and I cannot spare any more time for your wild-goose chase. Leave a note if you must. Good day.”

“No, wait. Please,” Lackland said. “Could I just—the man I want is in his mid-twenties. He’s probably somewhere about my height, good-looking. He had yellowy sort of hair, or maybe it’s darker now. Is that...?”

It sounded exceedingly like Robin. “Leave a note,” Hart repeated. “He’ll contact you if he sees any reason to. The door is behind you.”

Arvon gave him a scathing look, which Hart didn’t have to take from a man who’d run out on his debts. “Your courtesy and helpfulness are noted, Hartlebury. Toby, write a note. We’re lodging at the Bell—”

“Wait,” Hart said. “*What* was your name?”

“Arvon,” Arvon snapped, adding, barely under his breath, “For God’s sake.”

“Not you,” Hart snapped back.

“Toby,” the other said, meeting Hart’s eyes. “I’m Toby.”

Hart stared at him. He was searching for a resemblance to Robin—but no, that was wrong. Robin’s lost stepbrother had shared blood with tall, queenly, stunningly lovely Marianne, and Hart really couldn’t see her beauty in the man in front of him.

Except for the eyes. He had deep brown, lustrous eyes, and there might be something, too, in the curve of the lips...

“Excuse me?” Arvon said, sounding decidedly sharp.

Hart ignored him. “Are you—you’re not *Robin’s* Toby?”

There was a noise in the hall, he realised, a clatter of feet. Hart hadn’t been paying attention to any of it, but now the door opened behind him. He turned, and there was Robin, with that smile like sunshine only for him.

“Hart! I got back early— Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know...you had...” His eyes had flicked to the visitors. His voice faltered, died out.

Lackland was staring too. He swallowed. “Rob?”

“*Toby?*”

“I. Uh. I’ve been looking for you.”

Robin seemed frozen to the spot. His lips moved silently, repeating *Toby*. Lackland started to move toward him, stopped himself. “I’m sorry it’s been so long. So many years. I wanted—I meant to come back, only—”

“You left.” Robin’s voice was thin, strangled. “You didn’t even say goodbye. You just went, and left us.”

Lackland swallowed. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“*Why?*” Robin was a grown man, a clever, confident one, but in that single word he sounded like a child.

Lackland's mouth twisted. "Lordship. I had to go, he'd have killed me. I meant to come and get you both but I couldn't find the money, and time just passed, but I didn't forget, Rob. I always meant to come back."

"But you didn't."

"He'd have killed me," Lackland said again. "*You* know. I was afraid, so I ran and left you with him and I'm so sorry, but—"

"We thought you were dead!" Robin shouted, making everyone jolt. "We thought you'd *died* because you never came back! Why didn't you tell us you weren't dead?"

"I was busy!" Lackland shouted back, panicky rather than angry. "I had to get out, and I was busy trying to stay alive for months, years, and—and I kept thinking I would write to you but I wanted to have good news, to say I had a safe place for you to come and stay, but I never did." He swallowed again, convulsively. Arvon made a jerky movement toward him, and stopped himself. "I never did. I had nothing to offer you."

"We didn't *want* you to be rich and successful! We wanted you to be all right!"

"Well, that was a close-run thing," Lackland said with an effort at a smile that failed badly. "It was as much as I could do to keep my head above water for a long time. And—and now I'm doing better, and I've been looking for you for *months*, and if you wanted to be found sooner, you might have used fewer names."

Robin choked on that. Lackland opened his hands. "I'm *sorry*, curse it! I don't blame you that you're angry. I wish I hadn't had to leave, and it doesn't make it better that I did have to. But I truly always meant to come back." His voice wobbled and cracked as a tear spilled down his cheek. "And

if—if you don't want to talk to me now, that's your choice, only just please tell me if you and Marnie are all right. I'll go away again if you want, but I have to know—as long as I know you're all right—”

“Oh, shut *up*,” Robin said, and then he and Lackland—Toby—moved at once so that they collided mid-room, each hurling himself into the other's arms, hugging with desperation. “Toby, Toby. You're *alive*. Oh God, you're really alive.”

