

BY THE WAY

A MISSING BUTTERFLY SIDESTORY

MEGAN DERR



LESS THAN THREE PAGES

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By Megan Derr

Published by:
Less Than Three Press

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Cover art by Megan Derr

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Electronic Edition March 2010
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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-936202-18-8

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"Divorce?" Kathleen repeated, then laughed. "Don't be stupid, Wallace."

Wallace. He remembered, once upon a time and far away, he'd thought it special the way she used his full name and never abbreviated it. He'd thought it meant something special. What he'd learned too late was that she hated nicknames, considered them vulgar and low class. She'd never allowed him to call her Kathy, or Katie, or even sweetheart. She'd never once called him Wally.

"I've been stupid for the past fifteen years, Kathleen. You've done nothing but lie to me, use me, and abuse me since we met. There's nothing about this marriage worth saving, so I'm ending it. You can go along easily, or I'll take you to court and drag you through the mud."

She laughed again and sipped at her morning bloody Mary, perfect platinum hair falling perfectly over one perfect shoulder. He hated that word, perfect. It described her *perfectly*, and she'd never tired of telling him it was the one thing he would never be.

"You'll get the papers today," he continued. "I expect you to be out of this house, and your belongings out of the cabin and beach house, by the end of the year. I'm leaving you the penthouse."

In reply, she only kept laughing. Her voice was frigid, however, when she replied, "Why bother moving my stuff? I'll take them in the divorce and we both know it, Wallace."

Once, he would have had to acknowledge she was right. Kathleen was evil and vindictive when she wanted something. Easier to put up with her, and keep the peace, than challenge her and only suffer for it. Not now. He wasn't stupid. Thanks to Antoine, to Mal, he had all he needed to cut the bitch from his life completely. "End of the year, Kathleen. You had better hope one of your many boyfriends is willing to foot your bills from now on. Past the stock and property I'm giving you, you'll have nothing."

Though her derisive expression didn't change, though she didn't so much as twitch or even move beyond taking another sip of her bloody Mary. Shit, being married to her for fifteen years had taught him a few things, and he knew that lack of anything wasn't good at all. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She looked at him, blue eyes chilly, and he could see her going through it all in her head one last time. Kathleen never did anything impulsively. She was calculating, and very good at it—and this time, it seemed, her numbers added up to a blunt response. "I'm pregnant."

Wally felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "Not mine. I haven't fucked you in years. I'm guessing the father doesn't know? He probably wouldn't want it anyway."

"No," she said, and he supposed that covered both questions. So she'd messed up somewhere. It was the one thing he hated most about her, that little lie all those years ago. *Oh, I love children. I've always wanted some of my own. We'll fill the house someday, Wallace.* It had taken him too long to realize all her excuses *Soon. When we're more stable. When you're not traveling so much* were just that—excuses. She had never wanted kids, wanted nothing to do with any kids at all.

But he'd always wanted them, and she knew it, and she was using that now to get out of one last little tight fix. He should tell her to fuck off, to deal with her own mistake, her and whomever she'd fucked. She knew she was screwed—he obviously knew of the lovers, and if he was being this confident about the divorce, he knew more besides. So she was cutting her loses, taking what she could, and handing off the last problem facing her.

Typical Kathleen.

"Fine," he said quietly. "You go along with the divorce, sign everything put in front of you, give me full custody of the kid, and walk out of our lives forever. I never want to see you again. Do that, take what I'm giving you, and we're done. Show your face again, and you'll regret it, understand? In return, I'll take the kid, and let you walk."

"Fine," she said quietly, and it was only then he saw just how scared she had been. All for herself, of course. A child would ruin her life, and he could have easily made it all so much more difficult. Antoine was going to call him a sucker, and probably worse.

Victory was his, and without the months or even years of long, drawn out fighting he'd been prepared to endure. She'd surrendered as easily as that, for a reason he had not seen coming in a thousand years. He should feel jubilant, ecstatic.

All he felt was old, tired, and depressed.

A child. Christ, he'd never thought his divorce would bring him the one thing he'd wanted most from marriage. It wasn't his child, technically, but he preferred not to think about that part. He could give the child a better life than either of its real parents would. He'd take what he'd unexpectedly been given, and not look too closely at the source of the gift.

