

Ignition

Author: CK

Rating: P16

Summary: Once ignited, some flames burned, lasting lifetimes and guiding the people they belonged to. But this one burned so bright that it blinded them and kept them from seeing that they we're heading the wrong ways in their lives.

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Author's Note: I'm usually not the one for OOC and AU stories. However, I got stuck with this idea and it just didn't want to leave me alone. It's mostly consistent with the normal timeline of the show as well as the general character development, but it still is somehow AU for me. Oh, and one thing: Stella/Adam never happened.

This is partly inspired by 6x18 "Rest In Peace, Marina Garito". The ending touched me so deeply that it seemed to be perfect as a starting point for this story. It is, however, not really connected. That's why the timeline doesn't add up 100 per cent.

The situation was awkward, to say at least. He woke up with her lying in his arms, in her bed, after a night of endless kisses and touches. The whole night through, it had felt right. Now, it felt awfully wrong. He didn't *want* it to. But if he was honest with himself...

Mac Taylor had never been spontaneous when it came to women. He was the old-fashioned kind of man; he would take a woman to dinner, buy her flowers and spend some time with her before going to bed with her. Not that he could claim that he hadn't done it in that order this time as well. He had shared dinner with her more times than he was able to count, just like they'd lunch together, and even breakfast. They'd spent years, more than a *decade*, with each other, befriending each other, relying on the other, getting closer and closer, forming a bond no one around them fully understood, but everyone recognized and respected. He had even given her flowers, and he distinctly remembered that one red rose she had welcomed with a smile and a sparkle in her eyes. Nevertheless, this was completely different. Because this wasn't just any woman he had courted. This was his best friend, Stella Bonasera.

The alarm clock on the nightstand showed 5:16 am in glowing green digits when Mac turned his head to look at it, careful in his movement as to not to disturb the sleeping woman cuddled up to him, or more, half draped over him. There was still some time till they would have to get up; till he would have to get ready for work.

When he had found her the evening before, sleeping on the couch in the lab, it had been the last confirmation he needed to know that the case had gotten to her much more than almost every other case. She had woken up when he had pulled the blanket up to cover her, looked with those emerald green orbs at him, and instantly he had insisted to take her home so she would be able to catch a good night's sleep. Also he had told her that she would take the next day off, no arguments.

Mac had only wanted to do what good friends did - make sure she was alright, because he cared about her.

He for sure didn't have had in mind being in her bed not even two hours later - making love to her.

He was glad when she stirred and slowly woke around quarter to six. He had planned to get up at six, and hadn't wanted to disturb her.

"Mornin'," she mumbled sleepily against his chest, and the tingling her breath caused on his skin reminded him too much of last night. He detached himself from her to sit up, rubbing his hands over his face, before he looked at her.

"I have to get ready for work," he told her, an apologetic note in his voice, and Stella smiled understandingly. When duty called, he was the last person on probably the whole wide world to ignore it, and she knew it. Her hand caressed his back as she sat up, too, and pulled his head to her with her other hand. She kissed him deeply, and he almost lost himself in the moment, before he regained his senses and pulled back carefully. "I really need to..."

"Sure. I understand." They got up together, and Mac was about to head for the bathroom, but Stella stopped him.

"You can take your shower in a minute, just let me quickly..." She smiled and pointed to the bathroom door, and he nodded. But when she turned around, some happy glow about her, he knew he couldn't do it any longer.

"Stella," he said quietly, taking her hand gently and tugging at it to turn her around and make her look at him. "We..." Stopping, he looked down for a moment. He was a gentleman. And gentlemen didn't dismiss the woman they had just slept with. But he needed to put things right, and he needed to do it now. "We can't... we can't repeat... this." He was almost whispering in the end, afraid to hurt her, and himself. It was only a fraction of a second in which her smile faltered slightly before she rebuilt it, but he wouldn't have been him, the man who had known her for so many years, hadn't he noticed it.

"No, you're right, we can't."

"I don't want you to think I-"

"It's alright, Mac. Don't worry about it." Her voice was, to her own surprise, strong when she answered him. Even then her smile never wavered, and for a moment she wondered where she took that strength from - or how her voice had come past the lump in her throat that felt like it wanted to choke her. What they had done was never to be repeated. They simply couldn't. It had only been a night of passion, of acting out desires that had developed over the time. Rationally, she understood that.

Yet something inside her broke when she had to admit to herself that what she and Mac had shared that night was a 'one time only' thing. Something shattered into a million tiny pieces, boring into every fiber of her body, and she couldn't make out whether it was her heart or her soul, or both, that had just suffered.

When he opened the door to go, she felt that he was about to leave more than just her apartment. As well as she felt that she had to let him leave.

The lonely tear that rolled down her cheek and fell onto her carpet, leaving a dark spot, was never taken notice of. The wet remnant simply dried away, leaving nothing but a memory.

Only a few weeks later, her apartment was empty. Most of her things were in New Orleans already, and she would follow in about two days, leaving New York to start a new career, and probably also a new life. Hadn't she been so sure about it when she had gotten the offer, after that one night, she knew it was her best choice.

She and Mac had tried to work together normally, like they had in all those years before, and as long as they were working cases, they actually could even make themselves believe for a short while that nothing unusual, nothing that was turning their lives, and more so, their relationship around, had happened. Personally, in private, however, there was barely any more contact. No sharing of meals, no coffee breaks together, no easy chatting. At the lab, at crime scenes, they still *worked* perfectly. But other than that...

