Find a Map and Draw a Straight Line
by simplyprologue

Summary

Mac decides to do what she best knows how to do, and puts thousands of miles between herself and her problems, covering a three-week NATO fact-finding mission in Northwest Pakistan. She might uncover as much of her emotional trauma as she's trying to bury; the year is no longer 2007 and Will isn't ignoring her calls, even if he's still the one she's running from.

Notes

A/N: This was inspired by a gamut of things, but probably most influential among them, a message I received from mcmacthenewsroom on tumblr at the beginning of an eight hour train ride home for spring break, which gave me plenty of time to stew over narrative and plot. Thanks to Pippa for letting me ramble to you at (for me, anyway) ridiculous hours of the night.

Title and chapter titles taken from Snow Patrol's "Set Fire To The Third Bar." This fic takes place in January 2012. All newsworthy events have been fictionalized. Warnings for violence in later chapters.
“So she went?”

Will shifts in his seat at the table in the corner of his office, not quite avoiding looking her in the eye but not quite managing to maintain any eye contact, either. “Well, it was Mac who was specifically invited. So yeah, she went.”

“Is she allowed to do that, as an EP? I mean, isn’t that a bit unusual?” Nina asks over the plastic lid on her Starbucks latte, the pink of her lipstick imprinted on the rim.

Seated across from him, she looks largely out of place in the newsroom. But since Mac left on Christmas Eve, she’s been visiting him at work more and more.

“The British Ambassador to Pakistan is her godfather,” he explains, trying to not sound as oddly defensive as he feels. “She and the NATO delegate in charge of the fact-finding mission had the same tutor teach them French back when their fathers both worked in the British embassy in Moscow. Mac’s whole life is a bit unusual.”

So is his own, although a distinctly different kind of unusual. But Nina is normal, and their childhoods pass as something close enough to resembling each other that she doesn’t think to question his own. Whereas Mac has always been able to seek out the disruption of normal, and even if her queries were never pointed, he knows she knows. He’s told her.

“So it’s because they know her?” Nina asks, not pointed at all.

Will lifts an eyebrow.

“It’s because she’s the expert on the war in Northwest Pakistan. She spent twenty-six months in the region as a foreign correspondent with CNN. The last time we sent green people out—it didn’t go well.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” she’s quick to say.

It wasn’t, and he knows that. He knows it was Mac’s call as executive producer to send Maggie and Gary to Uganda, and she was the one who signed off on it. That doesn’t make it her fault either, since sometimes a gunman just shows up at the door of a school full of children or your father gets drunk at the distillery on the family farm and beats your mother for correcting him on how much money the hands are owed in their paychecks this Friday.

Mac may have spent two years in violence, but he was born in it.

It’s cruel, but as a system, it seems to be wholly random.

And it happens.

“Mac feels like it was hers,” he says, beginning to feel like this is a conversation he and Nina should not be having. “Besides, it’s not exactly my place to tell her no.”

Her smile is concerned. “She works for you.”
“That tends to be a sore point between us,” he says with a snort, lifting his own coffee to his lips.

“Her working for you?” she asks, eyebrows puzzling together. “You’re the managing editor, aren’t you?”

Will thinks he might do better not explaining the finer points of his relationship (working or otherwise) with Mac to his girlfriend. Not that she doesn’t know them, anyway. She used to report on those facts.

“Mac wanted to go back to Peshawar, and it’s a three-week NATO fact finding mission,” he says, trying to think of a way to deftly point out the differences between Mac’s career and Nina’s, or even his own. “Last night she had an interview with a member of the Pakistani Taliban. No one else could go over there and get us that kind of stuff, she’s unbelievably—”

“Good?”

Nina is clearly amused. Crossing her legs, she leans forward.

“Reckless. But yeah, good. That too.” He knows she’s noticed his insomnia, the late night phone calls to Mac that are morning phone calls for her. And he knows Mac probably finds them annoying, and he knows Mac can handle herself, but regardless. “I can’t think of anyone else in the newsroom who has the contacts and sources to get a high ranking member of a global terrorist group to talk on camera to Western media.”

She nods. “She’s amazing.”

“Charlie thought it was a good idea.”

It was Charlie that Mac got on her side first, before even broaching the idea with him. Rationally he knows it was so she knew that they would have the funding for it, but he can’t help but think she was expecting that he would have to be persuaded. But the way that Charlie keeps looking at him, even now that she’s left, Will doesn’t know if Charlie wanted him to tell Mac to go or ask her to stay.

“It is good for Mac,” Nina says, finishing off her latte and setting the paper cup down on the table. He laughs again. “She’ll get a Peabody for last night’s segment alone.”

And he’s already written out a check for the three hundred dollar submission fee. Will wonders what you get for someone when they win their third Peabody, if it’s leather or silver or gold, or if you just apologize for having spent your entire career inside the studio.

“So I guess you didn’t want to tell her not to go?” Nina asks, and he almost remarks on her tone before remembering that last night he was complaining about how he doesn’t like the way Jim handles being in his ear during the broadcast.

“Why would I want to?” Will can think of five distinct reasons off the top of his head, and two of them are the scar from the knife wound she got in Islamabad which he somehow only found out about a month ago. “She was excited.”

He hasn’t seen Mac that excited since the night of the American Taliban broadcast.

“You need her here as your EP,” Nina argues, referring back to their conversation the night before, if him complaining about Mac’s absence from the control room constitutes a conversation between two people. “I mean, not that Jim isn’t good. But three weeks is a big gamble on ratings.”
“I’m not… worried about the ratings,” he says, looking down at the table as he shifts in his seat again. “This is the sort of thing that Mac—that we want, for the show. Tomorrow they’re going up into the mountains and she’ll be the first American journalist to talk to tribal leaders in years.”

But Nina doesn’t look as impressed as he’d like her to be, only more concerned. “I just can’t see that making you guys likeable. I’m sure they have some things to say about US soldiers that won’t play too well with your viewing audience.”

“I don’t care,” he replies, probably too quickly. “I mean, I do care, but Mac wants—”

She smiles. “Mac cares about Northwest Pakistan more?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“And you care about Mac. More than the viewers.”

“It’s a good opportunity,” he says. “For all of us.”

Since he was attacked in Egypt Elliot hasn’t been too keen on leaving the country for foreign coverage. And even if she wasn’t born to violence like he was, Mac was born to this sort of instability, proxy wars and weaponized extremists and fragile administrations. It might not be good for her, as much as it’s not good for anyone, but she knows it.

It’s given her two Peabody’s, after all.

The Pearl-Continental was their second choice in hotel, after the Emiraat was booked by all the diplomats and delegates traveling to Peshawar. Their second choice, since he and Mac had been there when it was bombed in 2009, having dinner with a UN official that she had known from childhood when gunmen stormed the building.

“I’m fine,” she assures him, trying to adjust the webcam on her laptop. “They’ve changed the carpeting and everything.”

Jim is hardly reassured.

When Mac first received the offer from her godfather to put her name in with his friends in Islamabad as the go-to reporter to cover the NATO mission and talks, he assumed that he would be the one going with her. Not Neal. Or Maggie, who’s barely holding it together and isn’t even finished with her mandatory twelve sessions with the company psychologist after Uganda.

“How’s Maggie?”

Mac procures a sheaf of paper from outside the left boundary of the frame, studiously pretending to read the top report. “Why would the carpeting upset Maggie?”

“You know what I mean.”

He has a feeling that Mac is enrolling Maggie in her own trauma recovery program, which involves burying your trauma in even more trauma, in the hopes of winning a Peabody, and then using the trophy to tunnel your way out of the trauma. Jim’s seen that regimen of pain before, and he only hopes that it concludes before anyone starts day-drinking in their sweatpants in a bowling alley.
Failing that, he hopes that Maggie has better wrist technique than Mac ever did.

“She and Neal are downstairs sitting in on a meeting of NATO and Khyber Agency officials. They’re going over the itinerary and regulations for tomorrow, including what to do in the event of an IED blowing us all to hell or an ambush,” she says, fiddling with the alignment of the camera on her laptop. “I imagine I’ll see how ready she is when they come back to the room.”

“Why aren’t you sitting in?”

She snorts. “I think I remember what to do if the Taliban attacks.”

“Yes, well.” Looking up, he makes sure that no one else is listening in on this Skype call, and then cranes his neck to make sure that Nina and Will are still in his office. “Don’t get shot in the ass.”

“You better hope I don’t. We’ll be holding a memorial for my ass,” Mac mutters, picking up the reports again, actually reading them this time. “How’s the rundown looking for tonight?”

“I emailed it to you already,” he says, certain that she already knows that but wants him to go over it again so she feels less neurotic when she picks it apart verbally rather than in an email with a large wall of text. “And you’re probably important enough to be kidnapped, now.”

Not that he wants to see Mac in a fuzzy video with a bag over her head, but he’d like to see Will a little more engaged with the fact that Mac is once more in a warzone, and less engaged with a certain gossip blogger.

Who, when he turns around in his chair again, is exiting Will’s office on his arm.

“Is that Nina?” Mac asks, the corners of her mouth twitching into a frown. “Has she started coming by since I left?”

“Yeah, you should see how Gary gets anytime she walks into the newsroom,” he says, smiling wryly.

A column of honey blonde hair falls over his shoulder.

“Just Gary? You look like you’re about to go into an apoplectic fit.”

He sighs. Every damn time. “Tess, don’t you have a guest to prep?”

“Hi Mac!” Behind him, Tess wiggles her fingers at Mac’s face on his computer screen.

“Hello.” Mac’s frown shapes into a grin. “What’ve you got?”

Tess looks down at the notepad in her hands. “Ahmadinejad’s meeting with Hugo Chavez on the first stop of his Latin American tour. I’ve got a Georgetown professor who’s an expert on Venezuelan politics and a spokesperson from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Any tips?”

Sitting back in the chair at the small hotel desk he figures that Mac has commandeered as hers, she pushes her hair off her face. “I would concentrate on Chavez’s support of Iranian nuclear power. Don’t let the academic push you away from human rights, either.”

“Thanks,” she says, scribbling another line into her notes. “Good luck tomorrow! Today?”

Nine hours ahead, he’s going to say, before Mac cuts him off.
“Tomorrow. It’s not midnight here yet,” she says, waving when Tess nods appreciatively before heading back to her desk. Mac trails Tess, her eyes tracking behind him, before returning her gaze to where his face must be on her screen. “See? You’re doing great.”

“You could have called Jerry Dantana back up from DC.”

He really should be in Peshawar with her; Neal and Maggie won’t fight her if she tries to do something like pretend she hasn’t been stabbed.

“If I never see Jerry Dantana again it will be too soon.” Mac says on a long exhale, her nostrils flaring in annoyance. “And if you hadn’t felt the need to flee to New Hampshire back in September I’d have brought you along, but—”

“You’re letting Maggie flee!” he hisses, trying to moderate his voice down. “To Peshawar! Where I got shot in the ass!”

Shrugging, she waves him off. “Yeah, but I’m here.”

He knows his expression is less than enthusiastic.

“You were there when I got shot in the ass.”

“She’ll be fine. She listens to my directions better than you ever did,” she deadpans, arching a brow at him like a threat. But he’s certain he’s already a cautionary tale for many a Private on why when the Sergeant says to stay down, you stay down. And it’s not like he could embarrass himself that much more to Neal and Maggie.

He laughs. “And yet you leave me your control room.”

For a brief moment, she looks as if she’s about to supply him with a sharp retort, but then her face shuts. Turning around in his seat again, he sees that Will’s returned from escorting Nina out of the building.

“Go back to work, Jim,” she says, forcing a smile. “And re-work the c-block.”

“Wait, what—”

But she’s already disconnected the call.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks to everyone that commented on the first chapter! Question: I have a playlist of songs for this fic, would people want it published as a fanmix/soundtrack on 8tracks?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s nothing. Jerry Datana refuses to believe it, but while Operation Genoa did happen, it proceeded without sarin. There’s no reason to believe that her source with contacts inside al-Qaeda would lie. The two soldiers were kidnapped, the sale to al-Qaeda was contracted, and MARSOC raided the village. The Marines wore protective suits, but only because of false intelligence that the village was storage for chemical weapons. MARSOC rescued the men. And then it was over.

Her phone rings, the same DC number flashing on the screen of her Blackberry for the fourth time, and she elects to ignore it.

There’s nothing. The Genoa story is dead.

Sighing, MacKenzie lies back on her bed. Something, something is out there. Maybe tomorrow; that, for certain, is out there. And yesterday wasn’t too bad, either.

“Again?”

Closing her eyes, she presses the heels of her palms against her forehead. “I honestly do not believe Jerry knows anything about moderation. It’s over. It is so, so over.” She sighs. “What time is it?”

On the bed across from the one she and Maggie are working on, Neal looks at his watch, counting back silently. “Almost half past seven in New York.”

Swallowing down a tacky gulp of her own dry mouth, she reaches for the glass of water on her nightstand, takes a large sip, and exhales loudly.

“We should probably move outside.” She sits up and combs her fingers through her hair, flinching when she encounters knots. After Skyping Jim she slept, her body curled around her laptop and files and papers, hardly comfortable at all. With it nearly five in the morning in Peshawar and after a few hours of mediocre sleep, she’s sure she’s nowhere near tidy enough to appear on camera. “Let me do my hair and makeup first.”

And then promptly scrub it off after they finish, since the NATO convoy to Jalalabad leaves at eight o’clock, and she has no desire to sit in an armored vehicle for four hours with foundation melting off her face.

Not again, anyway.

Her back aches, and she pushes her shoulders back, rolls her neck. The Pearl-Continental, despite Jim’s hesitation, is very much a luxury hotel. The bathroom is well-lit, well-furnished, and deceptively Western. Still trying to rid her lumbar of pain, she pulls the magnified mirror close and reaches for her cosmetic bag.
The bags under her eyes are a flourishing purplish-blue, but they’ve been there since before she left New York two and a half weeks ago. It doesn’t bother her, she didn’t come to Peshawar for sleep. She came to see if she could do this again, maybe, without it breaking her. Or perhaps for a more petty reason, a small voice reminds her as she rubs tiny circles of concealer around her eyes. It was hard to breathe when Will didn’t want to forgive her, when he was being photographed with a different woman every week. But now he’s getting photographed with Nina Howard, has been for months.

And if he can move on, then so can she.

Wade didn’t work out, and since any potential date since Wade could simply Google her to find out that she’s a cheating whore, she figures it's good sense to call time of death on her love life.

With a careful hand, she applies blush. Her mother’s always admired her cheekbones. Blush, and then setting powder. Eyeliner, then a neutral eye shadow to soften it. Two coats of mascara, for the camera. Chapstick, lipstick; she tries to be less bothered by the fact that her lips aren’t as full as they used to be. Glasses, because beautiful women are apparently impossible to take seriously without them. Blinking owlishly, she runs a brush through her hair, running the blow dryer on cool over it for a moment, trying to make it look like she wasn’t sleeping with the entire left side of her head buried in the pillow.

“Just focus on your fucking job,” she mutters to her image in the mirror, picking up the hairspray, the hair covering that looks the best on television.

She had wanted Will to object. Not that she would have listened, or stayed, but she had wanted him to object. To show her travel advisories and wire reports on terrorist activity, to call her crazy and reckless and careless with her own life. To say that she could get hurt, or killed.

He had nodded, called it a good idea, and shrugged when Charlie looked at him like he was a lunatic.

So she’s here. And she’s spending a lot of her days stopping herself from checking out options for long-term assignment here. Reminds herself, instead. This is her job now. And on Friday she’ll fly back to Manhattan, and her job there, and she’ll make herself happy enough. For now, regardless. And if she can’t be happy enough, maybe she’ll send herself away again to forget that she’s not happy.

