

**Title:** Slipping

**Author:** Frumpy

**Rating:** PG-13, to be on the safe side.

**Summary:** A case, Grissom struggling, G/S angst, and a fluffy bit. (You've been warned.)

**Disclaimer:** If I'd own CSI, we'd have it on HBO by now.

Not beta read - all mistakes are mine, and mine alone. I was feeling frustrated today, so this is a bit on the angsty side.

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Sara sighed. She looked over the page for the fifth time, still not seeing anything that might prove to be a real clue. Shaking her head to focus on the page that started to blur, she put it down again, and looked at her list.

"Got anything?"

Sara turned to see Catherine walking into the Layout Room, carrying a folder.

"Nothing really. Not a thing. Nada. Niente..."

"Oh, save it." Catherine shot her a look, coupled with a mild frown. "You just don't like working the phone records."

"Yeah, well, that's nothing you ever have to bother with, do you?"

Catherine was about to come back with a snarky remark, but then softened her gaze. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not the one who gives out the assignments."

Sara was caught surprised by the other woman's gentle tone, and it took her a moment to grasp it.

"I... I'm sorry, Catherine. You are right, I'm just frustrated." She thought back to the beginning of the shift. Homicide. Young woman shot to death in a parking lot. Gang area. Shirley McMannon. And what did Grissom have for her? The victim's phone records. She realized she was being selfish - the phone list might hold just as important a clue as any other piece of evidence, but it still didn't lessen the feeling that there might be some underlying reason to Grissom's assignment.

"Hey! Happens to the best of us. No hard feelings." Catherine opened the folder.

Sara was still surprised by Catherine's conciliatory tone, until she recognized it for what it was. Pity. That realization made her stomach churn, but she held it back this time. Save it for the one who deserved it.

"I was projecting. Sorry." She picked up her phone list and walked over to Catherine. "As I said, nothing conclusive, really. I traced the out of state calls to mostly family. Local calls went to friends, her workplace..." She flipped the page to a series of highlighted numbers. "I did find three unlisted numbers, so I'll look into them next."

Catherine nodded. "Might be something. Tox report just came back."

"Did they find anything?"

"Positive for opiates." Catherine looked the page over once again. "Nothing else. Minute amount, really."

"Pretty heavy stuff, though."

"Hmmm." Catherine nodded gently. "Amount is minimal, which seems weird. Considering there were no other drugs in her system."

"Maybe first time user?"

"Maybe. Might be totally unrelated. Though, gang area, drugs... it's not a stretch."

"Yeah. I'll look into the numbers." With that Sara walked out of the room, and to the rows of desks that coupled as their private work stations.

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"Unregistered."

Grissom nodded. He hadn't expected anything else. "Look into the bullet we recovered, Bobby. Something might stand out."

"Okay. I wouldn't hold any hope, though. If this is gang related, the chances..."

"I know. We still try."

Bobby looked a bit taken aback at Grissom's tone, but didn't show any stronger reaction before getting the bullet out of the bindle. "I'll get back to you, sir."

"Thanks." Grissom was halfway down the hallway, when he caught sight of Catherine.

"Give me some good news."

Catherine looked up at Grissom. She noted how tired he looked.

"Well, " she picked up the tox report and handed it to him. "Found traces of opiates. Not much, so not sure if it really means something. I'll look at the gang angle."

He looked the report over and closed his eyes. "Alright." What had seemed like a pretty cut and dry job at first, was turning into a mess. "Did Sara find anything?"

"Other than bad vibes? Not really." Catherine held his gaze, but he didn't do so much as frown. "She did find some unlisted numbers, and is checking them."

"Thank you. Work the car with Warrick."

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"Yes. Yes, thank you, sir."

Sara put the phone down to see Grissom standing in the doorway. Swallowing her personal feelings, she jotted down the info she got for her first number.

"How's it going?" He walked slowly over.

Sara bit back the answer she wanted to give, and showed him the list. "Slowly. I traced one unlisted number to a bookie. A bit unusual among her phone calls, but... nothing really."

"That seems to be all we're getting with this case."

His admission was uncharacteristic. "Have you talked to Catherine?"

"The opiates, yes."

"Not much hope there, huh?"

He turned to leave the room. "Not really."

"Yeah. You can get a result like that from eating two bagels with poppy seeds."