The day came when they had to say goodbye, after a small party the team had organized for her, and Stella once again felt those shattered pieces dig into her. They stood before each other, not daring to hug, not even daring an innocent touch of hands - not daring to do what had been so natural for them and their friendship in bygone days. They just stood and stared, single tears rolling down Stella's cheeks one by one, and even in his eyes she saw some of the salty water glistening.

She had long since accepted that there was no future for them; that, although Mac cared deeply for her, he didn't feel the same way she did, didn't *love* her the way she loved him. She certainly hadn't wanted or planned to fall in love with him, and yet she had found herself powerless against her own feelings slowly building up and then one day cruelly confronting her with a truth she had for so long tried to deny. She had fallen for her best friend.

Men came into and left in her life, and most were either useless - or used her. One after another made her lose her confidence more and more until the only ones she trusted anymore were the men in her team, and the only one she talked to openly, told about her problems and fears, was Mac Taylor.

Part of her had thought that there was some deeper meaning to him following her to Greece as he had done a year prior. Or more, part of her had hoped for it to be a sign, the sign of something changing. But they came back and everything was as it had been before. They were friends, very close friends - period.

It had been the moment when she had first faced the possibility that there was never going to change anything between them. To some extent, she surely didn't mind the unshakeable nature of their connection. But when your heart got to the point when this wasn't enough anymore...

She got the offer from the New Orleans Crime Lab and at first hesitated. She loved New York, and everything she had ever called family was there. Leaving those people was the hardest thing to do for her. On the other hand, would she stay, her career would stagnate. Still, she didn't make the decision until after the night. That one night.

It had been such a clichéd situation. She had been emotionally churned up, and he had stayed with her after bringing her home so she wouldn't be alone. They had sat on her couch, with a glass of wine, and talked. Soon, she had fallen asleep, leaned against him, he had wanted to carry her over to her bed and... They had gotten caught in the moment, staring into each other's eyes, not completely sober anymore, though still capable of coherent thoughts. In the middle of the room he had stood, with her in his arms, as she had leaned in and, instead of kissing his cheek, tried his lips. Then she had found herself lying on her bed, kissed fiercely by one Mac Taylor. The night didn't progress as wildly as it had started. While it was passionate indeed, it was also slow and sensual and exploring, and Stella savored every moment of it, treasured it, hopeful that those memories would be soon accompanied by many similar ones more.

She had been sure that it was the turning point for them and their relationship - finally. Had only she known how terribly right she had been with that thought.

The morning came, and with it those words of him, and then him leaving. She knew she had to make a decision. One that wouldn't cause her too much harm. So she took the offer and prepared to leave.

In the end, their goodbye was quick and nothing that showed how deep their friendship went. Mac wasn't the one to make the first move, and she - she just couldn't overcome her hurt. So she replied to him wishing her all the best with nothing more than "And you.", turned, and went away.

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Mac didn't hear from her in three years. He tried to phone her, to write her, even got Lindsay to contact her - but Stella never responded. It wasn't like her, and still, after reassuring himself with the help of some contacts inside NOPD that she was alright, he realized that she obviously simply had made a clean sweep, leaving her old life behind.

Leaving him behind.

The old phrase that things had changed since their night together applied to them in every sense. He had never forgotten the expression in her eyes when he had told her that there was no repeating of that one night, as wonderful as it had been. It had been the moment he had seen, really seen, for the first time what this expression he had noticed more than once in all those years they had known each other meant. She was in love with him.

Never before he had thought about it, that something like this could possibly happen. They were friends, best friends, confidants, and closer to each other than to any other person. She had helped him dealing with Claire's death, with his inner demons, his grief and guilt, and he had always been there for her whenever she needed someone. One might say that at some point, their acquaintance could and should have resulted in something far deeper than good friendship, but still, to him it was always only platonic.

Sure there was some truth to what people said - that a man and a woman could never be close friends without developing a certain sexual attraction and tension. It was normal, it was... biological. So maybe they had been attracted to each other. They were a man and a woman, and not exactly unattractive. He would be lying if he said that he hadn't thought of Stella as beautiful, because that's what she was. A beautiful, intelligent, passionate woman who he was lucky to be friends with. But nothing more. He would never have been so bold as to really expect it to happen, much less to wish for it; still it hadn't surprised him when they had given in to natural desires that had been kept well hidden for years.

But falling in love again? After Claire? The thought had never even occurred to him. Not even seeing the love in Stella's eyes, and at the same time how heartbroken she was because of his rejection had changed that. He had dated a few women, and with Peyton, it had even gotten more serious - but even then he had been far from being in love.

Mac Taylor didn't fall in love. He had loved once and lost this love. How should he ever feel so deep again?

"Mac?" Adam suddenly brought him back from his thoughts, standing in the doorway and looking rather confused. "Are you alright?" There was concern evident in the young man's voice and Mac allowed himself a small smile.

"Yes," he simply answered, before his look fell onto the tablet PC in Adam's hands. "Are these the results from the fabric?"

"Yep, and you're gonna love this." At Taylor's raised eyebrow, Adam added a "Boss", before continuing, "there's actually only one manufacturer who produces this kind of satin-georgette-mix."

"I take it you got an address?"

"Danny and Flack are already on their way."

"Good work."

It was business as usual. Day in, day out, they got new cases, and they solved those cases. Countless ones in the course of the years. It seemed like nothing had changed; yet Mac knew that the team missed Stella.