Fitted against the Peshawar cityscape outside their hotel, Mac looks just as home there on a foreign street as she does in the News Night control room. The sun is beginning to rise in Pakistan as Maggie stands, behind Neal and the camera, waiting with Mac’s phone (with its international capabilities) pressed to her ear for the cue from New York for their segment to begin.

If she had slept last night, she’d be paying closer attention, but Maggie strongly suspects that she and Neal are here as formalities. Actually, she doesn’t know why she’s here, but Mac asked, and Mac was insistent, so she’s here. It’s an excuse to not see the company shrink, so there is at least that. And Mac, she’s learned, can go drink for drink with her in the hotel bar.

(Neal, less so.)

Their ninety seconds go quickly, but she hears the segment before them over the phone too, and
she wonders if Will even notices that he changes his voice when he’s talking to Mac instead of any of the other correspondents, or a guest. It’s gentler than an anchor’s voice probably should be, and his accent wouldn’t pass Murrow’s muster. It’s stronger, and if she wasn’t paid to produce his broadcasts she wouldn’t know that the strong “-ah” sounds and the way that the endings are tripping off his words mean that he’s emotional. His face probably doesn’t betray it, not on camera, it almost never does.

Will and Mac exist in contrast, when they’re not moving in perfect sync. The more she adopts the persona of the foreigner, the British expert in Pakistan, the more he roots down into his Midwesternisms that take a native to decipher. But Maggie notices it in his voice, she’s been noticing it, or something like it, since Mac first walked into the newsroom almost two years ago.

She hopes Nina notices.

She thinks that if Mac noticed, they wouldn’t be in Peshawar. Or maybe this voice didn’t begin until Peshawar, and it’s that everyone in this fucking profession runs on a high octane blend of sexual frustration and social ineptitude.

“And you’re clear,” Jim says, voice clipped. He’s angry with her but that’s not new; she’s angry with him too, but it’s only made worse by the fact that she’s standing where he once stood.

“Thanks.”

She refuses to apologize for being asked to succeed in her career, not when that’s all she’s being trying to do since October.

“Can you put Mac on for me?” he asks after a moment. “We’ve gone to commercial.”

“Yeah, I know,” she says, choosing to not tell him that she has the rundown, it’s right her in her hand. “Just give her a minute, she’s unclipping.”

Just before she hands the phone over to Mac, she hears Will’s voice faintly asking, “Wait, you’ve still got her with us?”

She lets Neal and Maggie slide into the convoy before her before climbing up herself, yanking the door closed. They’re nearly seven thousand miles apart—being on the phone with him now it seems like inches on a map, where three years ago it felt like enough distance to drown in. At least back then she felt like she couldn’t go home to Manhattan, to DC, a control room anywhere.

Anyone would hire her now, since she’s proven herself to be put back together, a product worth investing in.

Anyone.

Like NBC’s foreign bureau. And ABC’s, since Diane Sawyer’s put in a good word for her.

She wonders if she’s so angry because she half doesn’t think it would help, or because she doesn’t know if it could. It didn’t, last time. But last time she wasn’t trying to get over Will. She was just trying to run from him.
Mac is a woman who prides herself on being able to control her circumstances, control what the people around her do, control what happens to her. But she doesn’t want to control Will. Not since the voicemail. Even the show has become lackluster, and she knows it, as she’s become more and more reluctant to exert any control during the show, over how he feels about the ratings, how he’s not going hard enough on the guests. So she decided to remove herself, and cede control wholly back to him. Control herself. Do her job, just a different one, one she knows she did well. One she won two Peabody’s doing.

“Does sitting in Kevlar ever get less uncomfortable?” Neal asks. “Just, you know, consulting the expert.”

She laughs. “Just be grateful I’m not making you wear a helmet, too.”

“Hey, last time I was in a bombing I wasn’t wearing a helmet. I did just fine.” He tugs at the straps securing him into his seat. “Not that I’m anticipating that happening. Why does this feel like I’m about to ride a rollercoaster?”

“You’ll be happy when you see the absolute lack of suspension some of these have,” Maggie says, squinting down at the Blackberry. “Well, not see. Feel. You’re not a hurler, right?”

“Ah, no.”

His assurances don’t sound exactly assured, and Mac doesn’t fault Maggie when she moves as close to her as possible.

“Mac?” she asks, head drooping. Mac wonders if she slept at all last night; Maggie’s proven herself to be an energetic drunk. “What happens if we get blown up? And like, don’t die. What do we do after? That wasn’t really in the brochure that HR gave us.”

Laughing lightly, she manages to topple Maggie over by pressing her elbow into her waist, until Maggie’s head lands on her shoulder.

“It’s a bit different than being shot at,” she says slowly, looking at Neal, who merely shrugs. “Bombs tend to be set off remotely. And even if they’re not, they usually eliminate the primary threat in the process of exploding.” Her mind forces to untangle the instincts she wrought the hard way. “And what brochure? The life insurance—never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Maggie snorts, her eyes drifting closed. “It the event of your death, AWM is not legally liable—”

(CNN wouldn’t have been either, if the universe had left her to bleed out on a street in Islamabad, if she hadn’t been so quick in pulling Jim back down, if she’d been a few feet closer to a few of her other close calls.

But it had never really bothered her. Now, though, she knows that liability rests solely with her, and they haven’t left the city in the time they’ve been here, and now here’s the big test.)

“You wait,” Mac says, jostling Maggie on purpose to quiet her as their driver enters the convoy, greeting them before sliding the key into the ignition with a precision that comes from practice, and turns the engine over. As the vehicle jerks to life, filling the cab with noise, she begins to talk again. “If a bomb goes off, you wait, and count to sixty. If you’re already under protection, I mean. If not, get there, and count to sixty. Count to sixty again, get low to the ground, and stay there. Get away from anything flammable, but you need to know—there’s really nothing that you can do. It’s already happened. Help people if you can. If you can’t help people, then you can do your job. That’s the difference between getting shot at and surviving an explosion here…”
Neal licks his lips, nodding nervously. “And if we get shot at?”

Grinning crookedly, she rolls her head along the back of the seat. “Do you want to complain about your Kevlar again?”

It’s an irreverent answer; she wonders if Maggie wishes that she had Kevlar in Uganda, if maybe then she wouldn’t have carried that boy on her back.

But she thinks it’ll put them more at ease than her real answer.

*I only made that mistake once—the only way you two are getting shot is because my corpse doesn’t hold up as a shield.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Distant Dark Places

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay! I couldn't quite get the second bit to feel right to me, but something finally clicked. At one in the morning before a workday, which is just typical. Thanks to everyone who read and commented on the last chapter! Thanks especially to mcmathenewsroom for her comment, which inspired it's own line of dialogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Jim, I think you’ll want to see this.”

It’s nearly midnight, and he wants to go home. But it’s nine o’clock in the morning in Pakistan, and he won’t sleep until Mac arrives safely in Jalalabad sometime before noon. Most of the staff is here, waiting for that call too.

But Will is at his apartment, with Nina.

He knows Will has seen the travel advisories for the tribal region. He knows Will has seen the special NATO passes from the Pakistani and Afghan governments.

He leans over Gary’s shoulder. “What is it?”

“I’ve got an email from someone at People asking for comment for a story they’re about to run on Mac. From when you two were in Pakistan.”

There’s an email open on Gary’s computer screen, from an email he doesn’t recognize, but with pictures attached that he does. It’s him, and Mac, outside the Pearl-Continental in 2009, as they entered the building the night of the bombing. He’s a boy there, following along at Mac’s heels, still so certain that she knew everything there was to know. That boy would have followed her everywhere; the man still would, too, but the man has responsibilities and duties.

“What are they saying?” he says, his shoulders becoming tense.

There are only two tabloid interpretations of that event—the one that casts her Mac as a martyr and a hero, and the one that casts her as reckless and the shrew. And given what the tabloids tend to say about Mac, he can guess which one it is.

“It’s a takedown piece,” Gary says, voice pointed with concern. “I think they’re still looking for a second source, which is why they’re asking for comment.”

Martin appears next to him, and plants a palm down on Gary’s desk. A moment later, Kendra crowds in as well. “Why would they be looking for a second source? It’s People magazine.”

“This is the same story that Nina was going to run a year ago,” Gary says, scrolling through the pictures in the email.

Gritting his teeth, Jim braces for the images. The ones of them going in, of course, are perfectly fine CCTV security footage from the office building across the street that was made public after
the attack. The ones of them coming out—the audible reactions from Kendra and Martin at the sight of them covered in plaster and blood draw Tess to them, as well.

“And *People* couldn’t have found it themselves?” Kendra asks, leaning in closer.

Jim heaves another sigh, scrubbing his hands over his face. It’s tempting to become angry, but it’s nearly midnight he’s too tired to be angry and now there’s work to be done. “No, because Nina only got it from a voicemail that I left for Mac. No one—no one alive, anyway—would know where to go digging for this except me, Mac, three members of the Marines special forces, and Nina, who only knows because she hacked Mac’s phone.”

Martin’s eyebrows lift towards his hairline. “So Nina gave this to—”

“Why?” Kendra asks, straightening.

Tess fumbles for the phone on Gary’s desk. “Well, where’s Mac right now?”

Jim barks a laugh. “If she’s trying to make Will care less about Mac being in Peshawar she’s not going about it the right way.”

Not that he’s entirely convinced that Will even really *cares* in more than a cursory professional way. Although, he’ll admit, that’s more than how much Will cared two years ago, three years, four, when Mac was furiously typing emails to him and wiping away tears that he dutifully didn’t notice in the smallness of their barracks and hotel rooms and tents.

Throwing her hair back over her shoulder, Tess shakes her head, still looking at the grainy security pictures. “No, I mean—Nina knows she’s on a sinking ship.”

Jim realizes that Tess and the others have a little (or to be honest, *a lot*) more faith in Will than he does.

Then again, none of them have seen Mac bleeding out on foreign pavement with Will’s name in her mouth.

So there’s that.

“She also had to have known this would get traced back to her.” Gary’s tone is disbelieving, or would be, if any of them actually believed that Nina Howard was above this sort of thing. There isn’t a person left in the newsroom who isn’t aware of the fact that less than a year ago she was regularly committing felony extortion and was an accessory to illegal phone tapping.

“She doesn’t care,” Tess scoffs. “She’s scuttling the ship.”

Jim mutters an obscenity under his breath. “And she’s taking Mac with her.”

“What does the story even say?” Kendra asks.

Gary scrolls back up to the text of the email, but Jim doesn’t let him get farther than that. He doesn’t know what *People* has to say, but they’re not going to the ones who get to talk about what did or didn’t happen in Peshawar. It happened to him, and it happened to Mac. Not some gossip columnist friend of Nina Howard’s who gets to do their “reporting” from their whitewashed cubicle.

“That Mac almost got us killed in the bombing,” he says, flatly, planting his hands on his hips and looking steadfastly at the floor. “Terrorist attack,” he amends, laughs bitterly, and then shrugs.
For a brief moment he looks up, sees all of them looking at him intently, and then looks to the floor again.

“Nina got her hands on a UN report to fill in the details, I think,” Jim continues. “It’s... public but pretty well buried, thanks to Ambassador McHale and—a British delegate, the man we were meeting with that night, died in the initial blast. The building was collapsing and we could either stay and hide from the gunmen in the hotel or make a run for it. Mac decided we should run, and we ran. US Marines were able to grab us, and told us to stay down. I got shot. She got grazed. Which to Nina means that because of Mac, I almost died, since in the end the hotel didn’t collapse. Obviously. Since they’re staying there now.”

Only because the Emiraat was out of rooms.

“Well.” Tess swallows pointedly, like she’s run out of anything pertinent to say after that.

The others just stare at him.

Without warning, a flash of anger surges through his tiredness, and Jim finds himself lashing out at Gary’s filing cabinet, his foot putting a solid dent into the bottom drawer.

“Fuck!” he shouts, and then circles around towards Mac’s office to call and see if Charlie is still in his office.

At first he thinks that something happened to Mac. It’s Charlie calling at nearly one in the morning, and Will barely lets it go to the second ring before picking his phone. It’s not Mac, not that Charlie will tell him what it is, except that it’s enough that he has to go back to work. So he wonders if it’s something to do with Jerry Dantana’s white whale that he’s not supposed to know about, tells Nina to go back to sleep, gets dressed, and calls down to the doorman to hail him a taxi.

He’s not exactly what he would classified as awake when he arrives back at AWM, but it’s close enough that if there’s a pot of coffee somewhere in the building, he’ll be able to function.

When he sees the expressions on Charlie and Jim’s faces, he decides he needs a scotch instead.

“What did I do now?” he asks, dropping his coat off his shoulders and down onto one of the chairs opposite Charlie’s desk.

There is a moment of silent conversation between Charlie and Jim, before Jim shrugs and takes a step back. Will nearly rolls his eyes.

“What?”

Charlie takes a bracing sip from the tumbler in his hand.

Will sighs. “What?”

“There’s a story out there, about Mac. Well, and Jim. People has it,” Charlie says, leaning into the conversation in a way that Will knows that this is just a preface.

“Okay,” he says, nodding. He doesn’t know why he’s here in the middle of the night over a tabloid deciding to run something on Mac, but based on the way that Jim is standing with his arms crossed
and looking like he’s ready to fight someone, he figures someone out there is slandering her name.

“It’s the same story that TMI was going to run a year ago,” he continues.

“The same story that Nina was going to run a year ago,” Jim corrects, standing up straighter.

Okay, he knows that no one is precisely overjoyed by the fact that he’s dating their former tabloid hound, or whatever they used to call her, but seriously. “You have go to be fucking kidding me with this, she’s not—”

“Jim says that Nina got the story from one of the voicemails that Reese ordered to be hacked from her cell phone, or whatever that proper terminology is,” Charlie says calmly, which only serves to annoy him more.

Will rolls his eyes, throwing up a hand in Charlie’s direction. “That Reese ordered to be hacked. Jesus, Charlie, she’s not—”

“She profited, didn’t she?” Jim asks quietly. “What was her price? Fifty thousand to make something go away? She was going to let you pay her off.”

“That’s hardly the point. She didn’t run the story!”

“Well, Jim believes she’s the only one who knows the story.”

“And how the fuck does Jim know—”

“Because Gary found out a year ago that the story was going to be run because he was friendly with some TMI people who had no idea why an ACN primetime EP was the target of celebrity gossip,” Jim answers forcefully. “It’s the same exact story. The only people who know where to look for the story are me, Mac, three members of the Special Forces, and your girlfriend.”

“Or maybe People found the story on their own.”

Jim lets out a contemptuous laugh.

“People is staffed by extortionists and journalism school dropouts who couldn’t source a UN report if I left them fucking breadcrumbs to sealed fucking reports, Will.” Unfolding his arms, he moves from where he’s leaning against the shelves lining the outside wall of Charlie’s office, inward. “I got them sealed. A year ago when this first came out.”

“Nina wouldn’t—”

“Nina would,” Jim says, voice louder and harsher than he’s certainly ever heard it, and Will wonders if that’s because Mac has been around to be loud for him or if it’s because Mac had been around to keep him in check. “Nina would, because you’re looking a little too keenly at Mac now, and she needed to remind you that Mac fucked up. So she passed it off to a friend at People since her own platform got shut down, by you if you could remember anything at all from the past six months—”

They’ve only been dating for three months, Will thinks, but he knows that being forced out of the tabloid business has been good for Nina.

“Okay, you—”

“Jim, take a breath,” Charlie, who has been content to watch this interplay without saying anything,
interrupts.