Except, he was staring straight at her now, and saw something immediately wrong with the picture. "Why the fuck are you drinking if you're pregnant?" he demanded.

"It's virgin," Kathleen replied coldly. "If you bothered to be here anymore, or notice anything but yourself and your boyfriend, you would notice I haven't been smoking or drinking for the past three months."

Huh. She had stopped smoking. He really had ceased to notice anything about her, had stopped caring. He knew that, but it was good to have additional confirmation that he no longer gave a fuck. It meant the break would be clean, and he'd never look back.

A child...he couldn't stop thinking about it. He should move to the cabin full time, then. That was a good little area to raise a kid, better than this flashy house. Wait until she found out he was going to sell it; he half wished he could tell her, just to see her explode.

So much for spending more time with Antoine. Mr. Player would never want to trek out to almost nowhere to hang out with him and a kid. Hell, Mr. Player was going to be Mr. VP soon. He wouldn't have the time.

Something in his chest twisted, as it always did, when he thought of Antoine. Beautiful, smart, ambitious, too clever by half Antoine, there for him when no one else gave a fuck. He always hated when the rumors about them reached his ear. He'd never been the one to cheat, and Antoine was a player, not an asshole. They were just friends...except that didn't really do them justice, he thought.

They were best friends. They spent some part of every day together. He knew Antoine better than he knew himself, and Antoine knew him. He'd helped Antoine climb the ranks of Amberton, and Antoine had helped him build his reputation as a scout. If he'd listened to Antoine sooner about the dumb bitch he'd married...

Shit would have been way different, and he was tired of dwelling on it. He was moving forward. Hell, he was starting over a father, now. That didn't even feel real yet, and it probably wouldn't until he held the baby...

He turned from those thoughts, leaving the room when he realized he'd just been standing there wool-gathering. Kathleen had always hated his zoning out. Antoine had always been amused by it, in a...fond sort of way, he supposed. Why was he always comparing those two? But he knew the answer to that, he'd known it for years. It was finally admitting Antoine was everything, and Kathleen nothing, that drove him to push for the long overdue divorce.

If only he could figure out how to say that. Funny, that he could tell Antoine everything else, but damned if he could walk up to the man and say it like he would everything else. *Hey, player. What's playing today? By the way, I love you.*

Yeah, no.

Antoine had never been the settling type. He'd started playing in college and never stopped. Why should he? Antoine was the kind of man who could have whoever, whatever, he wanted, right up until the day he took his last snooze. He wasn't the kind of guy to play a friend, and he definitely wasn't the type to settle down and stop playing—never mind settle down with a friend who sucked at marriage, sucked at love, sucked at pretty much everything except music.

A job from which he was retiring early, because he'd thought he'd be taking full advantage of his new freedom. He was tired of the road, tired of clubs, tired of avoiding his home. He'd thought to spend the time with Antoine, doing other things with a freedom that he had just lost. He was going to have a son or daughter. He still couldn't think of it and really believe it, except for that lack of expression on Kathleen's face as she'd said it. In what, six months? He'd be a father.

Leaving the house, thinking gleefully of the day when he'd sell the damned thing, he slid into his convertible and drove off. He turned on the radio, and smiled to hear Cassidy's voice pouring out. It hadn't taken more than a second for that group to soar.

The announcement had gone far better than he'd dared hope. He and Antoine had both been certain it would take all morning to have it out and make her realize he wasn't fucking around. He had the whole morning free, now.

His phone chimed an incoming text, and Wally smiled. That would be Antoine, texting to tell him good luck, keep going, don't give up. Grinning, he paused at a stop sign to slide his phone open. His grin widened as he read *Half done by now? Keep going until she pops like a bloated tick.*

Laughing, Wally sent a quick text back, then continued driving. Not thirty seconds later, his phone started ringing. Wally slide it open again and hit the accept button, then said, "Hey, player. What's playing today? By the way, I'm almost free."

Antoine's voice poured over him, warm and happy and going straight to Wally's cock. It should probably bother him to turned on by Antoine, but being Antoine's best friend for a decade and a half taught and untaught a lot of things.

"Then I'd say a small celebration for the completion of step one is in order. Where are you now?"

"Just driving around."

"Come pick me up, then, I'll buy you breakfast."

