

To Trust Man On His Oath

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A Will Darling Adventures interlude.

Set a week after the ending of The Sugared Game (so contains mild spoilers for that book).

Will Darling was awake. He'd have preferred not to be.

His arm hurt. Well, it would, what with the slowly healing bullet wound and the broken knuckle. Injuries were always more painful at night, the inflammation seeming to worsen when you lay down, and his hand was throbbing in a slow, dull, hot sort of way.

He was pretty sure it wasn't infected: that was a different kind of ache, in his experience. Still hurt, though. Probably, when you already had a broken knuckle, you oughtn't hit people as hard as possible with it. The memory of that blow—knowing how much he was going to hurt himself, doing it anyway—brought him a backwash of nausea.

He wasn't going to get back to sleep in a hurry, so he might as well get up for a bit. He eased himself out of bed, moving with excruciating care so as not to jar his left arm or wake the sleeper next to him. He even paused to check Kim's breath was still even and undisturbed, which was the moment he realised there was, in fact, nobody there.

He patted the blankets to check, then turned on the lamp by his bed. No Kim.

They'd gone to bed together. Kim had spent most of the last week here, in fact, after their return from Etchil, hiding from all the people he couldn't face. The Press, his family, the family of the man he'd killed, Phoebe. Will wasn't by nature a hider, except in specific, temporary, and about-to-be-violent circumstances, but he couldn't find it in himself to criticise Kim for it. He could tell a man who'd had the stuffing knocked out of him.

Kim needed to heal as much as Will did, just differently. So they'd agreed he'd stay, keep his head down, do the heavy lifting in the bookshop while he was at it, and that was all fine, or it would be when he actually started showing any signs of feeling better. Which, Will had to say, he wasn't yet.

So where had he gone?

Wherever it was, Will's dressing gown had gone as well, which meant he had to put on pyjamas. At least his slippers had been spared. He shoved his feet into them and padded downstairs.

To nobody's surprise, Kim was in the back room. He wore the missing gown, a rough brown wool affair startlingly unlike his usual purple velvet, and was curled on the camp bed with his feet awkwardly tucked under himself against the chilly air, leafing through a ratty old book with half a dozen more piled next to him.

"You can't be working," Will said. "It's three in the morning."

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“What’s up?”

“Just me. And you now, of course.” Kim glanced up. His eyes were dark-ringed with exhaustion; they had been for a while. “How’s the hand?”

Will grunted in lieu of answer. “Tea?”

“I’ll make it. No, sit down, and stop insisting on doing things. You’re going to take twice as long to recover if you don’t rest.” He uncurled as he spoke, and went to fill the kettle. Will shifted books to clear himself a space on the camp bed, an annoyingly unwieldy process one-handed, and sat, his back against the wall.

Kim stacked the books on the floor and joined him while he waited for the kettle to boil. “Are you all right? Do we need to drop in on a doctor in the morning?”

Will had no intention of wasting his hard-earned on a quack, still less of having Kim do this mother-hen business on him while the shadows under his own eyes grew ever darker. “It’s fine. It just hurts at night. I’ve had worse.”

“You’ve always had worse,” Kim pointed out. “I dread to think what it would take for you not to have had worse.”

“Maybe losing my best friend and my purpose in life in one go,” Will said. “That sounds worse.”

That landed with a thud, as well it might, but it was too late, or early, for subtlety. There was a short silence. Kim said, “Yes. Well.”

“Just saying. You’re making a lot of fuss about my hand, but I don’t think you’ve slept the night through since Etchil, and you look shocking.”

“Thank you.”

Will sighed internally. “Look, you don’t have to talk to me. But if you want to, it’s three in the morning.”

“Does the time make a difference?”

“Don’t you know?” Kim’s expression suggested he didn’t, and perhaps he wouldn’t. He was not much of a man for confidences, or intimacies. “Three in the morning, or whatever ungodly hours, you can say things then. It’s sort of allowed. On watch in the small hours, that’s when people brought out private stuff, the things they didn’t want to say in daylight, or to have anyone bring up later. You could say it then and not have anyone hold it against you. Like it never happened, you never said it. But you got it off your chest all the same.”

“Did you do that?”