With her gone, he needed a new second-in-command, and Jo Danville proved to be just the right person. Competent, clever, courageous, was she the perfect addition to the team, and good to fill the space Stella had left. At least professionally. While Jo was a woman everyone at the lab liked, she wasn't her predecessor, naturally. Mac saw that his team thought like this, and he himself felt it only the more. No one was able to replace the empathy and enthusiasm the Greek-Italian woman had brought into their lives and work.

Especially Lindsay and Adam took it hard. Stella had been like a big sister, if not mother figure for them. Mac was glad Lindsay had Danny and Lucy, but even having them at her side couldn't keep away the sadness when Stella didn't respond to her messages, sadness he saw too often for his taste. And Adam... Adam was still his joking, boyish self - at first sight. If one looked closer, however, it was hard to miss the cynicism he came up with now and then. He seemed... lonely. And Mac couldn't blame him for it.

As far as he himself was concerned - well, he didn't even want to think about it. You didn't just scratch more than a decade of spending the majority of days with each other, at work or in your free time, becoming close friends, and move on. Even though it seemed to be exactly what Stella had done - he still refused to believe that, and thought that she at least had good reasons for it - he felt incapable to. He liked routines and consistency in his life, he needed it. It was part of him, had always been. Breaking ties with someone he had known longer than most persons in his life didn't count as consistency.

People use to say, life goes on. Whatever happens, it should never stop you. Stella leaving New York, their lives, his life, hadn't stopped him.

But it had made him just a tad slower.

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The summer was warm, but not too hot. They all were thankful for it; strangely enough, there always seemed to be a connection between the rise of temperatures and crime rates. So as long as the thermometer stopped between 85 and 90 degrees, it was just fine with New York's crime investigators.

It didn't however, appear to be fine with Taylor's mind. He slowly began to doubt himself - or his sanity, for that matter. At first he thought he was seeing ghosts. He would spot chocolate curls vanishing around a corner, or an all too familiar elegant figure walking on the sidewalk across the street. But whenever he looked closer, she was gone. He suspected that the amount of work and the lack of sleep and free time, plus now the heat, was slowly driving him insane, and opted to take some days off. But then Flack stormed into his office.

"Mac! I've seen Stella today!" he announced. And nothing was able to hold Mac back anymore.

Looking for one person in a city like the Big Apple surely was everything, just not easy. But he had known Stella for over ten years, and he knew her favorite places. When she came back to the city for a holiday, she would choose familiar places to go to, of that he was sure.

Still, it surprised him that he found her so quickly.

She was sitting in a small café they'd often visited together; where they had shared a coffee during a long work day or a snack at lunch. It wasn't that far away from the lab, and secluded enough that it never was too crowded. They had their own very special brand of cookies Mac remembered Stella had loved, had almost been addicted to. Sometimes he had bought her one and given it to her while she was tied up with work at the lab, and every single time his reward had been one of her bright, happy smiles...

Mac shook his head, interrupting his own thoughts. Three years ago he had let her leave, so now definitely wasn't the time for fond memories.

She didn't notice him until he was standing right in front of her table. Only then she looked up - and a thousand emotions played across her features as their eyes locked. Seconds, minutes even went by, before she finally began to speak.

"Hey, Mac," she said, and the smile she offered, one that wasn't bright and happy anymore, but sad and tired, burned itself into his mind. Gone seemed the woman he had once known. She looked exhausted, worn out, and her eyes were devoid of the sparkle that once used to be so prominent in the rich green.

"Stella," he simply greeted, and he couldn't hold back a suspicious look towards the little girl sitting beside her. Still, he decided against asking about her for the time being. "How are you?" She gestured towards the chair across from her, and he sat down.

"Fine... got a lot of work, but managed to take a few days off. Missed New York," the dark-haired woman answered shrugging, and the child with equally dark curls beside her tugged at her sleeve.

"Mommy?" the little one piped up, and for just a few seconds, Mac's world spun dangerously, leaving him so dizzy it took him a moment to recover. She had a daughter. The girl was her daughter. He didn't know what he had thought who the child was, whom she belonged to - if he had thought anything at all. Probably he hadn't. That Stella had a daughter, however, was... shocking.

"What is it, matya mou?" But the girl didn't answer; she only looked at him, the question mark almost visibly forming on in her face. What was forming on Stella's face, though, was clearly visible - uncertainty. She looked at her daughter and then at Mac, and back to the little girl beside her, obviously fighting for the right words. And Mac

wondered what part of the answer was bothering her. "That... is Mac Taylor. He wa-" Hesitation, just for a moment. "He is a friend. Um, Mac, this is Eleni."

The child smiled shyly when Mac offered his hand, but then grabbed it with her smaller, cookie-crumbs covered one. She greeted him with a "Hello.", and the man responded with the same greeting, carefully shaking the little hand. Stella watched the scenery thoughtfully and with a hint of pain in her eyes, he noticed.

They sat together for a long while and tried their best to find the right words, to have an actual conversation, but even if they hadn't been trained investigators it wouldn't have been hard to realize that the past three years had formed a rift between them. Where once words had flowed easily whenever they shared a private moment away from crime scenes, dead bodies, and forensics, there now was a struggle for every single short sentence.

"How did you find out I was here?" Stella eventually wanted to know after some time of much thinking in silence and less talking.

"I thought I was seeing you, but at first believed I was only imagining things. It's been three years, after all," he began to explain, and she was surprised to hear no reproach in his voice. "But then Flack came into my office today and told me he had seen you and I knew... I had to look for you."

"I see." She paused momentarily, searching for the right words. "Listen, Mac..."