"I will take that offer," Wally replied. "Twenty minutes."

"Cool."

Wally hung up, and tossed his phone into the passenger seat as he hit the highway. Twenty minutes later, he pulled up in front of the building that housed main headquarters for Amberton-Lord Entertainments. Antoine was waiting for him on the sidewalk, dressed to the nines in one of his fancy suits and fuck if he didn't look as edible as ever in it. All the Osborne boys were too good looking, too everything, but it was always Antoine who got to him.

Antoine slid into Wally's convertible with a grin. "Hey."

"As often as you and your brother play hookie, it's a wonder either of you stayed employed as long as you have, and that any work gets done."

Shrugging, Antoine replied, "I get it done. My job is mostly shaking hands and meeting for lunch, cocktail parties. You know that."

"Yeah," Wally said, frowning. "Just ribbing. What changed your happy tune?" It'd only been twenty minutes.

"Nothing," Antoine replied, and smile. It was a bit forced, a bit distracted, but Wally knew better than to push. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Let's just hit our diner," Wally said. "No place better for waffles, and that's what I want."

"Diner it is, then." They subsided into silence after that, the kind of silence in which Wally felt comfortable. It was light, easy, companionable. It wasn't the heavy, oppressive, weighted thing pressing him down that he'd endured with Kathleen.

He didn't break it until they pulled into the diner parking lot. "So how is Mal enjoying his new life?"

"Loves it," Antoine said, smiling fondly as he thought of his brother. "Never seen him happier."

"Good," Wally replied. "God knows they both deserve it."

Antoine nodded, but didn't say anything further until they were seated at their usual booth. "So how did you wrap it up so damned quickly?" he asked after the waitress had come and gone. "Was the bitch really that easily defeated?"

Wally shook his head, and fiddled with his coffee mug. Antoine was going to blow a gasket. Probably a lot of gaskets.

"What?" Antoine demanded, voice lashing out like a whip. "What the hell did you do?"

"She's pregnant," Wally said to his coffee. "I said if she signed everything and vanished for good, I'd take the kid, no questions asked."

There was a ringing silence that weighed heavier than anything he'd endured with Kathleen. "You're a goddamned fucking fool," Antoine said at last, voice scathing. "'Finally smart enough to drop her, and you can't even do that without fixing up one last mistake for her, and taking the burden of it on yourself. So she gets the freedom and whatever you're letting her have, and walks away free and clear. You get saddled with a kid that's not even yours. So you look at your freedom for a half second, before throwing it away again?"

"But—"

"There is no but!" Antoine cut him off. "It's not even your kid, unless you were fucking lying about that like you've apparently lied about not taking any more of her shit."

"I didn't lie!" Wally snarled. "She threw it at me this morning. What was I supposed to do? Leave the kid to a mother and father who'd just as soon throw it out like so much garbage? Does that sound familiar, Antoine? Did you deserve to be treated that way? Does this kid?"

Antoine raked a hand through his hair and swore, unable to argue with that. "So that's it, then. Already chaining yourself to something else. So much for any plans with me, huh? I guess it's just as fucking well I had to cancel them, anyway. I had hoped you'd come with me, though, and we'd enjoy new plans."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"My boss came in after I hung up with you," Antoine said to the silverware. "I'm being shipped overseas for about a year, give or take, to help establish a new branch in London. I leave next month."

Wally stared at him. Antoine, gone for at least a year? But...but what was he supposed to do without Antoine? He'd known Antoine would want nothing to do with a kid, and be mad at him for letting Kathleen use him again...but he hadn't thought Antoine would vanish like this. Though, he guessed one didn't really have anything to do with another. Except it sounded like his invitation to tag along was being rescinded.

"That's good for you though," he finally managed, forcing the best goddamn smile in his repertoire. "Guess you're about done with playing CCO, huh?"

"Weber is due for retirement," Antoine replied. "If I pull off this London thing, I'm in line to fill his shoes."

"Vice President, just like you always planned, and well ahead of schedule, typical for you," Wally said. "I'm happy for you, Antoine. You'll own the whole fucking world before you die. I..." I wish I could go with you, and I wish we could play house together, but you've got too much going to want to slow down now. "I hope it works out for you."