Jim huffs, folding his arms again. “Well, someone here needs to protect Mac.”


Will feels himself balk, turning back to Jim. “I’m not?”

But it’s Charlie who answers, over the rim of his glass of bourbon. “I tried to reserve my judgment over you dating someone who we have all known to willingly commit felonies for her bottom line and hit counts, but I believe judgment day has come.”

“She has nothing to gain from this,” Will argues. “And I don’t like your insinuation—”

Because, of course, Charlie would have no problem with him dating someone who cheated on him, dumped him, and calmly left the destruction in her wake. Charlie hired that someone, of course.

“Well that’s the woman you’re in bed with, Will!” Jim exclaims, his arms coming apart once more and flinging outwards.

There is a very short moment where Will is half anticipating Jim to follow that momentum forward, and hit him.

“His face is insured for two million dollars, but maybe you should go back downstairs now,” Charlie says mildly, coming out from behind his desk to refill his glass at the sidebar. Raising his eyebrows, he looks at Jim in a way that makes it apparent that he is not making a suggestion.

He nods, tightening his mouth into a grim line. “Yeah.”

Fisting his hands, Jim barrels out of the office, and both Charlie and Will watch him leave.

Will entertains the notion of asking Charlie for a drink, but reminds himself that he generally makes a point of never asking for liquor from someone he’s pissed at. Regardless, he thinks that Charlie’s not offering tonight, either.

Draining his glass of half its contents, Charlie makes him wait.

“I’m pretty sure your staff is downstairs right now putting in an order for shirts that have some trendy hashtag on them declaring their fealty to MacKenzie, and in all honesty I’m going to have Millie call down and make sure whoever is in charge puts me down for a medium,” he finally says, with a droll look down into his bourbon. And then looks up at him, face softer, but still unyielding. Disappointed, truly, if Will would put a name to it, but doesn’t. “Do you have a defense for her that isn’t entirely grounded in your complete denial of the fact that MacKenzie has, once again, placed herself in mortal peril in her attempts to run away from you?”

Feeling awkwardness roll over him, he shrugs.

“I thought she changed,” he offers. Then, trying to think it through, “Why in the hell would she—”

“Because you love MacKenzie,” Charlie says, wearing a sardonic grin. “And I take it she knows that. And she knows her time is up, so she might as well go out swinging.”

If it was anyone else, Will would protest. But the hour is late and it’s never been of any use denying his feelings for Mac to Charlie. Or Nina, it appears, but he as good as set his fate with her back in October.
“How do we kill the story?” he asks, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Charlie drains his glass. “Gary is trying to find them something on Tony Hart to trade.”

“Wait, seriously?”

He shrugs. “Or Jane Barrow. Both of them need punishing.”

“What about me?” he asks, almost too afraid to pose the question.

Charlie snorts, eyeing him with a look on his face that is at once both fond and exasperated. “William Duncan McAvoy, you’ve already put yourself into your own special hell.”

He was angry when he left Charlie’s office. By the time he reaches the elevator lobby, all but punching the call button, Jim is shaking with fury.

Did Will even flinch when Mac sent herself to a war zone after they broke up? By what calculus does what Mac did merit twenty-six months of what they went through, if when he’s presented with evidence of Nina’s betrayal all he can do is defend her of crimes he knows she’s committed in the past? What variable has changed?

He wants to know what Nina did that made her more forgivable than Mac.

Did Nina get shot at? Did Nina get stabbed? Did Nina sob his name out while she thought she was dying eight thousand miles away from home? Did Nina get to take his bullshit punishments, put up with his crises of confidence, deal with the endless reminders of her sins?

The elevator opens out onto the newsroom floor.

Jim takes a deep edifying breath, and heads back to the conference room where Gary is leading the damage control.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Miles From Where You Are

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter! I got much more of a response to it than I thought I would, and I am so thankful for all of you who are enjoying this story. This chapter in particular borrows heavily from another one of my fics, Brushfire Battles, which is a part of the Dustland canon. You don't need to have read the fic to understand any of what's going on this chapter, but if you're looking for more background on what Mac is talking about and haven't read the Dustland series, you can read more there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jamrud is a dusty mountain town, a wedge of red mountain soil under a crisp blue sky, seamed in by steep snow-capped mountains. The flowers are the same as the last time she passed through. Vibrant poppies and amaranthus, datura and jawari. The NATO convoy has been stopped in Jamrud for an hour, waiting on a fuel pump to replace a broken one on the supply truck they’ve taken with them.

So MacKenzie has stopped, and is smelling the flowers.

“It’s so beautiful.”

“That it is.”

Her memory had washed it with grey. Planted the line of demarcation that folded her life into neat befores and inescapable afters and where Jamrud fits is a place in her life that she’s committed into a tidy little box so it can no longer overwhelm her.

Notebook clenched in white-knuckled fingers, Maggie appears beside her in the Jamrud marketplace.

“Was it like this? The last time you were here.”

Mac smiles, trying to look less than she feels—too much, she’s feeling too much of it, in saturated hues and lively colors, sharpened by happiness and beauty and pain and sorrow. She feels it in New York, she always feels it, but across the Atlantic and away it’s filtered by the many miles and feet of tinted glass at the windows of skyline, through the glass on the lens of a camera, through the screens in the control room.

A television screen is a tidy box.

“The last time I was here it was 2009 and it was to cover the bombing of that mosque over there. Seventy-two people died. The next day, the NATO supply trucks coming in to relieve the victims was attacked. The month before the bridge we crossed coming into town was bombed, too. All Taliban.”

Maggie’s face creases with confusion. “Why would the Taliban bomb a mosque?”

“The tribal police manning the checkpoint we’ll be going through pray there,” she answers quietly,
directing Maggie to stand closer to the stalls and let her be on the outside. Turning away from the NATO soldiers in their tan and Kevlar and helmets, she looks out towards the mountains again. “It is beautiful.”

And she means it.

They begin to walk.

(Her eyes follow the crowd, the cars. Dart up and down, tracing buildings and stalls and boxes and bags. Neal and Maggie don’t, so she does, even if they’re surrounded by military and trained operatives.)

Almost to test herself, she walks up to a flower vendor, and argues him down to half his asking price for a small bouquet of purple amaranthus. One, she tucks thoughtlessly behind Maggie’s ear where her scarf has slipped, revealing a swath of blonde hair.

Maggie fingers gently touch the petals on the flower. “How do you do it?”

“How do what?” Mac asks, bringing the blooms to her face before placing them into her bag. Maggie doesn’t answer right away, but her face is set in determined thought, she so waits.

“Come back?” is the question she finally poses, before her shoulders slump with something not entirely resembling defeat. “How do you make the pain go away?”

Managing to catch her laugh, Mac smiles instead. It’s such an innocent inquiry, and for half a moment Maggie appears to be the naive Midwestern girl she met almost two years ago. But she knows that despite how her foray into Uganda ended, Maggie never intended for the trip to redirect her pain onto a different part of herself. No, unlike herself, Maggie never asked to be taken apart into someone she couldn’t recognize.

It just happened anyway.

“Well, taking the antidepressants the company psychiatrist prescribes are a good start,” Mac says, dryly, reiterating some of Charlie’s first words to her after she signed her AWM contract. “It took me five months before I finally filled the prescription. Before then it was a lot of drinking beer in the middle of the afternoon, and then whiskey at night. And well, eventually you need more and then more of it, until that has swallowed you whole, too. I can help you Maggie. But not if you go down that route.”

Biting her lip, Maggie shrugs. “The antidepressants… I’ve been on them before. I’ve been on Xanax for years. I don’t know if it’ll help, I don’t know if—”

“They won’t make you forget, you mean.”

A statement, not a question.

She spent months trying to forget before learning that that is an absolution that no one can give to her; she would have to seek her peace in other ways.

“Yeah.”

“The trick isn’t forgetting.” She feels her smile shape itself into something smaller, and she shrugs. “Look at Neal. Do you think he’s forgotten the London bombings?”

No one ever forgets anything. It’s what makes forgiveness such a heady drug.
“What’s the trick, then?” Maggie asks quietly.

Their pace slows.

After all that has happened, she’s wary to dispense advice to Maggie like she used to. But this isn’t Maggie being handed a hundred dollar bill and being sent on her way with a pat on her head and an overstuffed duffle on her back, or Maggie needing help manipulating her way back to having power in her relationship, or Maggie needing to know which malaria pills work better than others.

The answer is much more complex. But it might actually save her.

“You need to die,” is all that Mac can think to say. “Everything you think you are, you’re not. Let everything you think you are die.” That was the hardest lesson; if she was going to move forward, she had to leave all of herself behind. “Then you’ll find you have room for the pain.”

“You love Will,” Maggie blurts out, and then blushes, her face contorting into a sheepish expression. “That didn’t—if you died, then wouldn’t—”

“Love is pain, too,” she laughs, and then groans. “If you’re asking how to fall out of love you’re asking the wrong woman.”

This is not a conversation she should be having with an AP. But the whole world already knows her business, and if she can prevent Maggie from tripping along into any more of her mistakes, then at least she’s helped one person.

“But what about Nina?”

Mac barks a laugh. “Why do you think I’m here?”

“I think that love has nothing to do with proximity,” Maggie says, almost sternly.

Mac lifts an eyebrow at her.

“The day you first came to AWM, you told me what to do. When Don bailed on me. For the longest time I thought you were talking about your relationship with Will,” Maggie explains, frowning down at the ground that she’s about to step on. “We all did. That’s why everyone thought he cheated on you. I told them about our conversation.” Sighing aggressively, she tilts her head back. “I shouldn’t have stayed with Don. We made each other worse. I was an idiot.” And she must realize what that could also imply, looking straight ahead, then to Mac, and back again. “Not that—”

Snorting, Mac tightens her grip on the strap of her bag. “Oh, I’ve become pretty well reconciled with my sins.”

If nothing else, she knows what she’s done.

And this—this she’s done well. But maybe now she can do it without it rending her into sharpened fragments, a mess of splintered bone and bloodied skin that only wants to claw its way back home, but fights the instinct at every urge.

Looking at Maggie, she sighs.

“There was a boy,” she says, reaching up to fix Maggie’s scarf. “He was nineteen, and he would pick these flowers, press them, and mail them to his mother who is a florist in Ohio. Sometimes he would pick them for me, too. And then he died.” Pursing her lips together, she disallows herself to
be mired in it. She shrugs, touching the flower in Maggie’s hair. “What I’m saying is, without him, this flower wouldn’t mean anything to me.”

Maggie’s eyes go wide. “How did he die?”

“Ambush. Not far from here. On the Afghanistan side of the border, though,” Mac answers, as if that means they’re any safer here. But that’s hardly the point. “I thought I could continue being the woman I was when I was with Will, the first time. The woman I was with Brian. And then I got fired, because that woman was too reckless, too unyielding.”

That woman sent herself into exile to be vilified and broken, until her only options were to die or be buried. Mac remembers the exact color of the ink in the pen the psychiatrist who wrote her final failed mental evaluation used. *Shows no aversion to risk, possibly suicidal. Displays visible and hallmark symptoms of PTSD. Unfit to remain in a combat zone.*

“And then what?”

Blinking hard, Mac clears that color from her vision.

“Then someone gave me a second chance. I stopped drinking. Filled that first prescription of Prozac. Stopped thinking I was the same woman I was back in 2007.” Not that she has an answer for why the woman she is loves Will, but it’s there, a constant. But the woman she is now was birthed with *News Night* and her position as his executive producer. Mac wonders if no matter where she goes now, she’ll be tied to him, even if she decides to figure out how to not be in love with him. But in that moment in 2010, they were both so full of potential.

Sighing, she pulls a single flower from the bouquet, and holds it in front of her.

“Looking at amaranthus still hurts, but I remember how happy he was, when he picked it. How happy I was.” Here, in this of all places. If she forgives who she used to be, she might open herself up to that joy. But instead she drops the flower back to her side. “I have a dead boy too, Maggie.”

She swallows hard. “Daniel died because they were shooting at me.”

“And Zack died because he got out of the convoy to come for us,” Mac answers firmly. “He died in my lap.”

Maggie disguises a trembling exhale as a cough, looking out hard until her tears dissipate. “I wanna be tough. Like you. And Jim. And Neal.”

Again, Mac has to stop herself from laughing. She is sweet, in a way, and Mac doesn’t want to spoil Maggie’s image of her by explaining that there were nights when she first came back to the States where she would wake up screaming and drenched with sweat, her body sore from the exertion of her nightmares. Why else, after all, does anyone begin to drink at ten in the morning?

“Maggie, you *are* tough,” she says, trying to look at her with a softness that only Charlie first gave her. “You ran through gunfire back into a building.”

“But I—” she begins, and then stops, and then shrugs, holding her notebook to her chest. “I can’t sleep. I can’t stop thinking about it. I keep thinking, what if I had just carried him in front?”

“You would be dead.”

“I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve to be alive.”
Maggie’s eyes are big and pleading and one Mac knows well, from her folder full of dead boys and the two Peabody’s sitting on her shelf back in New York.

“Well, it’s time to figure it out, right?” she asks. “You ready for this afternoon?”

Should, of course, they ever actually arrive at their destination.

“I’m sure they’re going to find my Pashto offensive. But yeah.” Maggie shakes her head, and almost giggles, before saying with firmness, “I can do this.”

“Good.” Not that Mac is certain what she’ll do if Maggie can’t, but she thinks she’s hardly in the position to condemn. But for now, this conversation should probably be saved for the quiet of their hotel room or a bar back in Manhattan, where she’s paying substantially less attention to their surroundings. “You hungry? I think we were supposed to be having lunch by now. Is Neal still napping in the truck?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll go get him.”

Maggie darts forwards through the crowd, towards the taxi station where the convoy is parked, awaiting deliverance from the mechanic in Peshawar. She almost grabs Maggie back to remind her to be careful, but her intentions are interrupted by her BlackBerry ringing loudly in her purse.

Reaching around the posy of amaranthus, she extracts her phone from her bag, and brings it to her ear.

“It’s the middle of night, Jim,” she says with a frown.

Alone now, Maggie nearing the line of armored vehicles, Mac walks slowly forward. Up, down, sides, her eyes trace over her surroundings.

“Only for me,” he says, and even through a satellite signal she can tell that he’s annoyed.

“What’s up?”

He ignores her. “Are you in Jalalabad yet?”

“No, we’re still waiting on the lorry bringing the part from Hayatabad,” she says, trying to slide through the press of people. Easily, she slips around a booth, nearing the taxi station and garage. “Everyone’s scrambling to reschedule the afternoon.”

“And you?”

“I’m doing some shopping,” she answers flatly. “It’s one in the morning Jim, what’s gone wrong?”

“There’s a story. Back over here, in the realm of, you know, trivial bullshit and tabloid exploits.”

Mac sighs, closing her eyes for the briefest of moments. “What did Will do?”

“That would require a long and involved answer,” he says, laughing in a decidedly bemused fashion. “It’s looking like Nina has passed the Pearl-Continental story onto a friend. People is going to run it. I’m just—the UN might not be too fond of the image of you tagging along for this if the story goes to print. But we’re fixing it.”

Don’t bother, she wants to say about the story, but her mind latches immediately on to the immediate fact that this was Nina, again.
“Will didn’t know,” Jim clarifies. “But he tried to claim it wasn’t her. I don’t know, he’s with Charlie now.”

Biting her lip, she drifts to a halt, deciding to have this phone call away from Neal and Maggie.