He shot her glance over the shoulder before replying "Yes. I read the same article yesterday," and was out in the hallway again.

For the millionth time, Sara wondered just when things had gone so horribly downhill.

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Grissom rubbed a hand over his eyes as he sat down in his office. Leaning back in his chair, he didn't bother to switch on his desk light, cherishing the few moments of quiet and peace that he got. The lab sounds were muffled through the closed door - phones ringing, machines whirring, people talking. Usually the background murmur relaxed him, but for some reason he was on edge tonight. He had taken it out on Sara. As so often. He didn't know when it became that way, but channelling the frustration and focusing it on her had become easy over the time. He knew what he was doing. He knew he was incredibly wrong, but he felt powerless to stop it, and that only added to his frustrations.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his thoughts, and he quickly reached out to turn the light on. There was a time when people didn't feel the need to knock hesitantly, either. He was slipping. He knew it.

"Yes?"

Greg poked his head in. "Here you are!" He opened the door wider, and stepped through. "I ran the blood samples Nick collected. Came back your victim. Not even a degraded second sample."

"Yeah, we didn't expect to get anything really. She didn't have any defensive wounds." He took the analysis Greg held out.

"She was surprised."

"Or unprepared."

Greg nodded, mulling this over. "I'd be prepared in an area like this."

Grissom cocked an eyebrow. "Good for you, Greg."

"Not saying I make a habit of..."

"Greg!" The labtech's apparent lack of the ability to realize what was a good time, and what wasn't never ceased to amaze Grissom. Or maybe Greg had it all right, and he was wrong.

"Sorry." Greg turned towards the door. "Warrick found some hairs in the car. I'll get to them right away."

Grissom nodded, then added gently, "Good, Greg. Thank you."

Placated for the moment, Greg shot him a tentative smile, and went back to his lab.

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After the third unanswered call, Sara decided to call Brass, and have him try to rouse the owner of the number sometime during the day. The shift was about to end, and she felt no real desire to put in more overtime.

She waved to Greg, who was busy in the DNA lab, and then went to get her purse from the locker room. She didn't bother to stop by at Grissom's office, but walked by the garage on her way out to say goodnight to Catherine and Warrick, still busy with the car.

On her way home, she stopped at the deli close to the lab to get some takeout pancakes, not feeling in the mood to cook at home. A light meal, and a meaningless tv show would do to wind down from the shift. It usually did, but she found herself contemplating Grissom - again. She couldn't put a finger on it, but something was off. His increasing disrespect for her was hard enough to take, but he had seemed somewhat resigned today. Tired. She had seen Grissom tired before, but never this weary and worn out.

She shook her head at herself. There he was treating her like shit, and she was thinking about why he was this tired. 'Get real, Sara.'

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Not even the rollercoaster granted him the needed relief like it used to. Instead of feeling flushed, and lighter after the rides, he only felt increasingly... empty. Like nothing was able to rouse him enough to care anymore.

He watched the people strolling around excitedly in the early evening. He had never minded crowds, they were good for getting lost in them, but he was feeling trapped, revulsed by the smiling faces. When had that happened?

Weaving his way to his car, he checked his watch. Nearly time to go to work, he realized. He also realized that the prospect of work didn't fill the emptiness in himself like it used to, and didn't know when that had happened, either.

Lately, he couldn't find the mental strength in himself to finish a movie, or even concentrate long enough on it to enjoy it. Let alone reading a book. It all left him feeling untouched, and cold.

At first he had attributed this to his lack of sleep, and told himself when he'd be tired enough to sleep through a night uninterrupted it would all go away. But it hadn't.

Night was when all that he kept pushing down came back up. Sporadic at first, and it left him reeling. Regularly now. His anger, his guilt, his white hot fury, and the pain. He hadn't had a full night's sleep in over three weeks. The struggle to cope with everything had given away to a resigned acceptance, that left him drained and feeling cold. He didn't know whether to embrace that coldness or push it down, too.

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Sara had gotten the note Brass left for her. Another bookie, and a friend that had an unlisted number on the side. There was a time when she would have wondered why, but instead she just added the information to her notes, and enclosed it with her report.

The lab was relatively quiet, with most of the dayshift gone, and her being the first one from nightshift to arrive. Actually, the second one she realized, as she saw Greg already at his workstation.

"Hey!"

"Sara. Hey." He put down the syringe he had been holding.