Antoine nodded, but his voice was hollow when he said, "Thanks. I was arranging for you to come with me, but I guess I don't need to bother. So where are you going to raise this kid that's not actually yours?"

"He's mine, all right?" Wally snapped, suddenly irritated. "You're right, I didn't fuck her. By blood, the kid has nothing to do with me. But I don't recall you and your brothers being blood related to each other or your mother. If you want to be bitchy that I let Kathleen use me, fine, but don't get snippy about who spawned the kid. I'm going to be raising him, so he's mine. I'm sorry it pisses you off that in the divorce I'm suddenly getting the one fucking I wanted from the marriage. I don't expect you to be happy for me, but you could stop being a jackass."

He wasn't being fair and he knew it—he knew Antoine had been looking forward to spending time with him without the dark cloud of Kathleen hanging over him. Wally had been miserable, and Antoine felt that misery, and had been happy for him that it would be gone. In Antoine's eyes, he was just moving from one cage to another. He wished he was a player like Antoine, that he could love and leave so easily. But he wasn't, and he had only ever loved two people his whole life—the stupid bitch who'd only ever wanted his money and reputation, the other a man who preferred a different flavor every week.

Both of whom were vanishing from his life, though for different reasons.

Sad, that he couldn't wait to see the last of his wife, but just the thought of being without Antoine for one short year left him in a state of misery.

Antoine remained silent, and they continued that way all through breakfast. Wally hated it. So much for a celebration. "When next month do you leave?" he finally asked.

"Don't know, but sooner rather than later."

"Guess that means you won't be here for your birthday, then," Wally said, the news depressing him further. They always celebrated their birthdays together. They did everything together, and he had no idea how he was going to do any of it without Antoine around.

He'd hoped they'd do so much more. His hazy plans...well, they didn't matter now. Antoine was leaving, and furious with him at the moment, and Wally dreaded what an ocean of distance would do. He pushed his waffle away, only a couple of bites taken. "I should get you back to work. You've better things to be doing than wasting your time on me."

Not waiting for a reply, more terrified there would be none, he strode from the diner and back to his car. They drove back in silence, and he hated it so goddamned much, because these were the sorts of silences he was divorcing. They weren't supposed to come from Antoine.

But, they'd be fine, he assured himself. They'd argued before, they always worked it out in the end. It wasn't very heartening, though, when Antoine only told him 'bye' before slamming the car door shut and stalking back into his office building.

They'd be fine, Wally thought again. They'd never gone longer than a day when they were pissed off.

Except when he called that night to see where they were going for dinner, he got no answer. Antoine did not pick up any of his three lines. Fine, let him sulk.

But when he called in the morning, there was still no answer.

Every day he called, and every day he got nothing.

Two weeks passed, and he called to say the divorce was proceeding beautifully. It would all wrap up for good in a matter of days. But he told his good news to the answering machine. Antoine never called him back. Wally celebrated his pending freedom alone.

After that, he gave up. He heard from someone else when Antoine left to go overseas. Though he kept his phone glued to his hand, Antoine never called or emailed or even fucking texted to say goodbye.

Wally tried to blow him off the same way Antoine had apparently ditched him...but it was like trying to staunch a wound that ran too deep for the bleeding to stop. They'd never ignored each other for longer than a day. He saw Antoine more than he'd ever seen his wife. As hopeless as it was, he'd been in love with Antoine for at least a decade, and sometimes he thought it might have been there all along. Did Antoine really hate him so much now?

He should just move on, learn to live without Antoine attached at the hip. Pride said Antoine could go to fucking hell. But pride was a cold companion. He just wanted Antoine back.

Getting his address in London proved to be a bitch, but Wally managed it, and arranged his birthday present.

Now...now he had to sit here and wait, and hope to god the asshole opened the fucking thing.

~~*

Antoine had never been so fucking miserable in his entire life, except maybe for those years before he'd somehow found himself a family. He couldn't even say how the fuck he'd gotten himself into this mess. Shit had spiraled out of control, until he'd slunk off to London feeling like the lowest and dirtiest of rats.

He'd only meant to ignore Wally for the day—that was the longest they could stand, whenever they argued. When he'd still been angry, he'd gone another day, giving himself time to get his head on straight and get over stupid, petty jealousy that he had no business feeling, time to get over...