“Jim, don’t do anything—”

Lifted off her feet by a thundering explosion, her hands fly in front of her face. Landing on the concrete yards away, her limbs splayed at improbable angles, she does not move.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
A/N: The response to this fic has been overwhelming, and I just wanted to thank all of you! Thanks to everyone who has commented or left kudos. I appreciate each and every one of you. Warnings for some minor violence, in this chapter. Nothing compared to what happened to Mac in the last though, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She doesn’t deny it. He thought that she would, even if from the time he called her from Charlie’s office to when she met him in the lobby of the AWM building any remaining foundation of doubt that he had managed to maintain had crumbled. But Nina doesn’t deny it.

“Why did you even agree to date me if—”

Nina’s lips twist into a sharpened grin.

“Why did you ask me out, if you knew I knew that—” He begins to interrupt but she looks half-astonished, holding up a hand, her smile growing wider for some inexplicable reason. “That you’re in love with Mac.”

And he knows that he can’t deny it. She’s heard him say the words.

Swallowing hard, he asks, “Why did you say yes?”

“Why did MacKenzie go to Pakistan?” she counters with a contemplative tilt of her head.

His immediate instinct is to tell her not to call her that, MacKenzie, it doesn’t fit in her mouth and she shouldn’t say it, she’s not friendly enough to call her that and it’s wrong. He calls her MacKenzie, and Charlie, and Jim.

But Nina keeps talking, musing her thoughts out loud.

“This time or the first time, really, I think it’s the same exact answer and we both know that’s true. You’re still in love with her, she’s in love with you. But you’re a stubborn ass who has planted himself on the moral high ground and she’s committed until the first sign of trouble, at which point she goes and martyrs herself for her convictions to remind herself of what a good person she is.”

He feels his mouth gape open.

A dozen disjointed rebuttals float in the front of his mouth, all waiting to be spit out with his anger, all saying that he knows MacKenzie and she doesn’t, she doesn’t know her at all, except that Nina does, a little bit, because she’s done the digging and the research and the surveillance. He doesn’t know who Mac is in Pakistan at all.

But what he knows is that his executive producer is committed for more than just the satisfying image of herself nailed to a cross.

“Mac is not—” Will begins to say, not bothering to keep his voice down. The lobby is deserted at
this hour, and the only ones listening are the night shift security guards.

“You two deserve each other really,” Nina says, somehow amused and sneering all at once. “I wasn’t a project, Will. I’m not here to play the Eliza Doolittle of tabloid journalism to your newscaster Henry Higgins. It was fun, until it wasn’t. I don’t take kindly to being used.”

“I didn’t use you,” he answers reflexively.

No more, perhaps, than Mac used him when she was still with Brian.

Which, to be fair, is now a lesson learned.

“But you did.” Crossing her arms, she leans her weight onto one leg, jutting her hip out. Then laughs. “Although, to be fair, I used you first. But you knew exactly who you were getting into bed with, with me.”

Rolling his eyes, he plants his hands on his hips. “You’re not a bad person, Nina.”

The laugh she gives in response is true, and genuine. “To you I am. Definitely to your staff.”

“You’ve gone after MacKenzie!” he splutters, hands flying from his hips forward, gesturing wildly.

“Twice, now. Actually,” she corrects him, holding up the proper amount of fingers a mere inches from his face. “I thought we knew who each other was, Will.”

Closing his eyes, he shuts his features, keeps his anger under control. There are two things he needs to be doing right now, he reminds himself. He needs to end things with Nina, and he needs to get her to keep People from running the takedown piece on Mac and the Pearl-Continental bombing.

(Shed almost died. He can feel the pounding of his pulse from his fingertips and his toes, and he keeps wondering, how in the fuck did he convince himself three years ago to just not care and how did he let himself do it again?

The need to say something is great, and he knows if the article goes to print it will go viral and he’ll say something, about collateral damage and unintended consequences, how people will still get hurt even if you’re trying to protect them.

It’s not the same, but his body sends adrenaline through his heart anyway.)

“Then why are going after Mac?” he asks more quietly, more calmly.

“To hurt you,” Nina replies, voice equally as quiet but hardly calm. Instead intense, and purposeful, eyes alight. “I thought you wanted to get over her. I could be that woman. Even if it was for six months, a year. But you have no interest in getting over her. And I think you’ll be very disappointed with how your relationship with her turns out.”

“I’m not going to let you get away with this with your hands clean,” he seethes, anger building itself over the devastation he’s refusing to let himself feel, the devastation rose from the resolution that crumbled into doubt even before she stepped into the building. “I know what you’ve done, I know who you’ve extorted. I prosecuted in this city, before the rest of it. I won’t let you drag her down because you feel intimidated by a better woman. She’s—she’s done nothing to you.”

“In my line of business? They never do.”
He snorts, half because of disbelief and half because he’s having trouble breathing. So he takes a moment, staring at the floor, before looking at her again. “Do you remember Valentine’s Day? Last year?”

“When you threatened me in the back room of the shitty bar your staff frequents?”

“I meant it,” he reminds her. “I’ll do it. I’ll take you apart. I have an hour of primetime, five nights a week. I can make it so that no one will hire you.”

Nina smiles tightly, and shakes her head. “No you won’t.”

“How are you so sure of that?” he asks, eyebrows rising at the challenge.

For a few seconds, she considers her answer. And then says, with an air of finality:

“Because MacKenzie won’t let you.”

Will balks, but knows that it’s not wholly inaccurate. It’s possible that Nina is planning to rely on what she imagines to be Mac’s martyr complex, when she should understand that right now, Mac is eight thousand miles away, conducting the interview of her life. So now he’s going to stop her, and it’ll be over by the time Mac and Maggie and Neal break for lunch.

“This won’t go your way,” he warns. “The People article. Mac’s a hero.”

“We’ll see about that,” she says, nodding with conviction, as she clutches her purse closer to her side, walking towards the exit. “And by the way? Tell her to come home. Before she gets herself hurt again. Despite… well, I’ve sort of always liked her.”

“Why?”

“It’s easy to be a handsome, rich, white guy behind an anchor desk in an empty studio.” She says with a shrug, still walking away. “I wanted to be Mac, once. I wanted all of it.”

“You could have,” he calls, disgust creeping up his spine. And not just with her. “You and me, we took the easy way—”

“I kinda like it,” she says, cutting him off, and then smiles. “Good luck.”

“Fuck you,” he scoffs, and she disappears into the night, and he fights every instinct to make sure that she’s made it safely into a taxi. No, he thinks. Nina Howard doesn’t need anyone’s help.

With her exit, he’s alone.

Will knows he should go back upstairs. But the soles of his shoes are trapped to the floor as his mind flashes the Pearl-Continental story through his mind again. A bomb, a dead UN official, and then the gunmen. Crumbling edifice and cracked columns, and Mac with her hand around Jim’s wrist, leading him blindly through the smoke, outwards. Trying so very hard not to die, and not for the first time.

Other explosions, other gunshots, other weapons.

He felt too much of his own pain to allow her any of her own, and when MacKenzie comes back to work on Monday, he’s going to remedy it.

*This* is his fault.
“What are you doing down here?”

He feels a small hand close around his arm, dragging him towards the elevators.

“She?”

“Will—what the—you need to be upstairs.” Hair in a ponytail, in clothes that resemble pajamas, she’s doing her best to push him forward with a stricken expression on her face.

“What?”

She stops, eyes widening. “You haven’t heard.”

With a creeping sense of dread, he quickly shakes his head, his shoulders moving into an abortive shrug. “I’ve been down here, taking care of Lady Macbeth or whatever you guys call her—”

“Wicked Witch of the Lower West Side, but that couldn’t be of any less importance right now, and what—”

“I broke up with her,” he clarifies, his own mind becoming distinctly less clear.

“Thank fuck,” she says with a sigh, for a few seconds the dread recedes, and Will wonders if she only came back because she heard about the *People* article. Until her nerves take her again, and she haves a hand violently in front of her face as if clearing away errant thoughts. “No, shit. Fuck. We need to go.”

“Sloan?” he asks, not fighting her when she directs them into an elevator.

Her mouth opens and closes around silently-formed words. “There was an explosion. Jim was on the phone with Mac, and he heard—he said it sounded like an explosion, and I figure he knows what that sounds like.”

Although her words are heard, they’re not quite processed beyond a mental litany of *dear god please no*. Not when he’s just figured this out.

Blinking rapidly, he watches the numbers signaling the floor increase. “How long—”

“Twenty minutes,” Sloan answers shortly. “Why do you think I’m dressed like this?”

“No one’s gotten ahold of them, there’s no other reporters—?”

There has to be *someone*, before his mind fills with images of smoke and rubble, of blood and limbs parted from their bodies. And with this comes a startling sense of knowing; had he known her at all during her three years gone, she would have come home long before anything had been allowed to hurt her.

Helplessly, she shrugs. “The sat phone is dead, and they were the only reporters right there, so—I’m sure Mac is fine. Mac knows what to do with this stuff, right?”

Exhaling raggedly, he watches the number meet their floor.

*Does it really matter?* he wants to ask her.

Will wonders if he had known about any of it, that Mac was at the Pearl-Continental when it was attacked, that she was in an ambush up in the Hindu Kush, that she stabbed in Islamabad and flown to Landstuhl, wonders if he would have told her stop.
Wonders what difference it would have made, if he had answered an email, or a letter, returned a phone call, if he had flown to Landstuhl and told her it was enough and to stop running and come home. But the fear, even now, holds him back.

Trapped—but what if she’s dead?

His stomach churns his dread into a bubbling panic, and the doors open with a chime.

Jim has people on the phone with the State Department. He has people on the phone with the Pentagon. He was people on the phone with NATO, with the UN, with Ambassador McHale himself, who has once again been awoken at a strange hour to be informed that Mac might be dead, but no one can tell him what precisely happened in Jamrud twenty-five minutes ago.

Everyone is on a phone, including Don now, and Elliot, even Charlie, and Jim circles the bullpen while his source in Islamabad keeps him on hold while he talks to his supervisor in the Pakistani military police.

He can barely keep himself on his feet, as his blood rushes through his veins and adrenaline blows his pupils wide and a dozen or so other fight or flight hormones twist down with his fury. The urge to clench his fists continues to grow, but there’s nothing to fight here so he continues to move, roving from desk to desk.

It builds and builds, twisting tighter and hotter.

Until Will appears from the elevator lobby with Sloan, and his fight suddenly has a direction. Barely thinking at all except for how good it feels to have his fingers shaped into a fist, he launches himself at Will.

(Twenty-six months as an embedded reporter, many of them with Special Forces. He may be small, but Mac has always made him larger.)

Later, he thinks Will might have let him.

It takes both Charlie and Don to pull him off, and by then his knuckles are bloodied.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
There Is No Peace That I've Found So Far

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks again for everyone's continued interest in this fic and the thoughtful, engaging comments! I'm so happy you guys are still liking this fic.

Warnings in this chapter for blood. Also my apologies if I've missed anything in editing. I have a huge headache that the 800mg of ibuprofen I've taken is not really helping as much as I'd like, but I wanted to get the chapter up tonight for you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

These are the moments where she wants Will.

When they first started dating, when she was first left by Brian, when she was lying to Will and sleeping with Brian because he would get drunk and call her and get her drunk too, when Will was first teaching her that she no longer was held to Brian’s standards, when she first started living by standards closer to Will’s, and then when that all fell apart—Mac knows that she ran away.

Ran away, and figure out her rules on the hardest terms, through death and blood and rubble, but she found her rules and standards and procedures and clung to them so tightly that in the end, they were all she had left. And all she wanted was for Will to be there like she was when she was crumbling away under the press of Brian’s will, to pick her up and hold her and somehow convince her she’s already just fine.

Eyes still closed, she has no idea how far the blast threw her. Her ears are ringing, her nerves alight. Curling into herself on the concrete and the rabble, her muscles tense. Mouth filling with blood and the bitter taste of adrenaline, she tests out bearing her weight on her hands. But her body is too shaken, her nerves too rattled, and she returns face-first to lying on the road.

She wants Will.

It should matter that he’s with Nina, that he brought Brian in to hurt her, that he only nodded in acquiescence when she decided to come here. It should matter, but she wants him, and his arms around her, and his voice telling her that she’s alright.

Will’s come through, since she came back.

But then she remembers.

Neal. Maggie.

Drawing in a clogged breath, she forces her eyes to open. A low pained noise in her throat, she pushes herself up again. First onto her elbows, next onto her hands, then her knees.
They followed Mac’s advice. Somehow, the truck didn’t flip, and they huddled inside of it, and waited. And waited, while Maggie chattered on about Mac was out there and he tried to hold off, trying to rationalize, trying to tell himself that Mac would be pissed if they didn’t follow her instructions since it was so recently given, but as the screams continued to grow in the wake of the explosion Neal could only grab the camera, turn it on, and tug Maggie out of the convoy with him.

“Thank you,” she breathes, eyes widening as they take in the remnants of the Jamrud taxi station, the blown out bits and pieces of the marketplace, the charred and hollowed out car. Those Neal notices first, before the mangled limbs and bloodied corpses.

He stops. “Fuck.”

“I don’t think she was…” her voice drifts off as three men in NATO fatigues carrying a woman missing the bottom half of her leg emerge from the crowd swelling at the periphery of the blast. “I don’t think she was close to that—to the bomb. Not that close.”

*Not that close.* Belatedly, he focuses the video camera on the action, looking for Mac as he zooms in on individuals beginning to encroach in on the wreckage. Looks for a soldier or local to turn over a body and reveal her familiar face.

“We have to keep looking,” Maggie says, her voice as thin as a reed. “We need to go—I need to go back. I know where she was—she was following me. I need to go back.”

London was nothing like this, Neal thinks. The bombing in London was terrible, 7/7 was terrible, but it was nothing like this. The London bombings probably will have taken more lives than this, probably will have injured more, become a more indelible mark on the country’s conscience than this bombing will on Pakistan. But Neal looks backwards at the reconstructed mosque and then front towards the hollowed out truck, the incendiary. There were people here, looking for this sort of thing, preparing for it.

“Come on, Mac,” he mutters. The camera is pointed blindly as he looks for her.

Maggie runs ahead.

“Don’t—” he shouts, running after her.

*The Taliban,* Neal thinks, trying to keep ahold of Maggie as she pushes through the press of the injured and the helping. And ironically muses, *The London bombings were al-Qaeda. One of each, now.*

He sees her after Maggie has darted through another huddled group, and he means to shout after her, but the sight of Mac on the ground steals his voice. He thinks he says something else, her name probably, letting the camera fall to his side as he drops to his knees next to her.

“Oh thank god,” Mac slurs, and he’s forced to help her sit up as she throws her body upwards. Her head bows forward, hair falling in curtains around her face. And then she cries out, “Oh god, my phone. Jim was—I lost my phone.”

Licking his lips, Neal half-entertains the mess of rubble and torn up street and shrapnel around them. “Mac, I don’t think we’re finding the phone.”

His breath catches in his throat when she looks up, clearing her hair away from her cheeks. The camera is waylaid on the ground then, and Neal reaches for the handkerchief he’d tucked inside his Kevlar vest to mop away sweat, awkwardly attempting to wipe at her face before, with hands shaking, she takes it for herself.
Mac’s face is a mess of blood. It’s her nose, he deduces, probably broken. Because in comparison to the backs of her hands and her forearms and what looks like the front of her thighs, through the thin fabric of her trousers, her face appears to have been spared the worst of the shrapnel. But the bridge of her nose is swollen, and her eyes are slitted shut. There’s a mat of red where her head was a few moments earlier, and he wonders if she was lying in her own blood.

Trembling, she wipes much of the blood away from her eyes and off her forehead and temples. The backs of her hands, he notices though, are seeping dark red.

“We need to get you to a medic.”