"Stella...", he began at the same time, and they both stopped. He waited for her to continue, but she only shook her head. "I think the team would be happy to see you. It probably has already made its round that you're here; I doubt Don kept it to himself."

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Danny and Lindsay Messer, now proud owners of a nice single family home, invited the whole team to an impromptu welcome party as soon as they heard that Stella was back in town.

Cheerful Hellos were exchanged, and Stella lost count of how often she was hugged; it definitely was more than once by everyone attending their little come together. They were enthusiastic to see her, and even she, despite never contacting them in three years for good reasons, was now happy to see her "family" again. The attention, however, soon went to Eleni, who, after initially looking shy, if not frightened, easily wrapped the whole team around her little finger.

The Messers had quickly prepared some snacks; but food was the last thing on everyone's mind - and that even though their jobs didn't allow them regular breaks to satisfy a rumbling stomach and they normally took every chance they got to eat something. And so while Lucy Messer and Eleni happily munched miniature versions of sausages, the adults were too busy with talking to do more than occasionally pop a finger food piece into their mouth.

Information on how Stella now lived, what New Orleans was like, if she had nice colleagues, and if crime was different down there, was demanded, and Stella told patiently about her new life, wisely leaving out everything that was too personal. Not that it kept certain people from pressing on the one or the other subject.

"So... who's the lucky guy who has two such beautiful ladies in his life? Do we know him?" Flack wanted to know a good while into the evening, and a mischievous grin played on his face. He completely ignored Sid reproachfully hissing his name as he expectantly looked at Stella. The woman in question coughed slightly to buy herself some time, momentarily caught off guard by this direct approach, before going for an evasive answer.

"Ever the curious one, Don."

"That's what makes me so good." His expression changed from mischievous to winning. "So?" If possible, his grin became even wider when Stella leaned close to him. She spoke in a low voice, pretending that she didn't want the others to hear her words, but still it was loud enough so that everyone was able to get a good idea of what she was saying.

"I know you're very good at keeping secrets, Don Flack."

"Absolutely." His voice was as conspiratorial low as hers.

"And so am I." She leaned back and laughed as Flack looked a bit dumbfounded for a second, and the rest joined her in her laughter.

No one noticed that the only person at the table who didn't laugh was Mac.

Conversation went on easily, and the team talked about old times as well as they shared stories of the past three years. On Stella's suggestion, even Jo joined the group later this evening. The two women got along well from the moment they shook hands, and chatted animatedly; mostly about their work of course. All the while Stella did her best to avoid everything that was too Mac-related, which wasn't that easy, as her successor of course wanted to exchange stories about their experiences with the boss.

In the end it was Lindsay who saved Stella, guiding their talks into a less dangerous direction, bringing up semi-general topics everyone was able to relate and share own thoughts to. Stella thanked her friend silently; she hadn't missed Linds watching her curiously from the first second of their reunion, and she knew there were still some questions to come up later.

As midnight was slowly approaching, the group had left the table to gather in pairs and trios in different parts of the room. Stella took the chance to pull Lindsay aside, knowing that now was the best time as ever to try and shed some light on some things.

"Linds... I'm sorry I never called back. I just... I just couldn't." She refrained from continuing when the younger woman held up her hand.

"It's alright, Stella. I was sad and kind of angry at first, but... I think I understand now." Lindsay looked past her for a moment, thoughtfully so, and when Stella followed her eyes, she spotted Mac, talking to Sheldon and Sid. Stella swallowed hard. She should have guessed that if anyone, the girl from Montana she always had a special connection to would figure it out - what was behind her behavior, her disappearance - behind her sudden motherhood. "Hey," the brunette then continued, "how about Danny and I look after Eleni tonight and... you two", she nodded slightly into Mac's direction, "talk to each other properly?" Lindsay offered quietly so the others wouldn't hear it. "It seems Eleni and Lucy are friends already," she pointed at the children, still playing despite the late hour, and laughed lightly, "and I'm positive that she'll be fine a night without her mum."

Stella hesitated for a moment. She didn't have any doubts about letting her daughter stay overnight at the Messer home; but she wasn't so sure if she was ready to talk to Mac. To face him alone, without her daughter at her side, without people around them like in the café earlier that day - without anything protecting her from the inevitable conversation they would have to have anyway.

They would have to have anyway.

There was no way to hide - and no reason either. She owed it to Mac to tell him everything. She had been a coward long enough.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea," she finally sighed. "Thanks, Linds."

"Always."

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They left the house together in silence after saying goodbye to the rest. No one asked or wondered why those two left alone, why Eleni stayed behind, or why Stella, as the one the party was given for, was the first one to go. They simply accepted it, and Stella as well as Mac were thankful for it. After all, the co-workers were also friends - and they knew each other well. Well enough, at least.

As soon as they had left the house and walked a bit down the street, Mac stopped her. Questions had been burning in his mind since he had found her with the little girl beside her in that café, and more so since he knew the child was her daughter. He had kept to himself the whole time, contemplating and brooding, trying to think through everything; but every time he came up with only one likely scenario.

"Stella. Eleni... how old is she exactly?"

"Two years, Mac. Why?"

"Two years? Or maybe a bit more?" His eyes were almost pleading her to tell him the truth. And she knew that he by now had guessed at least half of it; even if she had wanted to, she wouldn't have had a chance to keep it a secret anymore. And she didn't want to, either. So she closed her eyes and sighed before she answered him, not bothering to pretend she didn't know what was on both their minds.