Oh, who was he kidding? He was angry and hurt and jealous as fuck that he had already lost Wally a second time. This time, he couldn't even hate the bastard who'd stolen Wally away. Wally would make a great father; he should have been one a long damned time ago.

He'd had every intention of getting Wally on the path to children himself...but he had selfishly wanted Wally to himself for a little while first. He'd loved the bastard almost from the moment they meant, definitely longer than that fucking cunt Kathleen. He'd even sucked it up and been Wally's best man. All he'd wanted was a year alone with Wally, with no ex-wife looming. London was the perfect chance for Wally to start over.

Now, they hadn't talked in nearly a month and a half, and it was a living hell.

But he hadn't truly felt like the scum of the earth until he'd returned to the flat the company had gotten him for the year, and seen the package waiting for him. The note with it said *I know you said you weren't buying this until you were a fat cat at forty, but given you're five years ahead of schedule, I figured the wine should come early too. Happy Birthday.*

He'd ignored Wally for more than a month, and the bastard had still sent him a \$5000.00 bottle of wine. Wally always had been too good for his own damned good. Antoine tossed back the whiskey he'd poured before opening the birthday present, then shook his head and set the glass down. Snatching up his phone, he texted *Coming to drink it with me?*

The reply came thirty agonizing minutes later, just when he'd begun to give up and think the wine had been happy birthday and goodbye, asshole. When his phone finally beeped, Antoine couldn't get it open fast enough.

You're paying for my ticket, asshole.

Antoine laughed in relief. *You know how to charge it to my account.*

Yeah, and I did. Hours ago, you dick. Come pick me up.

The words made him laugh and laugh, with so much goddamn relief, anyone who heard him would probably think he'd lost his mind. *Which one?* He texted, then grabbed his wallet, keys, and jacket.

Necessary information obtained, Antoine dashed. It took 500 years to reach Heathrow, but he did finally reach it, and the spot where Wally waited. But, god, the sight of Wally was worth 500 years. It was worth 5000 or more.

"Hey, player. What's playing today? By the way, you're the world's biggest dick."

"Yeah, I know," Antoine replied, and shoved his hands into his pockets to avoid doing what he really wanted—yank Wally close and kiss him senseless in apology. "How's the bun in the oven?"

Wally took the question for the apology it was intended. "Well. The oven is a bitch, but after she saw what I could have done to her in the divorce, she's been watching it with my kid. It's a boy, by the way."

"Going to be a Junior?" Antoine asked, and snagged one of the two duffel bags Wally had. Was he staying for awhile? He tried to focus on the conversation, and not on having Wally alone for several days or weeks.

"Hell no," Wally replied, hefting the other bag and falling into step alongside him as they left the airport. "One Wallace Mortimer Burgundy is enough. I'm not that cruel. Haven't settled on a name yet, and there's time enough."

"Tick, tock, tick, tock," Antoine muttered, then fell silent as he drove them back to his flat. Since arriving, he'd had zero interest in anything but work and what socializing that required. With Wally suddenly beside him, chatting about his flight, the wine, smelling of his vaguely tropical cologne, Antoine suddenly wanted to go everywhere, do everything, and enjoy every last fucking minute of it with Wally.

In his flat, he dumped Wally's bag in the spare bedroom. "Get settled, man. I'll tend the wine."

He fussed with the wine more than was really necessary, setting out glasses and opening it to breathe, fiddling and moving restlessly until he finally got so disgusted he forced himself to sit the hell down and not move.

The futility of this order was making itself apparent when Wally emerged. Gone were the business casual clothes in which he'd traveled, and instead he wore faded jeans and one of his two million band t-shirts, just as faded as the jeans and fitting with wonderful, evil snugness across his broad shoulders and chest. Good ol' Wally, not Wallace Burgundy, scout extraordinaire.

Antoine wanted to fuck him until neither one of them could move. More than that, though, he just wanted to kiss, to hold—to be able to do those things whenever he felt like it. He'd give anything, his whole goddamn world, to be allowed to pull Wally down beside him, run a hand through the silver-touched brown-red hair, and kiss him long and slow and sweet.

But what was the point? They were friends, and it was fifteen years too late to say 'I've always loved you, and I can do a better job of it than your ex-wife'. Plus, Wally was going to be a father. No one asked a guy like Antoine to set up house. Not even a best friend, especially one who saw him *only* as a friend.