Sniffling painfully, she shakes her head. “No, we uh—keep filming.”

Jim warned him. Don’t let her say she’s fine, if something happens. The last time that happened, she lost three feet of bowel. So Neal opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by Maggie’s screech from ten feet away.

“I’ll keep filming,” he says, “But maybe you should go back with Maggie to the convoy. Or a hospital.”

Staggering to her feet, Mac waves him off. “No. Come on, let’s get to work. Where’s the owner of the taxi stand?”

Maggie slips in under Mac’s arm, trying to brace her. Ducking down, Neal takes the other one while still trying to balance filming with his free hand. Feeling his frown deepen, he tries to examine Mac’s head. She’s up, sort of, and walking, kind of, but she also looks like an extra from a Rambo film and he’s seen this before, the up and walking before keeling over and dying as the force of the trauma from the blast sets in.

“Maybe you should sit?” Maggie asks nervously, peering up at him.

“Neither of you speak Pashto,” Mac says, her voice beginning to clear even as her limbs continue to move clumsily. She seems, Neal thinks, almost excited. Or if not that, incredibly determined. It’s the mode Mac kicked in over Genoa, but ratcheted up another notch or two or three.

Neal thinks that Jerry’s Genoa story, or at least Mac’s pursuit of it, makes a lot of sense now.

“Mac—”

“I will be fine,” she asserts, grimacing as she braces herself to bear more of her own weight. “I just need to find the satellite phone. I’m sure the rest of senior staff is having a lovely time back in New York right now, with Jim doing his damn best to make them think that we’re dead.”

Mac thinks she handles it well, staying upright and managing in the bright light and breathing through her mouth instead of her nose, all the while doing her job. If she wants Will, all she has to do is call him. It seems like Nina’s gone, her rattled mind thinks, since she has more faith in Will than Jim does and she does remember, even if none of the rest makes sense. She does remember that Will almost paid Nina fifty thousand dollars to bury the story the first time.

And if Will hasn’t broken up with Nina… she still has a job to do. And people waiting for her,
back in New York, who want to do their jobs. The ones that she gave them.

It works, for nearly an hour.

After which she winds up gasping as she vomits up blood, trying to not lose her balance as she braces her hands on her knees, her body wracked with powerful heaves.

“Mac?” Maggie’s voice is panicked, and she appears at her side, pulling her hair back from her face. “Mac, that’s blood.”

Shaking her head, she tries to spit out the rest of the blood and bile in her mouth. “From my nose,” she chokes out. “It’s been dripping down the back of my throat.”

She can see a medic. Later.

“I—okay,” Maggie says, rubbing nervous circles into her back. “I just—Neal found the phone. The screen is cracked but it looks like it still works. It was like ten feet away from where you—”

“Landed?” Mac supplies.

Maggie laughs, clearly despite herself. “Yeah.”

Her mouth tastes like something died in it, but there’s definitely no water to be had. But all things considered, she figures it might be time to listen to the NATO officers’ instructions and head back to the convoys, where at least Mac knows there’s someone’s canteen she can commandeer.

“I have to call Jim,” she says, when Neal appears as well, the phone in a hand outstretched to her.

“Yeah, probably,” Neal exhales, looking anxious and drawn and Mac nods, straightening. She can push through, but Neal and Maggie need to take a break. It’s Neal who leads them back through the crowd, more organized now, less frantic, filled with more uniforms between the NATO forces and Pakistani MPs and local officials, and Mac wraps an arm around Maggie’s waist, feeling a warm burst of pride in her chest for how Maggie’s conducted herself.

Trying not to lean too heavily on the smaller woman, she looks down at the screen of her BlackBerry.

Cracked.

The outer shell is warped, half melted and scuffed to a light grey, and the buttons are mangled on the lower right side. But the light on top flashes, notifying her of (at least one, she feels a flare of guilt thinking of Jim and Charlie and the others calling her repeatedly) a new voicemail.

Sagging against the convoy when they finally reach it, she dials her inbox and inputs her password.

It’s Jim, and then Jim again, and Jim once more, increasingly panicked and angered and she almost ends listening there, until the fourth message begins to play, and the voice is one she does not recognize, speaking in Pashto.

_The Taliban condemns these attacks_, is the gist of the message, with a condemnation of Western media and the American occupation causing rising tribal tension in the region.

Head feeling light again, she calls Maggie and Neal’s attention, playing the message again and translating it word for word, and then calling over the NATO Commander who has been directing orders from his truck in the front. Playing it again, and again, getting the translation confirmed by a
UN official and then another.

“Get the camera,” she tells Neal, thinking about the baby wipes in her bag back in the convoy, and the brush. And then plays the message again, scribbling it down onto the notebook she’d stolen from an attaché, along with the rest of her notes.

The message plays out, proceeding onto the fifth voicemail for the first time.

It’s only for a moment, but Will’s voice on the other end of the line asking her just to please be okay, I know you like trouble but just be okay, makes her stop, and remember to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
The Distance From Here

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thanks again to everyone who has left comments and kudos. Thanks to Meg for her support through this chapter, and Pippa too. As a note, this fic isn't going to be too much longer. The original outline called for ten chapters and an epilogue, so barring any huge plot changes, we're on track for that length.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He gave up early on swatting Sloan away from his face. She keeps pressing gauze to the laceration above his eyebrow, muttering about antiseptic cream and butterfly stitches, but Will's fairly certain she's just repeating something she saw on a medical drama and that actual professional medical attention isn't required, so he lets her do it. Not that he's particularly motivated to move her away —his head is pounding, and he's just fine sitting on top of his desk.

But at least the taste of blood in his mouth is gone, the glass of bourbon that Charlie pushed into his shaking hands had helped with that.

Besides, he's far more worried about Mac and the continuing silence from Pakistan than himself.

“Ice that,” he mutters to Jim, squinting past Sloan.

Jim stares determinedly at his hand, flexing his fingers. “I’m fine.”

“You’re both so fucking stupid,” Sloan says, finally satisfied with whatever she's been doing to his head and taping the gauze down over his eyebrow, the dressing so crooked that he can barely see out of his right eye. “Men are such goddamn babies. What the hell were you thinking?”

“He was thinking that I sent Mac running into a warzone.” Will answers, pressing an index finger against the split skin under his bottom lip. Now he, too, stares determinedly away. “Again. And now—” He swallows hard, and doesn’t finish voicing that thought. Anxiously, Sloan reaches out to straighten the crooked gauze. “The Ambassador—Sir Edward hasn’t heard anything yet?”

Clearing his throat, Jim does look up from his swollen knuckles. “It’s been less than an hour. If he’s gotten anyone on the phone with NATO central command who actually knows what’s happening then—I don’t know. We have to give him time.”

Charlie, standing in repose against the table, nods. “And Mac’s tough. She’s damn tough. She can take care of herself, and Maggie, and Neal.”

“Our Lady of the 7th Marines,” Jim says quietly. Charlie and Sloan look oddly at him, and he shrugs self-consciously. “It’s what the Special Forces called her.”

Not that it does much for Will, and the pictures that keep slamming into his mind like a freight train. The scenes just become starker, more vivid, and even though he’s aware that he has no opinion on how to survive as embed, he’s reported enough stories to know about bomb blasts and fatality counts and he just keeps seeing it, MacKenzie’s ravaged body on the pavement, and he knows that he was the one who sent her off to come back with her shield, or on it.
Again.

It’s becoming difficult for him to breathe, as Sloan continues to fuss over him like what Jim did to his face even bothers him at all, like he couldn’t have gotten Jim off him if he’d wanted to. But he has six inches and fifty pounds on Jim and even though he has twenty-something years on him, too, he’s done enough fighting that he could very well hurt him. Regardless, he deserved however many years of Jim’s rage.

He knows how to take a punch.

“And she… she saved my ass more than once over there. She takes care of her people,” Jim continues.

Will’s mind keeps skirting around the possibility of preemptively booking a flight to Landstuhl, or Islamabad, or both, and then he’s returned to the belated way he found out about the stabbing, and guilt drains the blood from his face when thinks of how if he’d paid attention at all back then, panic would have acted upon him until he’d have gotten on a plane to Germany.

That is to say, he’s certain he loves MacKenzie and will never stop, but he’s also certain that he’s terrible at loving her.

After all, she might be dead.

MacKenzie, Maggie, Neal—he used to pride himself on keeping others safe, on knowing how to keep situations from exploding, on knowing what to do and when and what to say to keep everyone unhurt, at least, even if the situation couldn’t guarantee safety.

Why did he think he could change Nina?

His head hurts.

There has to be a way out of this, or a way to make Nina regret using Mac as the fulcrum to hurt him, a way to even the scales even a tiny bit. Quietly, and with some delicacy, a way that will prevent any further collateral damage. Mac might be dead, and so might the others. But he can’t allow that to be the reality inside his head, not until someone from NATO lets them know for certain.

Unbidden, the flashes of it, the seconds-long sketches of Mac’s mortality, form in his mind. Processing backwards, he moves through the past three weeks and into the news headlines that he can still remember from her first time in the Middle East. Blood splatter, bullet-flayed skin, smoke and gunpowder, emptied eyes. Suicide bombings he can half recall, the Taliban insurgency, Shiite protests and violent MPs.

Charlie, Jim, and Sloan’s voices continue in an endless round.

His breath passes in light pants through his lips.

Even if it wasn’t just the explosion in Jamrud, it was bringing Brian into the newsroom, it was buying the ring during opposition research, it was dating Nina even after she tried to get News Night cancelled. God only knows what else, if it hadn’t been this, that he’d have done to make her run.

This time, it’s on him.

“Will? You’re staring at nothing.”
Blinking, he turns towards Charlie. He still can see Mac’s face clearly, her features slackened in death and covered in blood.

Any response he could give is interrupted by the cry of voices from the bullpen.

Jim doesn’t know what Charlie was about to do to him—fire him, probably, for assaulting the Face of ACN’s face. He’d been warned in Charlie’s office, before. So after Don and Charlie pull him up he considers, for a moment, fighting them off and making the end of his career worth it. But Charlie’s hand was tight on the back of his neck, pushing the tension out of his shoulders, and he slumped down, breathing hard.

Then was promptly lead into Will’s office, the rest of the staff still gawking at them.

“It’s fine,” were the first words out of Will’s mouth, spoken in a voice that was firm but soft and dazed, once he had something to press against it to prevent the blood spilling from his gums from dripping out. “Charlie. It’s fine. We need to worry about them.”

Charlie had given him a look that said that no, things were not fine, but he wasn’t going to argue the point too hard.

Will’s looking down now that Sloan is done with him (what precisely she did, Jim isn’t certain, but he’s sure it helped her calm down which he can relate to) and Jim examines his face. A bruise is already blooming along his jawline, but the cut over his eyebrow has stopped bleeding. The one below his lip is still seeping red, though. A bolt of shame roots into his belly, if only because this isn’t what Mac would have wanted.

But Jim still is angry, and that part of him exhales the idea that at least it looks like hair and makeup will be able to conceal the injuries his fists left.

“She’ll call,” he mutters, clenching and unclenching his sore fingers. “Mac will call.”

“Not if she—” Sloan begins, and then with a tiny shake of her head, redirects. “What if they’re all—all taken to the hospital? Where’s our closest foreign correspondent? Is there anyone we can call to—?”

“We’re in contact with all the local hospitals,” he answers, because it was the first thing he knew to do. “If any of them are brought in, they’ll call me. I also called a Marine Corps Major at CENTCOM in Rammstein, and Mac’s godfather in Islamabad. Someone will call.”

He fucking hates this.

(The anger starts building again, this time inwards.

If only because he should be there with her. Maggie is too fragile and Neal lacks the training and for the love of Christ, a warzone isn’t therapeutic, you just wind up culling out any part of you that can live outside of it until you can’t live in it, either. And then you go home and drink and cull all the people you knew before because they certainly don’t know you after and you drink to that, too, until you’re considering working for a daytime talk show because you’ve got to eat but maybe you can do that, that show, drunk as well.)
The worst of it, Jim thinks, is that he’s certain that Neal and Maggie are fine.

There’s more to it than that, but when the bullpen erupts into shouts, he stops and looks out into the newsroom. A few seconds later, Gary appears at the door, out of breath.

“Pick up the—”

On his desk, Will’s phone rings.

Without thinking, Jim lunges for the receiver past Will and Charlie, bringing it to his ear. “James Harper.”

“Jim? It’s—”

“Neal.” For a moment he wants to be greedy, find out what’s happened first but even if not for Will, Charlie and Sloan are here too. “Okay, you’re on speaker. Go.”

“Well, uh—we’re all okay. I think,” Neal says, voice stilted. “Mac is getting looked at by the field medic right now, Maggie’s with her. Not that she’s—”

His voice stalls out over a few broken syllables. Jim can hear talking in the background of Neal’s end of the line. Shouts too, and scared cries. Charlie folds his arms at his middle, coming to stand at Will’s shoulder. Sloan, still in her pajamas and jacket, looks confusedly between the two of them.

“Medic?” Charlie asks.

“It’s looking like she has a broken nose and the last time Maggie came over she said Mac’s not emergent enough to be transported back into Peshawar, but she’ll need an MRI when we get there since she doesn’t know if the blast knocked her out or not,” Neal rambles. In his periphery, Jim sees Will’s shoulders begin to shake. For half a moment he considers doing something, but has no idea what it would be. Mostly, he just feels an undeserved pang of self-righteousness, so he lets it be Charlie’s hand that falls on Will’s shoulder as Neal continues. “And uh… her eyes are pretty… bruised. She said that Maggie might have to do the next segment. And she has a lot of shrapnel that needs to be removed, but it looks small. But she says she’s fine. She’s Mac. She says it looks worse than it is. But it looks nasty.”

“Neal,” Sloan says, looking wide-eyed and frightened by the fact that Will is crying.

“Yeah?”

She leans down close to the speaker. “What the fuck happened?”

“Right,” Neal says quietly, and Jim can hear the rustling of paper. “Right now it’s looking like it was a tribal conflict. Retribution by a local warlord. There was a truck parked at a taxi stand, the bomb was planted inside the bed. Mac was… lucky. A lot of people are dead. About sixty, at last count, and it’s gonna go up.”

Charlie’s eyebrows lift towards his hairline. “But you and Maggie—”

“Mac had sent us back to the convoy,” Neal answers shortly.

Jim scrubs his hands over his face. “How close was she to the blast?”

“I don’t know. She was about thirty feet away when I found her, but I’m sure that’s not where she
started out.” Neal begins to sound like he’s veering towards desperation now, still shuffling through what sounds like a notebook, or scraps of paper. “She lost her phone, when the bomb went off. That’s why we—well, that and she—she was hyper. We got a lot of footage, I’m uploading it now. Mac’s starting to fade, though. I don’t think we’ll be able to stay much longer.”

Pursing his lips, Jim thinks on all the times they shouldn’t have stayed for the story. “Is she gonna actually, stop, or—”

“Maybe for Maggie’s sake. But I might need you to get her to sit down for me,” he concedes, and Jim feels an unwelcome laugh bubble up his throat. “We should be heading back to Peshawar soon, though, someone said. A Captain. I think. And then we’re supposed to go to Lady Reading Hospital.”

“Can we talk to her?”

All of them look at Will, who is steadfastly looking down at the phone, seemingly ignoring any potential reaction to his strained voice.

And what Jim thinks might be a touch of hysteria.

“But not at the moment, but when she and Maggie get back I’ll make sure she calls. I don’t know how much battery this phone has left, though. The screen’s broken. I had to call the switchboard from memory.”

There’s a moment where someone should say something, but Jim at least feels frozen in relief, all sense of doing released from his body.