"What makes you think-"

"You're no woman to sleep around, or go to bed with any man you barely know. And I'm sure that after our night..." His voice trailed off when she turned away from him, trying to hide the tears threatening to leave her eyes; tears he had already seen. "Stell...", he said gently and she cringed at his use of the short form of her name she hadn't heard in years. "Is Eleni... my daughter?"

She could have sworn that every sound around them died down. The only thing she heard was his breathing - although he was standing a few steps away from her, it was so loud that she wanted to cover her ears. Still standing with her back to him, one of her hands covered her mouth while the other supported her elbow, and she pressed

her arms into her, like something inside of her wanted to forbid her to breathe. She could *feel* him waiting for her answer, but she let half a lifetime pass before she felt strong enough for one simple word:

"Yes."

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He was a father.

He was father of a little, no more than two year old daughter. There was a life, partly created out of his flesh and blood, and she had been walking the earth for two years without him even guessing that there may be was such a life, such a child.

Mac hadn't gone through so many emotions in such a short time since Claire's death. In fact, apart from the moment he had learned of his wife's death twelve years ago, he had never felt a wave of emotions like this one. Not even when his father had died, or friends and colleagues. If he was honest, this was bigger than every single one of these events. This was *his child*.

Had his world spun before when he had learned that the girl was Stella's daughter, it now raced and left him breathless, with a mind clouded with countless thoughts he couldn't even start to sort through. He vaguely grabbed the memory of his father talking about grandchildren on his deathbed. He saw the pictures rushing by, pictures of him and Claire, sadly looking at a negative pregnancy test. He watched himself with children he met during investigations, and how he dealt with them. He remembered the thoughts and emotions when he learned that Claire had a son. He felt again the collection of hopes and wishes for a child of his own, and how they were destroyed on that fatal September day in 2001. He relived the understanding that he would never have children, as he was sure he would never again meet a woman he was ready to have them with, and how that understanding nearly ate him alive.

In the end, he came up with the probably stupidest - to his mind - question of all:

"Why didn't you tell me?" To his own ears, he sounded weak, shocked, shaken. In one second, *everything* had changed. Being robbed of someone by death was one thing. You had to deal with your grief, maybe with guilt, but when you were lucky, you would find someone to help you through that time, help you back on your feet and go on with your life. But when a new life suddenly, out of nothing, was added to yours, and you... you only got to know about it *by chance*...

Mac knew the stages of shocked and confused lay behind him. Now came the anger. It welled up inside of him and he was barely able to control it. It was his daughter. And he had already lost two years of her life. He hadn't been there at the day she was born, didn't hear her first scream, her Hello to the world, didn't see her take her first steps, didn't hear her first words. It was his loss. And no one would ever be able to give back to him the time he had lost with his daughter.

When Stella didn't answer him, his anger grew. They were standing in the middle of an empty street at night, surrounded by single family houses, but despite all his good manners, he didn't care if anyone would hear them.

"Don't you think I had, I *have* a right to know that I have a daughter?" He tried a second question, and this time his voice was not only strong, but also loud, louder than he himself liked. But how was he supposed to keep his emotions under control?

"That's neither the time nor the place to discuss this, Mac," the woman who was finally turning around to face him answered, mixed emotions, anger and sadness and fear, evident in her tone.

"No. You're right. The time would have been three years ago!"

"Mac. Please," she begged, and he breathed in deeply. She was right. This wasn't the right place for such a discussion. And this wasn't him speaking, but his anger. Neither was acceptable. Not for him.

Motioning to follow him, he walked to the next crossroad, not far away from where they had been standing, and looked out for a cab. Surprisingly enough, he indeed spotted one and headed straight for it, Stella on his heels. She didn't argue when he named his home address as destination; she knew it was their best choice at the moment, better than any public place.

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They entered his apartment around twenty minutes later. Mac offered a drink and Stella chose a glass of water; it was as if the emotionality of the evening had dried her out and she was desperate to get at least a bit of the liquid her system seemed to lack back. Even though she knew it was a matter of psychology, not physiology.

They sat down in his living room, she on the couch and he on a chair opposite her, and looked at each other; simply watched the other, without saying anything. It seemed to be their new refrain - silence. Just not the comfortable kind they used to share during their long years of friendship.

Staring at each other, thinking, and hearing the clock tick - it was all they did for uncounted minutes. Although they both were sure it were more hours than minutes. In the end, it was Stella who found the courage to start talking.

"I know I owe you an explanation... probably more than that. I'll try to explain as much as I can, so please, Mac, let me finish." She breathed in deeply before beginning her story. "I found out that I was pregnant about two weeks after I had left New York. I thought missing my period was a result of all the emotional and physical stress, and save for a very few times, I was one of those lucky women who never had the problem of morning sickness. To say I was shocked when the doctor told me is probably an understatement, and at first I didn't know what to do. I was sure I wanted to have the baby, but other than that..."

"I know I had no right to not tell you, to keep you from your daughter. But... you didn't... you didn't love me, and I couldn't stand the thought of seeing you on a regular basis, not at that time at least. I was too hurt. Besides, everything went well, and the New Orleans office offered a lot of help. Not long after Eleni was born I stopped thinking of me as a single parent. Me and her, we were a family. We didn't need anyone else." Stella paused for a moment, looking at him thoughtfully. "She's very much like you, you know. She's intelligent and thorough, more than a child at her age should be. And she certainly knows how to keep the lab in check whenever I take her to work with me." She gave a short laugh, but then grew serious again. There was, however, Mac noticed, this touch of fondness, of love, never leaving her eyes while she was talking about her daughter.

Their daughter.