It was best to stop thinking about it. He motioned for Wally to sit, then poured the rich, dark red wine for them.

"So how does it taste?" Wally asked several minutes later, after they had each finished a glass.

"Good," Antoine said, meaning it was fucking wonderful, and the small curve of Wally's mouth said he knew it. Wally always knew it. "Thank you."

Wally shrugged his wonderfully broad shoulders, dismissing the thanks. "For the record, if you break up with all your lovers the way you broke up with me, jackass, it's no wonder you run through them the way you do."

"I never keep them long enough to have to worry about breaking up, really," Antoine replied, and really hoped that after all this time, Wally wouldn't finally ask why.

"The master player."

This time, it was Antoine's turn to shrug words away like they were inconsequential. "None of them are what I want, I guess. But good wine deserves better conversation topics." He took another slow, appreciative sip. "How long are you staying?"

"Don't know," Wally said, shooting him a look. "I wasn't even certain I'd be leaving the fucking airport. But, if you're speaking to me, I can definitely stay a couple of weeks. Maybe more, I have to play it by ear. I'm in the middle of buying a new house. Which you'd know, if you'd been speaking to me."

"You are going to run that into the ground, aren't you?"

"You're lucky I didn't punch you, Antoine."

"Fair enough. So two weeks definitely. Cool."

Wally nodded, and sipped at his wine in silence for a couple of minutes. Then he abruptly sighed, set it down, and shook his head. "Give it, man. You made me feel like shit for a fucking month and a half. You weren't there for anything, whenever I called you. Not even to celebrate with me. Couldn't even tell me goodbye, asshole. So what gives?"

"To celebrate what?" Antoine asked, unable to keep back all of the bitterness. "Your ditching marriage and picking up fatherhood all in the same breath?"

"Minor details aside," Wally said quietly, somewhat sadly, "I would have thought you'd be happy for me."

"You'll be the best damned father ever," Antoine said to his wine. "I just wish you'd gotten to be Wally for a bit first." I wish you'd gotten to be with me, just for a little while, however I could have you. He'd never felt a single moment of guilt for stealing Wally's time away from Kathleen, not after the bitch had proven unworthy of it.

But there was no way he'd steal Wally's time from his kid. That meant he'd see less and less of Wally, between Wally being a father and his own time being eaten by the company. Funny, that he was right where he'd always wanted to be, two steps away from having an office that said Vice President in a company he'd helped make great. All he wanted, and he was fucking miserable.

They were sitting side by side again, but it still felt like there was an ocean between them.

Confess, part of him whispered. Have it all out, once and for all, and accept that it would either blow up in his face—or maybe, just maybe, it would close the growing gap between them. It made him sick just thinking about it. Once upon a time, he'd kept his mouth shut because he didn't dare lose a friend. Then Wally had gotten married, and he put those feelings away forever. Now that the wife was gone...dare he take them out again, and finally lay them bare?

Antoine had no fucking clue what to do anymore. After this last fuck up, and the misery in which he'd mired himself, he didn't want to risk the rest of his life without Wally. A month and a half had been more than he could take. He drank more wine, mostly to keep from doing or saying something stupid.

"So are you going to take time from your busy schedule to show me around town?" Wally asked, a stifled sigh plain in his voice.

"Of course," Antoine replied, his smile as strained as Wally's voice. "I need to take you out as much as I can, before you give up the nightlife for changing diapers and attending PTA meetings."

Wally laughed, if weakly. "Then what, you vanish into the sunset to continue playing? I didn't come here just for you to tell me goodbye and give me a proper sendoff." He set his wine down with a hard clack. "If that's all you're going to do, then I'm taking the next flight out."

"Isn't that why you came? Other than to tell me 'Happy Birthday, Asshole'? Four and a half months, Wally, and you won't have time for shit, least of—" He bit the words off.

"We've been friends for fifteen fucking years, Antoine. Are you seriously saying that you think I'll ditch you just because I have a kid? Fuck you. That's sort of hilarious coming from Mr. VP of Amberton-Lord at thirty five. I'm not going to have time to go drinking and slumming? You're not going to have time for me at all. You're the one who'll be shaking hands and cocktail partying and jet-setting around the fucking world. I'll be at home, kicking back with a beer after my son is asleep, wondering where in the world you are this time and missing the days you bothered talking to me."