“Never had much I wanted to talk about. I had a few men talk to me, though.”

“A confessional time of night,” Kim said. “I do know what you mean, in fact. Except most of my threes in the morning have been spent in nightclubs, where people would be too drunk to listen, or understand.”

“Well, I’m sober now.”

“A rare and precious state.”

Kim leaned back against the wall, shoulder to Will's. The kettle hissed gently on the gas ring. Will waited, because three in the morning was also a good time to be quiet, and he wasn't going to push.

"The thing is," Kim said at last. "The thing is."

He stopped again as the kettle began to whistle, busied himself with making tea. Will watched him move around with untidy hair and the cheap, scratchy dressing gown, looking for all the world like an ordinary person. He took the mug that Kim handed him with a word of thanks, and waited some more while Kim resettled himself on the rickety camp bed, which complained as usual.

"Far be it from me to criticise the furniture, but really, this thing is God-awful. Oh Lord, Will." Kim inhaled deeply. "The thing is, I've lied to you."

"What, again?" Will demanded, a shock of alarm going through him. "What the—? When? What the hell is it now?"

Kim was waving a hand. "Not recently. I meant, I've lied to you a great deal over the course of our...of knowing you. I made your acquaintance under false pretences, and won your trust that way, and lost it more than once. Deservedly so."

"You had your reasons."

"I always have reasons. You can find reasons to do anything if you try hard enough. I've justified a lot of lies in my time, and look where it's got me." He exhaled. "And what's worrying

me now, you see—this is three in the morning rules, yes? You won't hold this against me?"

"Course not," Will said, hoping that was true.

"Then, what is worrying me now," Kim said deliberately, "is the question of whether you will ever trust me again. Whether you *can*."

"I said I could," Will reminded him.

"If I didn't let you down, yes. Which suggests you fear I will do exactly that. That you expect it, in fact, as was made very clear by your reaction just now. I'm not asking for reassurances," he went on before Will could speak. "The very opposite. I haven't earned reassurances. I did the damage: it's up to me to mend it. But, at this ungodly hour, I will admit that I'm very afraid I did too much damage, that what I hurt will never quite heal. That you'll forever, in the back of your mind, anticipate another let-down, another betrayal. And perhaps that you ought to, because I am not, in the end, a trustworthy man. I certainly haven't been, to people who merited a great deal better from me." He turned the mug in his hands. "So if you wanted to know what's keeping me awake, well, there you have it."

Will sipped his tea. It was good and strong and probably unwise at this hour, but he needed it.

"You did a fair bit of damage," he said. "No denying it. And I'm not going to say I can forget about it straight off. You taught me not to trust you."

"Yes."

“And you taught me I could, too. When it came down to the bone, you didn’t fail me.”

“I wish that were true.”

“It is true. As far as it goes, anyway.”

“Quite. How far is that?”

Will was far too tired to pick his way through the complicated knot of his relations with Kim: the lies, the truths, the concealments and denials, the dense, intricate mess of feelings and hurts that tangled them both up. Carefully unpicking things wasn’t his job anyway. Kim did that; Will preferred a more forthright approach.

But *You did it, so take the consequences* wasn’t going to do much good here. Kim was taking as many consequences as he could carry, and not piling them on Will either. This was the first time he’d talked about things since they’d got back to the bookshop.

And it was a truth, a raw three-in-the-morning truth. That felt important, something that couldn’t go unacknowledged, because Kim didn’t find it easy to bare himself.

“*Timon of Athens*,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“The play. There’s a line in it, I quoted it to you when we were arguing, back last year—”

“I wonder men dare trust themselves with men’, yes? I recall the occasion.”

“I don’t know how you remember this stuff,” Will said. “But it’s the question, isn’t it? Trusting someone, trusting yourself to trust them—which you have to—and trusting the other person trusts you to trust them, even. Because it wouldn’t be much good me saying *I believe you* if you were still sat there stewing over whether I might not. Am I making sense?”

“If I don’t look too closely at the words.”

“Sod off. Point is, when people talk about earning trust, that always sounds odd to me, because if you could be sure the other person wouldn’t ever let you down, trust wouldn’t come into it. It’s like faith: the whole point is you don’t get a guarantee. You dare to do it. You have to take a leap.”