"You are named as her father in her birth certificate. Even though I didn't tell you, I... it might not have been fair, but I made sure she would be taken care of should anything happen to me." Now Stella's voice was merely a whisper, and the man sitting in the chair across from her had to strain his ears to understand her words.

So many things to ask and say roamed in his mind, but in the end, he couldn't have possibly found the right words - or whatever qualified as *right words*. He didn't even know where to *start*. After he had used the ride to his apartment to get his anger under control, make it vanish, he now felt... numb.

He spends a night with the woman he considers his best friend. Then she leaves the city; never calls and never responds to any attempt of getting in touch. She reappears after three years, and tells him that he is the father of a two year old girl, a girl looking just like her mother - apart from those piercing blue eyes.

There were no classes in school teaching one how to deal with something like that. No courses at the military academy, or in the police trainings. Not even his parents had ever found it necessary to prepare him for a moment like this one, a situation in which he would be knocked out by news that were normally considered to be happy ones. Surely they were, for him at least, as he had always wanted children. But then...

He knew he was going around in circles, and certainly not forward, with the same thoughts repeating in his head over and over again, but he still couldn't really understand what had just happened. Yesterday, he had only been a crime scene investigator and scientist, a widower who barely dated and, since the death of his wife, had hardly ever committed himself to a new relationship; a man who lived for his work and was dedicated to solving crimes, catching criminals, making the city a bit safer. He was someone who cared for his team, but didn't have many, if any, friends outside the lab. And yes, he was someone who missed his best friend of more than a decade, the one who had left and was never to be heard of again - until now.

And just like that, everything that had his life defined for about twelve years was declared null and void in a matter of seconds, the seconds it took for the information that he was a father now to reach his brain.

"What does her name mean?" Minutes had gone by, maybe hours, before his mind came up with the simple question, sounding so innocent, yet somehow heavy with meaning.

"It's Greek for light of the sun. Sunshine, if you want."

"It suits her."

"Yes, it does," she breathed. Breaking their eye contact, Stella looked down at her hands, joined in her lap. For a moment, the silence returned. Then he heard her whisper: "I'm sorry." She looked up again, straight into his eyes, hers filled with unshed tears. "So sorry, Mac."

And something inside of him clicked. He jumped up and the last thing he saw was her slightly shocked, but mostly confused expression before he pulled her into his arms and held her as tight to him as possible.

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They talked the whole night and didn't even stop when the first rays of the morning sun fell through the windows of his apartment. Mac told about some of the more personal aspects of and incidents in his life and work in the

past three years; most of the talking however did Stella, telling him about their daughter, about every little detail she was able to recall. She regretted not having her photo albums and the *loads* of digital pictures and videos with her, but promised she would show him everything as soon as they saw each other again.

Mentioning the next time they'd meet again brought a halt to their till then flowing conversation. Suddenly, the uncertainty, the doubts and hesitation, were back and made them both shift uncomfortable in their respective seats. Despite a night long of talking, they hadn't yet figured out where they would go from there in their friendship, their relationship; they hadn't even talked about it to start with. Instead, they had skillfully avoided the topic, only to now stare into its distorted, unforgiving face.

But regardless of the time they took to discuss it - the result would always be the same.

Mac couldn't change what he felt, or not felt, and Stella couldn't live with a man who wasn't able to offer the love she sought, and still felt for him. Besides, neither was able to leave behind their home and life just like this to move to the other one's location; in addition to that, Stella also didn't want to move with Eleni, and thus take the child away from her home and familiar surroundings.

So their ways would part again; this time, however, with the promise to stay in touch. Because on one thing they agreed, without any of them having a shadow of a doubt about it - their daughter deserved to grow up with both her mother and her father. Especially since Eleni got along so well with Mac that it surprised not only their colleagues and friends, but also the child's parents. It was as if the little girl was able to sense that the man who acted so adorably insecure, but also with so much love around her was someone she had to hold in her heart dearly. Which she clearly did, judging by her behavior when they met again the afternoon after their first encounter.

Stella and Eleni's return to New Orleans was scheduled for the fourth day after the reunion. Mac brought them to the airport, and thanks to Lindsay's intervention they were alone to say goodbye. When their daughter very clearly expressed her unhappiness about having to leave her new friends and especially the nice man with the shiny pin on his lapel so soon, they both shared a smile and the first short light-hearted moment since Mac had found Stella and the girl five days ago.

This time, they also actually dared a quick embrace; nothing too intimate, nothing that was able to bring too many old feelings back, but still they recognized it as at least a step into the right direction; whatever this direction was.

Eleni, however, didn't think about letting go of Mac after only a few seconds. She clung to him like a little monkey, and Stella couldn't suppress her laughter when he looked rather helpless with the little one in his arms who just wouldn't let go.

"Matya mou, we have to go, or the plane's leaving without us," Stella tried her luck, but obviously chose the wrong words, because now Eleni tightened the embrace, mobilizing every bit of strength in her little arms. It seemed as though she hoped the plane would indeed leave without them, allowing them to stay longer.

"How am I supposed to visit you and your mama when you don't let go?" Mac then reasoned, and the girl pulled back a bit to look at him. Lower lip pushed forward and thinking hard, she finally nodded slowly. After having planted one last kiss on Mac's cheek, she let go of him. "Be safe, you two," he said gently, holding his daughter's hand, but looking at Stella.

"We will," she responded, before she let him pass the little girl's hand over to hers and headed for the check-in.

Mac stood and watched the sky even when the plane was long gone and out of sight.

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It was the same evening that Lindsay came into his office. She stood before his desk, looking at him thoughtfully, but at first didn't say anything.