Mac is alive, but battered. Maggie is alive. Neal is alive.

“Okay, thanks. Stay safe, Neal,” he winds up saying, and disconnects the call.

He stares at the phone for a long while after that, refusing to acknowledge the tears blurring his eyesight. Stares, until he realizes that for some reason he’s been left alone with Will, who’s moved behind his desk to reach for his cigarettes.

“Want one?” he asks softly, around the one between his lips. When Will’s hands enclose around his lighter, Jim can see his hands are shaking, even as his eyes are becoming less red and swollen.

He doesn’t. He hasn’t smoked since they were embedded, and then only because everyone else did it. You kind of had to, then, rely on the nicotine to keep your heads from trembling, keep your head from spinning, keep yourself from going mad from the stress of it.

“I’m sorry,” he says instead, even though he’s really not. Mac’s alive. He’ll need to make his peace with Will.

He snorts. “Don’t be.” And then sobers immediately, sitting down heavily and placing his head in his hands and looking up at him with an expression that Jim would characterize on anyone else’s face as beseeching. “Two black eyes, a broken nose, and shrapnel wounds. Possible concussion. How is she? I mean. You would know.”

“It’ll hit her in a few days,” he answers, voice forcibly level because he knows that she’ll want Will, like she always has. “Right now she’s high.”

Will nods slowly, and takes a shaky drag off his cigarette. “What do you mean by hit her?”
“She’ll get clingy, and teary. A bit manic, before the exhaustion.” He exhales a frustrated breath through his nose. “She used to want you. Still might. But not if the *People* article goes to print.”

“I have an idea,” Will says, after a minute of terse silence.

“So do I.”

Licking his lips, he stamps out the cigarette in the ashtray on his desk. “I know people she’s extorted. If we got them to sign affidavits, the ones where the statute of limitations haven’t expired, and get their financials—”

“I was thinking we beat Nina at her own game,” Jim interrupts, because he thought of this hours ago but it’s *more* than what Charlie would be comfortable with, and most of the staff doesn’t know, and he’s not explicitly *supposed* to know but he does, and Will probably has a feeling it’s been happening. “There’s a story that Jerry Dantana was chasing, with Neal and Maggie and a few others. Mac and Charlie. Mac just called time of death on it after talking to a contact, but Jerry’s not letting it die. And if you look at it from the wrong angle, you’d have to accuse the US of perpetrating war crimes.”

Jim hopes that Nina attached herself to Will for the credibility.

Slowly, Will nods. “Nina wants to be a real journalist.”

“I figured that one out myself.” He smiles grimly.

“So we trade her for the story. I’d been wondering what you guys were—” Will shakes his head, and then reaches to light another cigarette. Still, his hands shake. “So a Trojan horse for Nina?”

“If nothing else, Naval Intelligence will pay her a visit. Get her scared.”

“What’s the story?” Will asks.

Jim laughs in a small way, scuffing the carpet with his shoe.

“Operation Genoa.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
By the time they arrive back in Peshawar and fight their way through the midafternoon traffic to Lady Reading Hospital, the emergent cases from the bombings have been moved either to the surgical floor or ICU. But the remnants from treating the thirty or so casualties of the bombing remain—scattered triage supplies, blood-worn aprons, tired physicians. So when they, along with six other injured UN workers arrive for treatment, they’re taken by a harassed-looking nurse to a row of hospital beds with clean sheets, and instructed to wait.

Maggie helps her into a hospital gown, once it becomes clear exactly how much her pants didn’t protect her legs from shrapnel. Her chest, however, seems largely unscathed. For a brief, desperate moment, she berates herself for forgoing the helmets.

Mac manages to place a phone call to her parents, who she knows without a doubt have heard about the bombing. Ten minutes after she hangs up she can no longer remember what exactly was exchanged, but she thinks the fact that her head is killing her was probably a topic, because not another ten minutes goes by before Lady Reading’s head of neurology shows up in the emergency ward, mentions one of her godfather’s friends by name, and takes her for a head and chest MRI himself.

No concussion, but it’s apparent that her nose is broken. Which is what the medic thought, but Mac’s seen enough latent brain bleeds that it’s nice to have confirmation that she’s not actively dying.

It’s also nice to have a script for Vicodin in her hand, and she gives Neal and Maggie the money to go have the prescription filled at the hospital pharmacy.

Which is the point where she hooks up her battered-but-miraculously-still-functioning phone to the charger, connects it to her laptop, and calls the AWM switchboard.

She gets connected to Jim’s extension, which doesn’t explain why it’s Tess who picks up the phone, but MacKenzie is very quickly updated by Tess, Tamara, Kendra (and she thinks at one point, an over-excited Martin) on the office gossip.

Or, “recent developments,” as Tess put it.

Mac wonders if she wasn’t in shock if she’d have let them pitch her four different versions of how Nina was broken up with in the AWM lobby, but figures as she’s trying to distract herself—from the tired nurse putting stitches into the deeper lacerations on her shins and thighs and cleaning and dressing the rest—that she can listen to them fight over precisely what was said by Will and at what decibel, according to Sloan and the one security guard that Martin is friendly with and how the late night coffee cart guy said Nina fled the building.
Until Sloan wrests the phone away from them. “Kenzie? Oh my god. Kenzie!”

“Hi,” she says quietly, although Sloan’s enthusiasm does bring a small smile to her lips.

“You’re alive!” she shrieks, voice moderating up rather than down, at all, and Mac closes her eyes and pulls the phone away from her ear until Sloan’s rambling subsides.

“Yes. That I am,” she says delicately, her gaze fixed on the nurse’s gentle hands as she moves the suturing needle through the skin of her thigh. She’s been given her a topical anesthetic, so the sensation is blunted, but still wholly strange. But far better than it would have been, getting stitches (or the more likely option, stapled) in the field.

Her hands are cut up too, but not nearly as bad. There are a few spots on her forearms that will need more careful treatment, and through her exhaustion Mac is happy that the nurse started with her legs, since when she needs to look at her arms Mac will have an excuse to hang up.

“How are you feeling?”

Mac snorts.

(And she immediately regrets it; it fucking hurts.)

“Well, I was hit by the force of a blast that picked me up and tossed me like rag doll about ten feet, so approximately like I was hit by a truck. A sizeable truck. But I’m walking it off.”

“Have you considered sleeping it off?” Sloan asks pointedly.

“Sleep is for the weak.”

She can rest when they return to New York on Friday. Until then, she’ll be reporting on the bombing as much as her body will allow her—not that she recognizes it, or would know how to articulate it, but she’s finally learned the trick to almost dying without wishing that she was dead.

It might be that there’s an end date on her time as the girl in the war, or even the simple fact that she has a home to return to. Back then, a grave was the only resting place that seem assured to her.

“You almost died,” Sloan says flatly.

“I’m electing to focus on the almost part.”

“Not gonna lie, but it seems like Will is focusing on the died part. I have never seen him cry before…” Her voice drifts off thoughtfully.

Mac straightens up almost painfully on the bed, immediately pressing her free hand to the side of head when it protests the sudden change in orientation. “Will cried?”

She’s seen Will cry once. And that was after she told him that she had been screwing around with Brian the first four months of their relationship, and immediately before being told to leave his apartment. Will is far too repressed to cry in front of people. He doesn’t let himself cry in front of other people. She was always the crier in their relationship, especially after she’d been drinking. And not like Will’s ever been particularly stoic but she’s fairly certain that whatever his father did to him, it indoctrinated a near-perfect control over tears.

“I mean, after Jim punched him in the face,” Sloan edges out casually. “But more specifically after we found out you weren’t dead. Then he cried. That’s just a rough chronology.”
“What?”

The bridge of her nose begins to pound, her eyes ring with pain.

“I probably shouldn’t have told you that.”

Squeezing her eyes shut again, Mac tries to stem the rising unsettled sea in her stomach. "What? Sloan, what in the hell—?"

“You got exploded, Jim exploded. His fist. Into Will’s face. Three or four times. But they’re like… being weirdly friendly right now, camped out in his office. Charlie said they figured out how to give Nina what-for, or whatever old-timey phrase he used. Shit is going down, Mac,” Sloan explains simply, despite sounding decidedly excited. “I mean, more for you guys than for us, of course—”

It still isn’t making sense. Jim would never—

“Jim punched Will?”

“Jim blames Will for you being over there. Will also blames Will. They both seem to think it was the appropriate course of action, and have collectively moved on. Although Jim landed a good one on Will’s jaw, so he’s gonna have fun with hair and makeup tonight.”

“Sloan!” she hisses.


There’s a brief exchange, too low and garbled for her to make out, but within a few seconds she hears Sloan demand that Will take the phone out of her hands, I don’t care if we’re in public, you’ve made an ass of yourself in front of the staff before, and she can hear him exhale sharply into the receiver.

“Will?” she says tentatively. And then, because she has no capacity for any of the other things that have happened today, asks, “I hear we’ve started a chapter of fight club in the newsroom?”

“The first rule of fight club is no talking about fight club,” he answers, without missing a beat.

She sighs, leaning her head back against the pillows as the nurse finishes suturing and moves to applying the mountain of gauze she’s acquired to her legs; her superficial injuries are more numerous than she’d originally hoped. While the medic had been able to remove most of the shrapnel and debride the larger wounds while they were still in Jamrud, there was a laceration or four that required more irrigation.

So much for her perfect legs, she thinks. The stab wound eliminated bikinis from her wardrobe (not that she’s exactly taken a vacation since returning to *News Night*) with the singular thrust of a knife, but MacKenzie thinks she’ll mourn how she’ll look in a short skirt more.

(She realizes she should be concerned about less petty things, but that’s reserved for when her brains aren’t trying find a way to drip out of ears.)

“You know I hate that movie,” she says.

“I know, you have terrible taste in cinema.”

“Sure thing, but at least I can’t name obscure fifties musicals that no one’s ever heard of.” She’d
hoped that they could get more mileage out of pointless conversation, but there’s something in his voice that keeps her from pushing forward with a rebuke of his love for musical theater. “You alright?”

He baulks. “Are you?”

“Been better. I’ve also been worse.”

“The theory of relativity is not an answer, MacKenzie,” he says, probably more softly than he intends.

She opens one eye, peering down at her legs. “I think we’re up to seventeen stitches. And my nose has one of those butterfly bandages on it.”

“That’s also not an answer,” Will admonishes her gently.

“It’s half an answer.”

“Not the half I’m looking for.”

She’d roll her eyes, but he’s not here to see it, so she remains in repose against the pillows, trying not to allow herself to slip into a doze. “How’s your face?”

“Sore. I can handle it. How’s yours?”

“I’m tired and a little loopy, so I imagine it’ll hurt a lot tomorrow,” she answers, more truthfully than she’d like, but Will won’t let her obfuscate and it would take too much energy at this point. “As will the rest of me. Neal and Maggie are off trying to get my prescription of Vicodin filled. Maybe I’ll just borrow yours.”

“Well, you’ll be home soon, right?” he asks.

“Friday. Night, Manhattan time,” she replies, repeating information she knows is readily available to him in the itinerary Neal emailed to everyone a week before their departure.

Will doesn’t have an immediate response; the silence could be awkward, but perhaps they’re past that. Or perhaps she’s just too tired. But she hopes he starts talking again, because his voice is calming her down more than the light sedative the neurologist gave her did.

“Maybe wear padding between now and then?” he eventually asks. “I’m just saying, Mac. The incidentals and overheads on your excursions over there, I think we can spare to upgrade your Kevlar from a vest to a bodysuit, or something. Or maybe just come home.”

“Seems like I have to now,” she murmurs. “Since everything’s fallen to pieces since I left.”

He laughs, the sound inherently self-deprecating. “That uh… tends to happen. When you’re not here.”

Her brows furrow together and she regrets it immediately, wincing. “Are you talking about—?”

“I’m not talking about anything,” Will answers quickly, his voice yielding into a soft tone; his accent gets stronger too, Mac notes. “You’re in pain, and exhausted, so I’m not—just take care of yourself. Jim and I have worked things out, I promise. No more bullpen brawls.” He pauses. “And, um, about the other thing. Nina—”

“I know,” she interrupts.
Or, well, she’s come to roughly half an understanding. She’s known for months now that he just wanted to be who he was free to be before she came back from war, and that his one choice left to him to do that was Nina. She knows that he now regrets it, if even half of one of the versions of the breakup told to her by her merry band of gossips was correct.

Idly, she wonders if People will run a takedown story on her now, if they’ll write her off as a hero (she could laugh, if it didn’t make her eyes cross) or use the heightened name recognition while it lasts for more hits on any potential article.

“I’m sorry,” he says, sounding painfully earnest that it catches her defenseless.

“I know.”

It takes him a moment to recover. “Okay.”

“You can apologize again for good measure, though,” she teases, when the nurse taps her on her hand to stretch out her arm for examination. Sitting up more fully, Mac shifts the phone solidly to her right shoulder, and lays her left arm onto the nurse’s rolling tray.

“I’m sorry,” Will says, catching her off guard again. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Well, I do, but that’s not a conversation for right now.”

“Alright,” Mac says. “Well, stop hogging me. Who’s around? Charlie? Or Jim. Tell Jim he’s on watch, the first rule of being an EP is not marking up your anchor’s face.”

He laughs then, more genuinely this time.

“Yeah, lemme just—”

Four minutes and fifteen seconds at the end of the A-block. It’s their most prominent segment since coming to Peshawar. It was always intended to be, despite the fact that it was supposed to be featuring the blacked-out face of a Taliban insider, not Mac with blacked-out eyes standing in front of the Pearl-Continental.

Maggie is standing to the side, as Neal works the camera. In her ear she can hear that Will’s accent is slipping, and she flinches every time, knowing now that Nina noticed it, too. Blonde, Midwestern Nina. For the slightest breadth of a thought, Maggie wonders if she’d have turned into Nina, had Mac not taken a chance on her.

Not that it matters.

Because she’s here, with Mac.

Honestly, she has no idea how Mac is still standing. After any of it. But yesterday morning she was in the blast radius of a bomb and now less than twenty-four hours later she’s in front of a camera (her eyes rounded with swelling and deep purple bruises, her nose not faring much better, large portions of her limbs wrapped in bandages, and really Maggie doesn’t know how Mac can stand to be so tough) talking to Will about the tribal conflicts in the FATA region and systematic unrest and preliminary fatality counts, what the nurse at Lady Reading told her after she asked in perfect Pashto.
And then, the segment ends, and *News Night* goes to commercial. The New York control room doesn’t cut their link immediately, but Maggie is already focusing on getting back into bed. Helping Neal dismantle the equipment rather than listen to Mac’s conversation with Will, she almost doesn’t hear it—

“Stay safe, MacKenzie. I love you.”

But the look of wide-eyed shock on Mac’s face tells her that she didn’t imagine it, either.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to reading!
A/N: Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! I really appreciate it. My apologies if I've missed anything in editing this chapter, it's really late, but I wanted to post it as soon as possible for you guys. And Happy Easter, to all who celebrate.

This chapter back tracks a tiny bit, going back to explain how and why Will said "I love you" to Mac at the end of the last chapter.

“Officials say that the pick-up was removed from within the marketplace and was towed to the taxi stand and gas station just adjacent the marketplace. The bomb planted inside the pick-up was detonated remotely about an hour later, leaving twenty-four people dead on the spot,” she says, looking down to read off the small notebook (that she lifted off a NATO official, if Neal’s report is to be correct, after losing her own in the blast) in her hand. “And I’m quoting senior administration official Shakeel Khan Umarzi here, but tonight the fatality count is currently hovering at thirty-five, with an additional sixty-nine injured, eleven critically. The death toll is expected to rise.”