“A leap in the dark?”

“It’s three in the morning,” Will said. “Doesn’t get much darker than this.”

Kim’s slim fingers were closed around the mug, hugging its warmth, knuckles prominent. “Why would you take that leap?”

“You tell me.”

“I can’t promise not to let you down.” He sounded like it hurt to voice that. “I said I’d try not to, and I will, but one never knows, does one? It may not be within my power.”

“No. Perhaps not. But you can promise not to lie to me,” Will said. “You can do that and keep it. Not small lies, not big ones, not the ones where you seem like you’re telling the

truth but actually you're answering a different question or leaving the important thing out—"

"How well you have come to know me."

"You can promise that much, Kim, and keep it. If you want to. And if you don't want to, you don't have to, but if you want to fix the damage—"

"Unfortunately, promises are just words, and words aren't worth much. Particularly not a liar's word." He gave a painful smile. "'Grant I may never prove so fond, To trust man on his oath or bond.' *Timon* again."

Will took a deep breath. "If you promise, I'll believe you."

The silence was absolute, inside and out. They were in the heart of London, a teeming city of millions, and they might have been at the ends of the earth.

"Could you?" Kim said at last. "Really?"

"I can do what I want, mate."

"Will—"

"I'm serious. Leap of faith, right? If you make me that promise, I'll trust it, because I choose to. Not because I'm a gullible idiot, before you ask"—at least, he hoped not—"but because I'm giving you the credit for being serious about this, and myself the credit for judgement. If you don't think you can keep the promise, don't make it. Really don't. But if you do, I'll trust it."

Kim swallowed audibly. Will could see the lines of his throat working. “That is the devil of an offer, Will. I’m not sure I’ve ever had an offer like that. Do you—Of course you mean it. You always mean it. Christ, I would like to live a day in your skin, just to know what it feels like.” He stared ahead. “And I would like to fall on this with cries of gratitude but I don’t—I can’t but wonder what happens if I let you down in this too.”

“Then I’ll be pissed off,” Will said. “Because you aren’t going to accidentally trip and lie to me, are you? If you do it, it’ll be because you chose to do it, chose to break faith like a shit, and we both deserve better than that. You can *do* better than that.”

“You think so?”

“You can do what you want, just like me. You’re a grown man, and a clever one, and in control of your own actions, so don’t make excuses.” That had come out a bit strong. He gentled his voice. “We’re talking about leaps of faith here. Maybe you should take one on yourself.”

“I hardly—” Kim began and then he stopped, clamping his mouth shut. “No. Yes. Yes, you’re right, aren’t you? It’s much easier to say *I can’t help it* than to actually make the effort. Another lie.”

Will shrugged, and sipped his tea. Kim sat in silence for a moment, then twisted to look at him. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“I promise. William Darling, I promise that I won’t lie to you again, by commission or omission or misdirection. You have

my word—I'd say *for what that's worth*, but it should be worth something and on this occasion it will be. It is. This will doubtless lead to you hearing things that you'd rather not, but you asked for it."

"No change there, then," Will said. "All right. I believe you, Arthur Aloysius whatever it was Secretan. I'm taking your word, and I trust you to keep it."

Kim breathed out. "Thank you, Will." The words were barely audible. "Thank you."

Will met his eyes, held the gaze. "Then we're all right, you and me. Look, come here. You're tired."

He lay back cautiously on the unforgiving camp bed, settling on his right side. Kim rose and turned off the light, and came to him in silence, nestling close because it wasn't like there was much space for two grown men on here, and maybe because he needed to be close. Will draped his sore arm over Kim's shoulder, throbbing hand resting on the coarse material of the borrowed gown.

"Bet you're missing your velvet," he muttered.

"What—oh, this ghastly garment? Yes, it's horrible. Almost as horrible as your camp bed."

"You're a martyr. Don't know how you stand it here."

"I'm thinking of it as penance. This thing's virtually a hair shirt, after all."

Will brushed a kiss over his brow. Kim curled closer, into him and into a silence that felt better, as if something had been cleaned out, and might start healing at last.

Soon, they slept.

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Will Darling and Kim Secretan return for the final episode of the Will Darling Adventures in SUBTLE BLOOD.