"You're early, Greg. Want to impress the boss?"

He tried to hide it with a quick smile, but Sara could see the flash of uncertainty.

"Always!" He turned to pick up a folder. "Ran the hairs Warrick found. Definitely belong to the vic, with one hair an unknown."

"Hair?" Sara took the folder and looked over the report. "But the vic was shot in the parking lot, not her car."

"Oh. Well..."

Sara caught herself quickly. "No, good work, Greg." She smiled reassuringly, and wondered again why it was up to her lately. "It might help find a suspect. Thanks!"

Actually, it had given her an idea. She looked over Greg's findings again. Hair. Unknown donor. Male.

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Brass was ready to leave when his desk phone rang.

"Detective Jim Brass... Sara! Hi." He sat back down. "Yes, of course we did. No one currently." He rifled through the folders on his desk till he found the one he was looking for. "Wait a minute."

Pinning the phone between his shoulder and ear, he flipped through the interviews. "We interviewed friends, family, they said there was no one... What? How far back?" He frowned slightly before picking up a pen, and jotting down the names Sara gave him. "Okay, I'll look into it. I'll get back to you."

With a weary look at the clock, he picked up his jacket and left.

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Sara put the phone down, and looked over the extended phone list. She had been poring over the new printouts for over three hours. Satisfied with her findings, she picked it up, and went to Grissom's office.

The door was closed, as had been usual lately. Knocking, she didn't wait for an answer and walked in. Hodges was standing before the desk, and turned slightly as she walked in, but didn't so much as nod to acknowledge her, only went on talking.

"As I said, the hair Greg gave me - no unique characteristics. Short, undyed, male. That's all I could find with this measly piece of trace evidence."

Grissom nodded, and managed to say "Thank you, Hodges.", making the name sound like some kind of disease. Sara suppressed a grin, and waited till the labtech had left the room.

"We made a mistake," she announced without greeting.

Grissom watched her sit down, and waited for an explanation. "We..."

"The phone records. I only got the ones from the last two months."

"As is procedure, Sara. You said you didn't find anything."

She held out the pages she had marked with a bright yellow marker. "I went back, and looked at Shirley McMannon's earlier phone records. Some names popped up that weren't on the recent phone lists, so I asked Brass to check them out."

Grissom looked them over. "Previous boyfriends?" he ventured.

"That's what I'm thinking, yes. We were so focused on the gang angle, we missed the obvious."

Grissom was still looking at the marked names. "Sara... the last one of those if over six months ago."

"Yes." She got up. "Bad feelings linger, you know."

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It was the second name that yielded a result. An immediate result. Mrs. McMannon's eyes clouded over, presumably with bad memories.

"Brian."

Brass nodded. "Did Shirley..."

"He was bad news. Soon as I saw him, I knew it." She sighed. "You just feel who is good for your daughter, and he definitely wasn't."

"Anything you can pinpoint?"

"Not really... just a general feeling." She shrugged slightly. "Shirley left her previous boyfriend for Brian. She was infatuated with him, talking about him day in and day out. Then she left him, one day. Never told me why."

Brass looked at Mrs. McMannon. "Anything happen after that?"

"He cam by one evening. They talked. He yelled. Shirley closed the door and didn't answer her phone for some days." She looked up at Brass. "You think... you think Brian..."

"We don't rule anything out. Sounds like he had a temper."

"As I said, bad news." Her shoulders slumped in resignation.

Brass nodded softly, and didn't know what to say. He had learned that the best thing in that case was to say nothing. "Thank you, Mrs. McMannon."

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Sara looked at Brian in the interrogation room through the one-way mirror. He was a morose young man. Early twenties. Handsome, but with a dangerous edge.

Grissom walked up behind her. "DNA is a match. But that only proves he was in her car... sometime. No one saw him near the parking lot the night of the shooting."

"Doesn't sound like we'll get a warrant."

He gazed at her shortly before settling his eyes on Brian. "No."

"Maybe he'll slip when we question him. You ready?" She started for the door.

"You go."

Sara frowned, and opened her mouth, but Grissom was faster.

"Your suspect. You can do it."

"Thank you..." 'I guess.'

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"Hello, Brian." Brass went into the room first, followed by Sara. "Thank you for coming in. I'm Det. Jim Brass, this is Sara Sidle from the Crime Lab."