"Lindsay," her boss greeted her, "what is it?"

"Mac, you know I respect and like you very much. You brought me here, gave me my dream job and practically introduced me to my husband. You're an example for every CSI and scientist out there, and I really look up to you." She paused for a moment, giving the man across from her time to formulate a sentence out of his confusion.

"Care to tell me where this is going?"

"It goes to the point where I tell you that you're an idiot." Mac raised an eyebrow, but she didn't give him the chance to say anything. "Now I know you won't discipline me because *you* know that I'm *right*. You have a daughter out there. A wonderful, cute, clever little girl who, despite barely knowing you, seems to feel the connection between you, and adores you. You have her mother who used to be your best friend, whom you were so close to that it wasn't comparable to anyone, anything else. This may not be my business, but I just can't watch you two tormenting yourself any longer." Again she paused, taking a seat in the chair opposite him. "It took me a while, but I got Stella to tell me the whole story. You two have been so close to each other for this long; and maybe after all this time, you fail to see how close you've really become. Mac... have you ever, only once, asked yourself what you feel for her? If those feelings have maybe changed in the past three years? Stella never had a family, and you... you have been alone for so long. You both deserve some happiness. Just... give it a thought. Please, Mac."

Leaving her boss behind speechless, but also deep in thought, she got up and left his office, silently hoping that her little speech would at least have some effect. This was dangerous terrain; it came close to insubordination. She knew that much. But she cared too much about both Mac and Stella to watch it any longer. And if Mac was anything of the man she trusted to recognize in him, he would think about her words, and not how inappropriate they were, coming from her.

For Mac, the young woman's words had been like a slap in the face. It took him a bit to overcome the initial shock, and in some recess of his mind, he was thankful that they'd just closed a case and the lab wasn't too busy - or crowded, for that matter. It gave him some time alone, without bursting anyone in with new results. Closing his eyes, he let his head sink into his hands and his mind go blank for only a few seconds. Before his musings overrun him.

Stella. What was it that he felt for her? He loved her, no doubt. He loved her as a friend, as the woman who had been at his side for over ten years, whom he had shared good and bad times with. He loved her as the one person whose passion and enthusiasm in everything she did had more than once saved him, sometimes from himself, sometimes because he needed to be rescued and saved for no reason at all - other than that life was getting to him. She had always been his constant. He couldn't count the times they had saved each other's lives, they had had each other covered, on the job and in their private lives. She was the one he understood without words, and who only needed to look into his eyes to know what he was thinking.

Contemplating all the reasons why Stella meant so much to him made him wonder where friendship ended and everything beyond began. How was it defined? How did one know? How did it feel with Claire; when did he know that he loved her, not as a friend, but as the person he wanted to be with forever?

Emotionally, he had been living in his safe little shelter for so long that he didn't remember anymore. Didn't remember what it felt like, being in love, having butterflies in your stomach and a not-so-realistic world view because for a while - and maybe longer - your world was the person you were in love with. He wasn't sure if he was still able to feel that way at all.

Did he feel something akin to butterflies inside of him? He doubted it. But then, didn't he miss Stella in every waking second, because his life simply didn't feel complete without her? He had once thought that this was what would only ever apply to his late wife; that he would never feel complete without her. When he listened to his inner self now, though, it told him that Claire, although she would always be a part of him and his heart, was also his past. What completed him now was the woman who had been at his side for over a decade, and especially since Claire's death. So maybe the time for butterflies was long since over; maybe it had never been there. But that didn't, shouldn't belittle the importance of what he had with Stella.

Lindsay was right. He was an idiot. Or would be one if he let that chance, whatever it held, pass.

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Given the odds, Mac Taylor was still the last person she expected to find standing in front of her when she opened the door that afternoon.

She was too shocked to invite him in, so it took his carefully spoken question to make her step aside and let him enter her apartment. Eleni had already spotted the visitor and run to him, squealing as he lifted the little girl up to hug her, while the girl's mother was busy closing the door in slow-motion and then lean against it, collecting her strength. She didn't know, couldn't possibly guess, why he so suddenly showed up, without informing her first, and outside their regular meeting dates.

Encouraged by his daughter, Mac had already sat down on the couch in the living room, with the toddler swarming around him, when Stella followed the two and offered her visitor a coffee. Before he could answer, however, Eleni had done it for him, and asked for - or more demanded - orange juice, which the man accepted shrugging.

Stella made some coffee nevertheless; suspecting they could and would both need it. When she came back into the living room, she found Eleni sitting in Mac's lap, babbling something with the few words she knew already. It was an adorable picture and she couldn't help but just watch it, smiling a little. But reality had to come back to them sooner or later, and so she sat down, putting down the tray with the carafe of orange juice, three glasses and two mugs of coffee on the table.

Then she sat back and waited.

"It's hard to resist the little one," Mac tried a half-hearted joke, but failed miserably as his tone wasn't by far as light as he had intended it to be, and Stella looked even less amused. Sighing, he carefully sat the child down and asked her to go play a bit, and to his relieve she complied immediately. "I take it you're wondering why I'm here,

and why I haven't called before. I..." he trailed off and rubbed his face with his hands. "Lindsay... had the nerve to tell me a few things I'm now really thankful she said, because they got me thinking."

Stella raised an eyebrow at that. "She talked to you about us?" He chuckled lightly.