He’s barely been able to focus since the segment began. It’s not like she isn’t still standing, because she is, and it’s not like she’s doing what Jim warned she would do, yet, because she’s isn’t, but her face is swollen and her hands are bandaged and he’s seen his mother’s eyes be blackened enough times that he knows that she’s wearing a heavy concealer on her own.

She was sleeping, before. He knows that. Just like he knows that Maggie and Neal have been attempting to get her to rest—not that Will anticipates learning that their attempts were at all successful.

“Sixty-nine injured.” Trying to wipe the emotion from his face, he looks down at his notecards. “Is that including you?”

He feels like the audience needs to know. Or less know and more be reminded yet again, since the attack was first reported by ACN Morning and Tony Hart was, in Will’s opinion, a little over-enthusiastic in his reporting that a primetime EP was wounded in the line of duty.

(But News Night is the only show that Mac has done live today. When the feed from outside her hotel first came up in the studio, he found himself unable to breathe, forgetting to start the segment until Jim was screaming in his ear.)

The smile that forms at the corners of her mouth is almost imperceptible. “That would be correct.”

(Mac doesn’t like being a part of the story, but to people who aren’t as educated in MacKenzie McHale’s facial expressions won’t recognize this one as faintly irritated.)

“You’re also reporting that Khyber Agency administrator Mutahir Zeb said that the bombing was similar to previous attacks carried out by the Taliban, this time with the NATO convoy as the target,” he says, getting removing himself back to the point. “But your sources say differently.”
“Yes. My contact inside the Taliban condemned the attacks via telephone shortly after the bombing. In an email that was verified by the State Department, Taliban spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan also disowned the attacks. So far my sources, locals with connections to the Zaka Khel tribe, believe that the attacks were perpetrated by local warlord Mangal Bagh.”

“And how was this conclusion reached?” Because to be honest, he cannot fathom how Mac got up off the ground after being nearly turned into pink mist, regrouped, and starting contacting local tribal warlords and talking to passers-by.

Mac flips to the next page in her notebook. “The Zaka Khel tribe has been party to a violent dispute with Lashkar-e-Islam, a homegrown Islamic militant group that has been growing in power in the Khyber region since 2004. Most of the victims of today’s attacks were members of the Zaka Khel tribe.”

“So the presence of the NATO convoy—”

“Completely coincidental,” she answers forcefully. Her presence, and Neal and Maggie’s, however, was less coincidental. He wants to apologize, to say a dozen other things to her that he was too cowardly to on the phone earlier. They feel more urgent to say now that time has passed, not less. But now the world is watching, or at least their audience of 1.5 million. “The fuel cap on one of our vehicles broke, forcing us to stop in Jamrud to make the repair. I had spent time in Jamrud a few years ago, and had just finished showing one of our ACN producers around the local markets when the bomb went off.”

In his ear, Jim gives him the sixty second warning.

“MacKenzie, you spent over a year in the FATA region, from the summer of 2008 through fall 2009. Is there any further context you can give us?” he asks, cutting the end of the questions he has for her—ones that didn’t involve referencing the first time she ran away, but those years are the ones he’s been living in since their phone conversation last night, as he combed through wire reports and her old CNN segments as their foreign correspondent and Middle East expert.

Looking for what it’ll look like when it hits her and sometime in October 2009, he found it in the middle of a segment from Islamabad.

“Just that this is only one in a long series of attacks in the tribal borderlands,” she answers, reaching up to press her earpiece further into her head. Terror seizes him for a moment; Will wonders if her hearing has been impacted by the bomb, and it’s not until the second time Jim gives him the thirty second warning that he actually hears it. “From the time I arrived as an embedded reporter with the 7th Marine Infantry in Khost, Afghanistan on the other side of the pass in June 2008 until now, roughly four thousand people have been killed by the rising insurgency. We’re only hearing about this one on national news because of the involvement of the NATO fact-finding mission.”

Briefly, he wonders if this is Mac trying to backhandedly remind him of their three years gone, until he remembers that FOX, CNN, and ABC are still reporting that the NATO convoy was the target of the attack.

Dazed, he belatedly realizes he needs to bring them to commercial now.

“MacKenzie McHale, reporting from Peshawar, Pakistan. We’ll be back.”
As soon as the A-block ends and News Night goes to commercial, Gary appears at his side with an eager expression on his face.

“The harpy has landed.”

“Taken the bait,” Jim corrects him, frowning at the note that Tess has just placed into his hand about the guest in the C-block needing to be moved to the D-block due to a livestreaming issue on their end.

“What?”

“The agreed upon code phrase was the harpy has taken the bait, not—” Picking up the rundown, he tries to evaluate what can be shifted around. “You know what, never mind. So the other story is dead?”

Gary nods. “The takedown piece on Mac is dead. Nina never handed over what Reese gave her, and now she’s handed it over to us.”

“Did she indicate if she’s going to go to print with what we’ve given her?” Because he doesn’t really know what Nina’s journalistic standards are, except low, and Jim would like for her destruction to be fast-tracked, if possible. Also an ETD for her life as an unexamined citizen not on the DOJ’s watch list would be nice, for popcorn-securing purposes.

“She huffily told me it was none of my business, but then arrogantly she’s meeting with Eric Sweeney tomorrow,” Gary answers, placing his hands on his hips. “Seems like she’s satisfied.”

“On her blog she’s already teasing about a world-changing story that she’s, oh, that’s cute,” Tess says from behind them. Jim turns around to see her still on the phone with their guest’s agent, but scrolling through something on her iPhone. “That she’s discovered. I’ll email you the link.”

Yes, he’s going to very much enjoy spectating the end of Nina Howard’s career.

“Good,” he mutters. “Now she can find out what it’s like to something explode in her face or take people down with her or whatever the fuck—”

“Is Mac’s link still up?” Gary asks, looking at the control panel, and the screen that’s showing the studio and not the commercials currently being broadcasted.

Jim steadfastly routes his brain around Will and Mac’s ongoing conversation, despite the fact that he can hear it quite clearly in his headset. “Yeah I’m trying to ignore them.”

“You can’t even tell you busted his face open,” Gary says, nodding approvingly. “Those makeup girls, I swear. Magicians. Mac though. Damn. She’s gonna take some sick time when she gets home, right?”

“I believe Charlie isn’t really giving her the option not to.” And by Charlie, Jim means that he went to Charlie with Will and Sloan earlier and they all mutually agreed that Mac needs approximately a week of sleep. “Legal is throwing a fit, making them fly home tomorrow while having some sort of conniption about insurance liabilities after having two international incidents in less than three months’ time.”

Maggie will need to take a few days, too. And restart her twelve weeks of company mandated psychiatrist visits. Jim desperately hopes that going to them accompanied by Mac will make them more than just a nuisance, this time.
Gary, it seems, is getting something out of his, at least.

“So, how long until Nina is ground zero of her own explosion?”

“I give her a week,” Jim says. “Two, tops.”

Before Mac comes back to work, at least.

It’ll just be cleaner that way. For her, anyway. Jim doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty for MacKenzie. Never has. And it’s good to know that no one else minds, either.

“I heard you actually slept?” he asks, after it becomes clear that Jim isn’t going to cut the audio or the video.

“You know about me and Vicodin,” Mac demurs, wearily dropping her notebook to her side. And that he does—he was there when she had all four of her impacted wisdom teeth removed. “When I realized I had fallen asleep it was because my pillow was covered in drool and Neal and Maggie had finished half the segment already. God, I’m sure I was a lovely sight to behold.”

Will’s sure she was.

A pang of ill fit jealousy boils in his stomach.

“I never had any complaints,” he says, wishing he could be there to keep watch while she sleeps, counting her breaths. And he damns himself; if it wasn’t for the fact that Nina slept in his bed just last night he could find a way to invite her stay in his apartment to recover. Now he’s certain it would just be an affront, even if she didn’t take it that way.

“You better not have, you snore like a freight train.” Something more akin to one of her real smiles appears on her face.

He huffs a silent laugh; they’ve had this argument before. “That was you.”

“Hardly. I don’t think I could hear myself snoring let alone wake myself up, and besides Maggie and Neal or Jim or the dozens of other people I’ve shared sleeping space with would have—”

“You’re the boss of everyone you’ve named,” he retorts.

“What about the Marines?” she asks, lifting an eyebrow.

He blinks repeatedly at the camera, and then remembers that Mac only has audio from him, so whatever facial expression he’s currently making is only for the entertainment of the control room crew. “You’ve shared—with Marines?”

“Some of them are very cuddly. Nicer to sleep on than the floor of a cave.” And then her smile falters, and slides into a wary frown. Gently, she lifts a hand to her face, probing her fingers over the small white butterfly bandage on the bridge of her nose. “I’m going to now, aren’t I? Snore.”

“I think you have a good excuse,” he answers, hearing his voice soften.

Mac sighs. “Am I only going to you in the studio?”
“Jim? Cut Mac’s feed to the control room,” he says without hesitation, waiting for Jim’s disgruntled confirmation before continuing. “Now you are.”

Will hopes that she lets him take care of her. But after what he’s done, she has every right to push him away. Still, he’ll do everything to help her that she’ll let him do.

“You didn’t have to—thanks.” Looking briefly into the camera, her eyes widen before she drops her gaze to the ground.

“You okay?” he asks. “MacKenzie?”

Sighing again, she sways visibly. He feels himself tense in the anchor chair, praying that Maggie and Neal are paying attention, are ready to catch her.

“Yeah, I’m just… everything hurts,” she says, and then shrugs, shaking her head. “It’s fine. I want to crawl into a hole and sleep for a thousand years, but now legal wants us to rearrange our flights to come home… at some point, I can’t do time zone calculus right now. Subtraction, and—well, you know.” Leaning her head back, she gives a groaning sort of laugh. “I’m sorry, I’m whiny and ibuprofen isn’t exactly cutting it right now.”

Will’s certain it isn’t, and he hasn’t even visibly seen most of her injuries yet.

“Mac, you’re not whining,” he tells her gently. “If I were you, I’d still be on the ground back in that village, curled in the fetal position. Take more Vicodin. Let Maggie and Neal do their jobs.”

“I knew something like this could happen,” she says, more a continuance of her previous statement than a response to anything he just said. “I just didn’t think—”

Her voice cuts off, and she shakes her head again. Will tries to convince himself that maybe he should just call her after the show, that this shouldn’t be something that should be happening so publicly, and definitely not when he only has a few minutes before he comes back from commercial.

But he thinks this is it, what Jim warned him about, so he can’t just cut the feed.

“Think what?” he asks.

“Think the universe, or God, or whatever, was going to—I didn’t think there was anything to give just cause for karmic retribution this time.” Gesturing vaguely towards the camera, she is the image of forced, manic calm.

“There really wasn’t any the last time,” he says slowly, but he’s been thinking about that too much since Nina’s People story was first discovered for that remark to go unchallenged. And even with recent events unaccounted for, he should challenge it anyway. And then more awkwardly, he says, “Either. You know that, right?”

“I really cannot have this conversation right now.” She sounds steady, or would to anyone who knew her less well than he does.

“Right. You’re right,” he says quickly, and swallows hard. “Promise me you’ll take more Vicodin?”

“I’ll pass out. You know that,” Mac replies, her tone edging towards defensiveness. But he can’t fight with her, not now.
“So then you’ll sleep,” he says gently. “You do need sleep. You know that, right?” In his ear, Herb gives him the first warning. “Thirty seconds,” he repeats to her.

“Sleep is—”

“For the weak,” he interrupts.

But she just looks so finished. Not in any way less than herself, but haggard and pale and distinctly like someone who is remaining on their feet through sheer force of will. And this isn’t like last time, he wants to tell her, but it can’t be now. This isn’t last time and now she can rest, and she should, and it will all be okay because he’s paying attention like he should have been years ago, instead of fleeing in his own way.

“Mac, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in real life,” he says, preeminently frustrated and mostly with himself, “and I’m standing by that statement, but right now you very much look like someone who was in an explosion and you don’t look like one of the survivors.”

Her expression changes drastically, from exhaustion to wounded alarm.

“Oh shit, I’m sorry, don’t—”

Jim, in his ear this time. Ten seconds. And we have to change something in the C and D blocks and Will mutters a half-panicked “Oh fuck me” under his breath because unless he can miraculously make this up to her in the next—

“Ten seconds. Get some sleep. Stay safe, MacKenzie. I love you,” he blurts out, the words tumbling thoughtlessly from his mouth—not that their thoughtless do not in any way impact their veracity.

Her eyes turn wider than before, her shoulders tensing with what he is afraid might be fear, before just a second until they return from commercial she manages to stutter:

“I—love you too.”

His heart doesn’t stop pounding through the end of the show, and when he bolts from behind the anchor chair for his office as soon as Herb tells him he’s clear, he couldn’t care less when the expressions on everyone’s faces in the bullpen tell him that they know precisely what he said.

He laughs when, minutes later, Maggie picks up Mac’s phone and tells him that Mac actually listened to him, took her Vicodin, and went back to bed.

“So when does legal want you back in the country by?” he asks Maggie instead, pulling his credit card out of his wallet.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
After I Have Traveled So Far

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, here's the final chapter. All that remains is the epilogue, which hopefully I'll be able to have posted soon. Thank you to everyone that has commented or left kudos! I have a few more assignments to finish for tomorrow that really need to get done tonight, so I hope I'll have the time to reply to comments shortly. (As a note, if the ending of this chapter feels abrupt, I recommend you go back and read the opening to Chapter One.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

First is two different trains, one to take them from Peshawar to Rawalpindi, and then from Rawalpindi to Islamabad, where a service car bearing British flags takes them to the Benazir Bhutto International Airport for their flight to Dusseldorf, via Abu Dhabi. Maggie has no idea how ACN secured their travel plans so quickly, but the fact that all three of them have been flying first class indicates that it was probably less ACN and more Will, Will’s agent, and Will’s black American Express card.

But still, twelve hours of travelling with two connections and a layover have not been kind of any of them, especially Mac.

“Dusseldorf,” Neal says faintly, looking tiredly up at the welcome sign as it’s written, in German.

“Shut up, Dusseldork,” she mutters back, looking worriedly at a Mac who looks like she might not be able to stay upright for much longer, all the Vicodin she took and that fact that she slept on the flights earlier be damned. “We’ve got to get our luggage.”

Their Lufthansa flight to JFK isn’t until tomorrow afternoon.

(She suspects that also is less to do with ACN and more to do with Will.)

“I wonder if Mac is tired enough to tell us what the hell is going on between her and Will,” Neal wonders, like there aren’t two hotel rooms booked for them, like the one room with the king bed isn’t clearly for Mac alone. “Tess doesn’t know anything. And she always knows everything. Also it’s... either really early or really late in New York right now.”

“I don’t think they’ve talked. Since. You know.” Unless they’ve been emailing each other, of course. “Mac?” she calls out, and Mac, who has been forcing herself ahead towards the baggage claim turns around, wearily lifting an eyebrow. “Why don’t you just check in at the hotel? Neal and I can grab the bags and meet you there.”

She’s already checked on her phone; the Sheraton they’re staying in is adjacent to the airport, and there are probably a line of cabs outside the terminal to get her there, and Mac is the one of the three of them with passable German besides. Maggie just hopes that the nice airport staff has passable enough English that they don’t get lost between trying not to lose the very expensive ACN equipment and hauling it back to their rooms.

“Or one of us can go with you—” Neal begins to offer.
Mac shakes her head, and then nods. “No, I can—I’m good. But I’ll go check us in. I guess just ask the front desk when you get there what our room numbers are, or I’ll tell them to—you’re smart kids, you’ll figure it out.”