"Quite a party for just some questions."

"Yeah, well, we just want to tie all loose ends here, you understand." Brass sat down. "Remember Shirley McMannon?"

Brian's face broke out into a sneer. "Sweet Shirley... oh, hell yeah."

Sara noted he didn't seem to be surprised that her name came up. "You know what happened?"

"Some gang scumbag offed her. Yeah."

"And how does that make you feel?" Sara had a hard time hiding her disdain.

"I'll certainly miss her sweet lovin'... I dropped her anyway." His grin was too smug.

"Oh, that's funny, you know?" Brass circled him. "We heard she left you."

"What?" Brian's face took on a nasty shade of red. "Who the fuck said that?"

"That stung, didn't it?"

He whipped his head around to face Sara. "Yeah. HER!"

"I bet a guy like you, doesn't take it lightly when his girlfriend sacks him."

"Look, lady, I told you! I left her."

Brass pulled out a printout. "I bet. That's why you kept calling her, right?"

"What!"

"I bet that grated on you, didn't it? It was eating away at you, wasn't it? You were mad. She made you look like a fool." Sara watched him closely. "That's why you found her, Brian. After all that time, your hurt little ego..."

He slammed his hand on the table. "I DIDN'T shoot her!"

Brass smiled. "That's funny, Brian. Real funny. You know... we never told the press that she was shot...."

All color drained from Brian's face.

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Brass smiled at Sara when they stepped out of the room. "Cheer up. We got the guy!"

"It's never gonna hold up in court, Jim."

Brass turned to look at Grissom. "But he knew..."

"As did everyone who heard the shooting that night. It's never going past the DA." Grissom looked at Sara who nodded. "Let him go."

"He did it, Gil, you know it! You know it!" He looked accusingly at Grissom, who turned away.

Sara sighed. "But we can never prove it. We'd need a warrant, and maybe, just maybe, we would find the gun. But we'll never get a warrant based on..." she gestured with her hand in the general direction of the interrogation room, "...this."

Grissom had started walking away.

"Grissom, what... you just giving up like this?"

They all saw the flinch. Nearly imperceptible, but still there. Grissom's voice was low. "Yes, Jim. Just like that."

Sara placed a hand on Brass's arm, but he shrugged it off, and went towards Grissom. "You always wax about there being a clue. Find it, dammit!"

The crack of the fist hitting the wall drowned out Brass' shout. No one said anything as Grissom stared at his knuckles. The cracked skin looking eerily white, before the blood came. He didn't feel it. He didn't feel a thing. He flexed his hand and looked with a detached wonderment as the blood began to run down the sides of his hand.

Brass had stopped dead in his tracks, his arms falling to his sides. Sara was frozen to the spot, until she saw the heads poking out of the rooms.

"Greg!" Her own voice woke her up. "Bring a bandage... something."

Grissom was still staring at his hand, unmoving, when she took the bandage from Greg, and touched his arm. The touch seemed to make him snap out of his state, or maybe it was the pain he suddenly felt when she applied the bandage.

Brass had gone on and gotten everyone to get back to their stations, not able to bring himself to look at Grissom just yet, watching as Sara led him down the hallway to the parking lot.

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"You don't need to drive me home." The reality of his lost temper had set in, and he wanted nothing more than to be away from anything and anybody.

"No, I don't. You're in no condition to drive, though." Sara opened the door of her car, and waited for him to put up a fight. Surprisingly, he didn't, and she saw that resignation again.

"Just drive me home, then."

The drive was spent in a thick silence. Sara wanted to turn on the radio, anything to distract her. She looked at Grissom, who was slumped in the passenger seat, looking at the passing lights, but not seeing them, left hand holding his knuckles protectively. The blood had soaked partly through the bandages.

"We should get you to a doctor."

Grissom looked up slowly, as if it took a while for her words to register. His gaze dropped to the bandage. "No. I'll just redress it when I'm home." He turned back to the window, and Sara had to check the desire to turn the radio on once again.

She parked in what she assumed was Grissom's usual parking spot in front of the townhouse, and turned off the engine, reaching for her purse on the backseat.

"What are you doing?" Grissom looked at her from outside the passenger side.

"You don't think I'll leave my purse in the car?"

Grissom looked like he wanted to say something, but then just closed the door and slowly walked towards his front door. He left it open, and went straight to the couch.