Toby collapsed on Robin's sturdy shoulders. Robin was crying too now, heaving sobs that looked like they hurt. Hart might weep himself at this rate. He caught Arvon's eye and noted a sheen there, which forced him to pull himself together.

“Drink,” he said firmly.

“God, yes.”

They both headed for the brandy decanter. Hart poured. Arvon took the glass. “Thank you. You don't happen to know anything about the sister, at all?”

“In fine fettle. She's abroad with my niece now, in fact. They're having a marvellous time judging by their letters.”

“Thank Christ.” Arvon shut his eyes and tipped his head back. “We've spent the best part of a year chasing false trails all over England and running into quite a lot of angry people while we did it. I had concluded they were both dead, truth be told, and was wondering how to tell him so. Lord above.” He took a healthy swig of brandy. “I could weep.”

“We've quite enough of that,” Hart said, since Robin and Toby were still hugging and crying and talking over one another in an incoherent way. “You've been looking for

Robin that long?" Not that he was complaining, but surely peers had better things to do.

"Yes," Arvon said, in an uncompromising tone. "Toby has done everything for me. I needed to do this for him."

Robin swung round. "Hart," he managed, voice thick with tears. "It's Toby. He came back."

"And this is Rob, this is actually Rob," Toby told Arvon. "We found him."

"So I gather," Arvon said drily, but his smile was full of affection, a shining warmth that drove away the shadow of the rakish gamester Hart had once known. Toby smiled back at him, a bright beam of joy. Robin looked at his brother, then at Arvon, then at Hart, to whom he flickered an eyebrow in a highly meaningful way.

He'd have to explain that later: Hart was no good at meaningful looks. "Shall we go outside?" he suggested. "It's pleasanter in the garden. I'll ring for wine."

"Yes, let's," Robin said. "And I can tell you about Marnie, you won't believe what she's doing, and oh God, you came back."

"I always meant to. Truly I did."

"You're here now." He hugged his brother again. "And you have to meet Hart. Sir John Hartlebury. Except I suppose you've met already?"

"Not properly," Hart said. "You're very welcome, Mr. Lackland."

Robin's face changed. "You're going by that? *His* name?"

"I was trying to find you," Toby said. "I wanted to be sure, if you heard someone was looking for you, you'd know

it was me, and it seemed the best one for the purpose. Otherwise, I've been using, uh..."

"Porrit," Arvon said, very much as though it was a reminder he'd had to make before.

"That's the one."

Robin gave a tiny shrug of acceptance, as though his brother's shifting surnames made no difference. "Fair enough. I would have understood Lackland if I'd heard it, I suppose, only we don't hear much in Aston Clinton, thank heaven. Come through to the garden and tell us everything."

"Yes, do," Hart said. "Porrit, was that?"

"Toby, please. Um, unless you'd rather not, Sir John," he added hastily.

"Hart. You're very welcome, Toby."

"Thank you." Toby beamed at him, and Hart could see a ghost of Marianne's loveliness in his smile. "Rob, this is Miles. Lord Arvon."

"Miles will do." Arvon put out his hand. "I'm more pleased than you know to meet you, Rob."

"Robin." Robin shot a quick smile at Hart. "It's Robin now."

"So we heard," Arvon said. "Robin Loxleigh, even."

Toby nudged his brother. "Yes, really, Rob? In," he added.

"It was Marnie's idea," Robin said, sounding a trifle defensive. "You know what she's like, and now I'm stuck with it. Anyway, it's not that bad."

"It's ridiculous," Arvon said. "I'm coming to suspect that's a family trait."

“As the only person in this farrago who’s confined himself to one name throughout—” Hart began, shepherding them all out to the rose garden.

There would be a great deal to talk about. There would be memories and new stories, old family to be rebuilt, new family and friendships to be formed. Visits to be planned because Marianne would need to see her long-lost brother, and Alice would be thrilled to add a new strand to her web of relatives by adoption. There would be wine—much needed, he thought, starting now.

But first, roses. While he could provide them for Robin, there would always be roses.

THE END