“You sure?” she asks.

Asks, and breathes. An airport in a German city is nothing like a marketplace in Jamrud.

Getting through customs was quick, at least for her and Neal, while Maggie pleaded with her American passport in her hand and eventually found relief when one of the agents became convinced by one of his higher-ups that delaying the travel companion of someone with a diplomatic passport was probably not the wisest course of action.

There was nothing inherently terrible about either of their flights, but the pain medication that she took before getting on the plane in Abu Dhabi is starting to wear off and it’s really only a very short walk from the outside of their terminal to the Sheraton at the Dusseldorf Airport so if she can just make it there, she can take more of her Vicodin and sleep until they have to wake for their next flight.

And possibly bury her face in something warm.

It’s been forty-eight hours, she can do that now—using ice hasn’t felt good (it’s mostly felt painful, like everything else, like the concealer she put on for her segment and then promptly and gently washed off) but she also hasn’t wanted her eyes to be swollen shut, so she’s been doing it. But now she just wants to run a washcloth under hot water and lie on the hotel bed she’ll soon be in, and soak in the warmth over her skin.

She can also feel her pulse beating tiredly down all the way to her fingers and toes, and even though the clothes she chose to wear are kind to lacerations on her arms and legs, her skin is dry and chapped and the force of the explosion has made most of her more or less and bruise, but most importantly, she desperately wants to shower and feel less like she’s been on public transportation all day. And even though she’s slept, she hasn’t slept well, with her head alight with a headache that refuses to die and her nose and eyes protesting whenever they aren’t at exactly the right angle so she feels like trying to find her way out of the airport might just be a dream, a clever hallucination of some kind, and she becomes entirely certain of it when she sees Will waiting near the doors leading out of the arrivals gate for their terminal.

Less waiting and more pacing restlessly, twitching his hands to fix his sleeves and collar and hair, barely standing in the same spot for more than a few seconds. And of course it’s him, because of course Will would meet them in Germany.

Meet you in Germany, a small voice reminds her.

MacKenzie supposes this explains why he didn’t pick up his phone the few times she tried to call him before getting on the plane in Islamabad.

Relief lightens the load of her bag on her shoulder, the strenuous weight of picking her feet up when she walks. But there is also dread, and she hates that it’s there too, but she’s minutes away from collapse and she can’t do this right now, she wants loving him to be enough but it’s not but she can’t talk about it, the why of her running again and the how of yes, it’s terrible that this has
happened, because she can already feel the PTSD rising up and coiling itself tight within her but she cannot do this, the grand gestures and huge finale.

She needs a shower, clean clothes, and a bed.

Love has to be enough, until New York.

When Will finally sees her they’re barely twenty feet from each other and she reminds herself that he’s no one here, the American news anchor in a German city, that no one will notice the large blonde man pushing by them to take her bag tenderly off her shoulder into his own grasp and send a video of it to a tabloid.

“Sorry, for a bit there I thought you were the hydrocone,” she mumbles, at the same moment that he apologizes for missing her three phone calls. “It’s fine. I can see you were busy.”

He smiles nervously. “I just—after our—after what we said. I wanted to be here.”

“You mean after we said—”

Because that, too, is beginning to feel like it was merely a desperate construct of her own mind. Just yesterday he was in a relationship with Nina fucking Howard and she was impossibly close to getting blown to a tiny little pieces, so she hopes he’ll forgive her if it’s all too much to cope with at the moment.

“I love you,” he affirms. And then looks around worriedly. “Where are Maggie and Neal?”

“Baggage claim.”

“Ah.” With a nervous touch, his hands skim down her arms, barely cupping her elbows. “Do you want to sit down?”

Before she can answer he’s guiding her to the rows of seats in the waiting area just before the doors leading out of the terminal.

“I was going to go ahead to the hotel—” she says, not trying to be particularly contrary, but merely plucking the plan she had been doggedly chasing to fruition minutes before from her head, not that it matters much anymore.

Will immediately redirects them. “We can do that, I already checked in—”

But she digs the heels of her feet against the floor, pulled in towards the cheaply-upholstered benches by a force not unlike a gravitational pull. “But we can wait here for them, now that I know if I fall asleep no one’s going to pick my pockets while I’m out cold on a bench.”

It shouldn’t take Maggie and Neal longer than maybe another ten, fifteen minutes to get all the luggage that they checked, she thinks. Allowing her legs to give out, she plans entirely on falling into the seat. But Will wraps his arms around, catching her and easing her down.

“Consider your pockets, and everything else on you, defended,” he says, skirting a hand over the curve of her waist.

Almost laughing, she rolls her head back until it’s resting against his shoulder. Half in his lap, she’s not inclined to move at all. And she reminds herself that she doesn’t have to. Germany. Very small odds of anyone recognizing Will here. Good, she thinks, when he relaxes into it too, his hands framing at her waist, fingers resting at her sides without any pressure at all. It’s easy to let her eyes
drift shut, count his breaths instead of focusing on her own.

Minutes pass, and she opens her eyes to see him watching her.

“What are you looking at?” she asks, faintly astonished at how hoarse her voices sounds to her own ears.

His eyes trace the round of her face, settling on the bridge of her nose. “You.”

“I am a disaster,” she says with a smile.

Frowning, he lifts a hand to glance the underside of her chin, one of the few places that’s remained unscathed. “You’re beautiful.”

“You said I looked like I died,” she tells him pointedly.

(She doesn’t really know why she does, except maybe as a preemptive measure. Or perhaps it’s her last line of defense left, or the last throes of her inclination to run, her overactive fight or flight instinct that’s made her a good journalist but a shit girlfriend.

Or maybe she just reminds him of what he said because it hurt.)

Will’s face is soft, and earnest—and a bit bruised, she sees, looking at his jawline. And just above his right eyebrow, she thinks.

Oh, Jim.

“That was a very poor choice of words, and I regret them.” His hands strokes tenderly through her hair, limp and greasy as it must be by this point. “I love you.”

“You don’t have to keep saying it, you know.”

MacKenzie knows she should want to say it back. I love you, too. She does, she loves Will, probably more naturally at this point than she breathes. But it hurt to do that a few days ago, before the doctor wrote her the script for a high dose of narcotics, and right now loving him hurts too, even if she knows it’ll feel just fine in a few weeks, or months.

“I want to,” he assures her, hand still passing through her hair. She watches him swallow hard, his glancing over towards the direction that Neal and Maggie will be coming from before looking back at her, his expression still earnest, but more intense. “I feel like I—can I just say that I’m sorry? I’m so, so sorry, and I love you and I’m gonna be in love with you for the rest of my life, and I’m never going to hurt you again. I know that you deserved better from me, because you came back and you did everything right, and all I’ve done is hurt you, and give you every reason to run, and you did and this happened and I’m—so, so sorry, and—”

Mac sits up, gingerly pushing herself up and out of his reach.

(But not far.)

“Will, less than seventy-two hours ago you were in a relationship with Nina Howard and I almost died. Neal and Maggie could have died,” she interrupts forcefully, and then squeezes her eyes shut despite the pain, and takes a fortifying breath. “I really can’t do this. I can barely keep myself awake right now. I love you, but we can’t do this until my head literally stops spinning.” Licking her dry lips, she tries to soften herself to his stunned expression. “I need time,” she finishes, voice shaking.
She cringes at the sound of it.

More tentatively than before, Will reaches out to touch her. Hands so tender that she wonders if he’s anticipating that he’ll shatter her with his touch, he curls his fingers around her own.

“I can wait,” he says quietly, leaning close until his mouth is next to her ear. “I can wait forever.”

Groaning, she does laugh. “Not forever.”

But like when she first saw him waiting for her, relief overtakes her.

“I’m just saying. Figure of speech.” His nose presses against her temple. “Can I take care of you, at least?”

Turning her head, she brings their faces too close, her eyes crossing an attempt to focus correctly so that his face becomes something other than a blurry mass. His breath is hot against her skin, and if she moved her head only a few inches to rest against his chest, she could listen to his heartbeat. She could half a dozen things, all within her reach, that she hasn’t been able to do in almost six years.

But he pulls back, so he can look at her in the eyes.

(Or her face, possibly. But he’s not looking at her pityingly, or with a look of horror, so she’ll abide by it.)

“There’s a good likelihood you’re going to have to carry me to the hotel—wait, don’t we only have two rooms?” she asks, even though Maggie and Neal already intended to share, but she wonders if Will had presumed, or if whoever reserved the rooms had no idea that Will would be present.

“I can book a third,” he promises, stolid and honorable.

“No, it’s fine.” She smiles, pushing herself back against him. “I’m cold. You’re unseasonably warm. It’ll work out.”

All the foresight she has at the moment is collecting their two wayward producers, somehow stumbling to the Sheraton, and crawling into bed. Quite possibly sleeping on top of Will—in the past he’s proven himself more comfortable than a mattress. She has an inkling that he’ll be more comfortable than whatever an airport hotel can provide her with.

“I can’t hug you, can I?” His thumb traces the edge of the gauze bandage covering the back of her hand.

“I’m afraid I am one huge bruise right now,” she answers, voice descending to something more akin to a murmur. Her gaze flickers to his mouth. “You can kiss me, though.”

“MacKenzie—”

He looks decidedly uncertain.

“You won’t break me, Billy,” she whispers, but moves no closer.

Watching her expression worriedly, Will curves his body towards her, leaning down to bring their mouths close. Still holding onto her hand, he presses his lips to hers, the force of it hardly stronger than a loving exhale. Trying, she knows, to avoid her injuries. Gently, he brings his other hand to the side of her face, skimming his fingers with the slightest touch along her jawline as his tongue traces her lower lip. And then with what MacKenzie thinks might be a noise of satisfaction, pulls
They both smile.

Laden with multiple duffel bags filled with equipment and trying to pull Mac’s rolling suitcase behind her, Maggie plows purposefully through the crowd. Neal curses loudly, trying to keep pace. Then she sees them.

Then she stops, Neal plowing into her.

“He came,” she says wondrously. “I mean, he asked about what we were planning on doing, and I thought he paid for our upgrades, but I didn’t think he would come.”

Neal stops beside her, watching Will and Mac kiss. “Huh.”

Maggie’s first instinct is the report this development to Jim. It’s immediately overwhelmed by the secondary instinct, the one that knows that Jim is mad at her and that she should be mad at him, but reaching for Mac’s battered phone she tries to build a third instinct.

When the call finally connects, Jim sighs into her ear from thousands of miles away. But she can tell that he’s happy.

“So he went?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you so much to everyone who has commented and left kudos! So this marks the end of the fic. There is a sequel in planning. Two, technically. A one-shot that will take place about a week and a half after the epilogue, and then a much longer one (closer to this length) that will sort of be an AU "News Night With Will McAvoy" where you’ll get to see the fallout from Nina running the Genoa story as well as a few other things.

I’ve also (for those interested) published my writing playlist for this fic as a soundtrack on 8tracks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The water turns off, and he hears her step out of the shower a few seconds later. Will looks at the clock—seven minutes. Probably just enough to rinse her hair and wash her body, but then he wonders if Mac is allowed to do that, between all the lacerations and stitches, if she’s supposed to keep those dry.

He sits on the edge of the bed directly in the middle, wondering if she still sleeps on the right.

She leaves the bathroom wrapped in a ubiquitous white hotel towel and he’s not sure if her eyes are even open; Mac crosses the room to the king-sized bed in the middle of it, sits down on what has traditionally always been her side of the mattress, and with a heavy sigh, lies back on the duvet. Slowly, her muscles relax, and when her hands fall from clasping her towel closed, he finally gets full appraisal of the full extent of her injuries.

“Hon?” He turns, and moves to lean over her, planting himself more firmly atop the bed.

One bruised, swollen eye opens, and then the other. “Yeah?”

Her eyes are more bloodshot than they looked on the livestream, and the fact that he can’t discern whether it's from the blast or from the sleep deprivation doesn’t make him any less concerned. But for all that he doesn’t know, the questions he can’t ask her, he does know that he is a deciding cause on how she wound up here, and like this. Even if he doesn’t know how he let her run away to Peshawar again, even if he was truly so blind to himself or if he felt that voicing his concerns would be condescension.

(It doesn’t matter, he thinks. She still left. He still dated Nina. Nina still tried to run a takedown story on her, one that has now been traded for a time bomb and should she try to pin Genoa on them, he’s well on his way to collecting dozens of affidavits from her former targets in order to keep her quiet.

After all, he was a politician, once.)

Pushing her damp hair out her face, he strokes his thumb over an unblemished patch of skin at her temple. “You never gave me an answer. On if you want me to--do you want me to take care of you?”
“I’m debating the merits of just falling asleep naked,” she answers, her voice a breathy and well-worn sound.

Will frowns, and threads his fingers through her hair after adjusting his body so he is more comfortably adjacent to her. “That’s not an answer, MacKenzie.”

With a ragged sigh, she closes her eyes again, shuffling her frame in small increments until she sinks more fully into the blankets. She’s stalling, he knows, and fears how much he’s hurt her if she can’t let him do this for. But despite himself, his hand lands on the corner of her towel, smoothing the terrycloth out of the way to reveal the fluorescent purple contusions coloring the tops of her thighs, where her hips become her pelvis. She shivers.

“There’s a kit, in my duffel. There’s bacitracin and gauze and tape,” she finally says, more tentatively than he wants her sound. “I need to redress the cuts that needed stitches.”

Biting her lip, she opens her eyes again. The look in them is distinctly hazy as she fights to remain awake.

“I know how to do that,” he assures her, hand stroking up to rest on her uninjured stomach, and steadfastly ignoring the scar curving up her right flank. “I can do that. Just go to sleep. I’ll take care of you.”

Mac smirks, the corners of her lips forming crookedly. “You just wanna look at me naked.”

He doesn’t tell her about the broken bones and too-deep cuts he’s treated in his youth, if for no other reason than she already knows about them. They both know what the other has seen, now that he’s taken the care to open his eyes.

“I promise when you wake up, you will be fully clothed,” he murmurs. “I love you. Go to sleep, let me take care of you. I owe you one.”

Holding her gaze until she nods, exhales deeply, and closes her eyes once more, Will slides off the bed. Her bag is where Neal placed it next to the dresser, and when he opens it he finds the bag of medical supplies resting on top of her other belongings. And so, kneeling between her legs, he gently tends to injuries. Counts the stitches, kisses the edge of a particularly loathsome bruise on her knee, and then the scrapes on the backs of her hands.

“S’fine,” she mumbles after his fingers press too hard onto a cut on her forearm, jerking her wrist out of his grasp. “Not gonna break.”

But he becomes gentler still.

(Just because a rough touch won’t break her doesn’t mean that she doesn’t deserve to be treated with love and care.)

By the time he finishes reapplying the bandages and rubbing antibacterial gel into her skin, her breathing has deepened and evened out.

Standing, he carefully pulls the towel out from around her, and leaves it at the foot of the bed.

The pajamas were an impulsive purchase from a boutique in the airport, but they’re soft cotton and silk and he manages to get her limbs into them and lift her legs up onto the mattress without waking her up, and then gets her under the covers.

He knows he should be more tired, after coming from so far. But when he shucks off his own
clothes, leaving himself in his boxers and undershirt, and slides into bed next to her, he finds himself with no inclination to sleep. Rather, he curls himself around her, cautiously fitting his arms her torso.

MacKenzie’s breathing has changed.

It’s her nose, he knows, that has her lips parted for her to breathe through. And he knows that she took more Vicodin as soon as they got to the hotel room, that she’s not in much pain right now as she sleeps.

But still, he remains awake, and counts her breaths until sleep takes him too.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!