"Headache?"

He shook his head, as he heard the door close.

"You want to be alone," she stated matter of factly.

"I am amazed by your deductive skills." Grissom closed his eyes, willing everything away.

Sara bit back the retort, and went to the kitchen, rooting around. She put the water heater on, and was getting out some cups. A groan from the kitchen table made her look up.

"Would you leave if I asked you nicely?" Grissom was leaning against the counter.

"No." She looked for the tea. Even Grissom must have a mundane thing like tea.

He turned his head to the left and looked at some spot on the floor intently, listening to the rustle of tea bags. He sighed. "I lost my temper. Happens. I'm sorry. Life goes on."

"No."

"What?"

Sara looked at him. "You can't keep going like this."

He averted his gaze again. "Ya, well, what concern of yours is that?"

She slammed the cup she had been holding on the counter. "You know what an asshole you can be? I don't know why I'm even here, the way you treated me lately! The world doesn't revolve around just you and your concerns, Grissom." Sara expected him to look hurt, angry, anything but the resignation she saw in his empty eyes.

He swallowed, and went back to the couch, pulling at the bandage.

Sara tried to comprehend what was going on, but was drawn back into reality when he hissed. "Let me get that." She walked over and kneeled down in front of him, unwrapping the bandage. "You got a new one?"

"Bathroom."

She handed him a cup of tea and got up. "Drink this."

He took the cup in his uninjured hand and sipped at it wordlessly. There was nothing to say to make things right. Grissom watched as Sara redressed his hand, and finished the tea. The heat was comforting, and by the time she was done, he could hardly keep his eyes open.

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He woke with a start. Something had roused him from his light slumber. Grissom looked around, and saw he was on his couch. Cup in hand. The cup was forgotten when he saw Sara, and everything came back. He placed the cup on the table. "Sara..."

"I'm not leaving. Go to bed." She had settled on the couch and made herself as comfortable as possible, trying to not wake Grissom up - he seemed to need the sleep. He didn't move or say anything, so she closed her eyes again. She was beyond tired herself, and was hugging the pillow on the couch to her chest, as her breathing began to become more regular, and shallow.

Grissom looked at her delicate neck, her soft hair falling on the pillow she had rested her head on. Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached out to touch the milky white skin, but caught himself in time. Again. And again. His heart said one thing, but his mind kept it in check.

He curled his fingers to a fist, and let the pain from his bruised knuckles take over. It felt good, he realized, and that shook him to the core. When had pushing down his emotions been replaced with drowning them out with physical pain? When had he stopped functioning? There was only so much he could ruthlessly push away before even Gil Grissom would break.

His gaze stopped on Sara again. He couldn't just... keep pushing her away. What right did he have, though? After all he had done. 'Thinking is overrated.'

And just like that, trusting his gut instinct for once, since he had nothing else left to rely on, Grissom leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss between Sara's shoulderblades.

Sara had been half asleep when she felt Grissom move slightly. She felt Grissom's hot breath tickling her neck hairs, but the kiss was unexpectedly cool. She stiffened. Maybe it was the complete surprise of the moment that robbed the kiss from any sensual quality, and made it a simple touch of lips to her back. Maybe it was all that had happened lately. She'd always expected the first kiss to be sizzling, scorching her skin, but then she was still grappling with what had just happened.

She felt Grissom moving away, and quickly turned her head. "No..."

The baby blue eyes clouded over with some emotion she couldn't read, before Grissom dropped his gaze.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I shouldn't..."

"No." She turned around and grasped his hand, uncurling his fist. The flicker of innocent hope she caught in his eye, for just a second before he seemed to steel himself against the world, made her touch even more gentle. "I meant, don't move away."

"I shouldn't have. I'm sorry." He pulled his hand away again.

"Gil."

He stopped. Completely. That one, simple word made his head spin, and the world stop. His walls were still there. He had always thought they'd be gone for her, but they weren't. But they didn't trap him anymore.

With a sound halfway between a gasp and a choke, he leaned down, and placed his head on her shoulder. Taking in her scent, her warmth, her strength, wrapping his arms around her tightly.

"Sara..."

The word was heavy with emotion as she felt his breath caress the skin of her neck, and she brought up her hands to hold him, run her fingers through the curls on his neck. He sighed against her. They had a long way to go, but this was a start.

"Yes."

And she smiled.