"Seems like farm girls from Montana are braver than us people who've grown up in the big cities." He coughed slightly. "Stella, listen... you know I care about you, more than about any other person I know. That hasn't changed, not even in these three years. But... you know better than anyone else how... emotionally... crippled I am." He took a shaky breath. "My greatest fear is... to lose happiness again once I allow it back into my life. To lose people I... I love. I thought I would spend my life with Claire, have a family with her, children. And then all of a sudden... I'm not good at adapting; I've never been. Not when it comes to my private life. After Claire... I was sure I'd never be able to love again. Have a family, a normal life - I had this chance once, but it was taken from me, and I took it as a sign. Work always kept me busy, kept me from thinking about it too much, too often. And then, one day, I just accepted it; my solitude, that everyone else around me moved on. I was strangely okay with it."

Another pause; another few shaky breaths. He nursed the mug in his hand, watching the dark liquid in it whirl lazily as he moved the receptacle slightly.

"I know I hurt you, and I wish there was more I could do than simply saying that I'm sorry. It won't change what happened back then, and it probably won't change much now. God knows I would never intentionally hurt you, and even do everything to not hurt you... *unintentionally* either. I just couldn't deal with the situation back then, and when I realized what I'd done..."

"I'm here now because I think our daughter deserves to grow up with both her parents, always around whenever she needs anyone of us. I don't want her being passed from one to another and back, and I don't want her to have to go by plane whenever she wants to see the respective other. I just think it wouldn't be... fair."

"Jo has the lab under control. So I will stay - for two weeks, if it is okay with you. On the condition that you agree, I don't want to waste any more time. I want to spend time with Eleni, with *you and* Eleni. I want to try to work something out, together with you. Maybe we can find a better solution for all this. I found a small hotel just up the street whe-" He stopped and frowned when she held up her hand, the first sign of any motion since he had started talking. Fear that she wasn't okay with the idea, that she would send him back to New York, telling him that she wanted to stick to their agreement of visiting each other every few weeks, was creeping up inside of him.

Stella saw the anxiety and anticipation in his eyes. She knew that taking that step, not only talking about his feelings, but also making something she recognized as a clear statement about them and their future, was one of the hardest things to do for him.

"I'd be very happy if you'd stay. Even more so if you stay *here* - in our guest bedroom."

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There certainly were some advantages to being the boss. Stella was able to rearrange shifts and take some time off, for a few days at least. She was still on call, but her team did its best to keep as much work from her as possible.

From the outside, they looked almost like a normal family. They spend time with their daughter, took walks with her, visited the playground together. Sometimes Mac would carry Eleni on his shoulders, and the girl would laugh

happily. A bit of the sparkle then would return to Stella's eyes when she watched them; but nevertheless, even this didn't chase away the melancholy in her.

They managed to restore a bit of the former relaxed nature of their relationship; they talked a lot, even laughed together. Mac helped her preparing meals, even cooked once, what allowed Stella a pause and him the chance to watch her interact with their daughter without that bit of unease that seemed to be always there whenever she knew he was watching them.

One week passed and they fell into a comfortable routine. It was nothing special - and yet everything to it was special. But all this was pushed into the background that Sunday morning when he left the bathroom and headed for the kitchen.

And stopped dead in his tracks when he neared the kitchen door.

Till then, she had always been already dressed, whether she was preparing breakfast or entering the kitchen when he was doing just that. This time, however, was different.

Stella was preparing breakfast - in her sleeping attire, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Her feet were bare as she stood in front of the stove, cooking eggs and bacon, and her toes tapped happily on the tile covered floor from time to time. Now and then she was humming a few notes to the song playing softly in the background; obviously coming from a radio he had yet to spot. Her light dressing gown flowed around her slender legs whenever she moved, checking the coffee machine or the waffle maker. It was a picture of such domesticity that it left his heart torn between dancing with joy and clenching with pain; a pain over things he had missed.

The whole time, he had been wondering what it was that held him back. The whole time, he had wondered why he couldn't reciprocate the love she was willing, eager, to give him. The whole time, he couldn't understand what was blocking him, as he had long since acknowledged his emotional barriers and was ready to try and overcome them.

Now he finally knew what it was, this missing puzzle piece, the last push into what he knew was the one and only right direction. It was what he had relied on for years and decades, what had dominated his work and therefore also his life.

He needed visible, tangible proof. Proof that there was the normal, domestic, and most importantly, *happy* life waiting for him. Maybe life wasn't always easy, and maybe there were still unforeseeable obstacles waiting for them on their way. But experience had taught him that every way was walked easier and more successful together.

And who better to walk it with than the woman he finally knew was so much for him than just a friend?

This was the woman he wanted to spend weekends and weeks with, wanted to go to sleep with every evening and wake up to every morning; the woman who was the mother of his child and with whom together he wanted to see this daughter grow up.

The woman he wanted to spend his life with.

She turned around when he entered the kitchen, a gentle smile and a "Good morning" on her lips. He didn't respond, though; instead he simply walked up to her, pulled her into his arms, and did what he should have done a

long time ago - he kissed her, laying every last bit of the love he felt for her, Stella Bonasera, his best friend and soul mate, and, save for his daughter, most important person in his life, into the gesture.

The moment she returned the kiss, winding her arms around him, his world turned upside down again. But this time, he knew, it was a good thing.

Where they would go from there, they both didn't know. Maybe he would move to New Orleans, or maybe she would return to New York, the city her heart had never really left. Maybe one of them would give up their job. It wasn't what they cared about at the moment. All that was important was that they were together, as a family.

And together they would see where the bright light of the fire that had been ignited over three years ago, had been ignited so many more years before that one faithful night, would lead them.

FIN