"Yeah, and I just bet Mr. Settled would want anything to do with me and my flash-bang life." He fell silent after that, and they glared at each other, until Antoine ended the staring contest and sighed. He raked his hands through his hair, then upended his wine glass and drained its contents in one go.

"That's no way to treat \$5000.00," Wally said, horrified and amused.

"Yeah, well, of late I seem to treat everything of value like shit," Antoine said sourly.

"Not really. You just get stupid sometimes." Wally picked up the bottle and refilled their glasses. "Enjoy your wine, Antoine, and stop sulking. Mal's the only one who looks prettier when he's sulking. You only get prettier when you're being evil."

Antoine smiled and took a proper sip of his wine this time. He looked up slowly as he replied, "We've been friends too long or something, man. We sound like an old married couple when we argue, a pity we don't get make up sex..." He drifted off at the fire that flashed through Wally's eyes before Wally dropped his gaze in an attempt to hide it.

No. Fucking. Way. Antoine suspected his jaw was hanging open. "You—since when do *you* want *me*, Wally?"

Wally swore loudly, and abruptly stood up, obviously trying to flee now that he was busted.

"No way," Antoine muttered, and set his wine aside before half-diving, half-lunging for him—but it was only then that he realized just how much wine he'd had, and how much of a kick it delivered. They wound up on the floor, limbs tangled, and he didn't doubt they'd have bruises in the morning. "There is no goddamn way you want me. Since when?"

"I could ask you the same fucking thing," Wally replied. "You've never paid me two cents, player."

"You were off limits!" Antoine bellowed, the words and their volume startling them both into momentary silence.

Then Antoine just snapped. Stooping, he held Wally firmly in place and attacked his mouth. He was bruising their lips, and there was not a single thing nice about the kiss, but he didn't really give a fuck. This whole goddamn time—and if he was going to only ever get the one kiss, he'd sure as hell make certain Wally felt it for a day or so.

At some point, he thought he tasted blood—and it was only then he realized Wally was kissing him back, and with the same careless rage. He drew back sharply, as though struck, and licked his lips. The taste of copper and a slight sting made him realize it was his lip which had split.

"I'm going to slug you the minute you let me up," Wally said. "Fair warning."

Antoine meant to give an equally flat, hostile reply, but the situation drew out a perverse need to flirt. "So is that just your way of asking me to kiss you again, Wally?"

Pain flashed across Wally's face. "Don't play me, Antoine. I'm not going to be demoted from friend to toy."

That caused Antoine to frown, and with a mental 'fuck it' he said, "Wally, I didn't start out a player. It was never my scene, and I had no desire to make it my scene, until sophomore year. Right after Spring Break."

"Right after..."

Antoine could see the cogs turning, saw the moment when it clicked—when Wally realized that Antoine had turned player after Wally had proposed to Kathleen.

"You son of a bitch!" Wally snarled, and then Antoine's world exploded in pain.

He picked himself up off the floor slowly, and looked at Wally in disbelief. "You punched me!"

"Yeah, and next I'm going to throttle you. I cannot fucking believe you've—what have you felt since college, exactly?"

Antoine said nothing, but he supposed something in his face must have finally given the whole goddamn game away.

"You—you've been in love with me this whole fucking time?"

Though Antoine wasn't exactly certain, because Wally's poker face was so much better than his own, he thought he knew Wally enough to take a gamble and say, "Doesn't sound like I was the only one keeping shit to myself, Wally."

Wally was silent for entirely too long, before he finally said quietly, "I was married, and you're a player, and I figured I was shit for choosing who to fall in love with."

Antoine nodded, and gingerly touched the bruise already forming on his cheek. "You picked her, so I buried it. If friendship was all I could have, then I was going to take it. You were never supposed to know."

"You've mattered more than her for a long damned time, Antoine. I wish you'd said something, but I see why you didn't. So that's why you threw your fucking hissy fit?"

Shrugging, starting hard at the carpet, Antoine said, "I thought...I dunno." He shrugged again. "I just wanted you to myself for a little while. Where I didn't have to steal you from someone else, where I wasn't waiting for someone else's phone call to summon you home. Not for very long, just a little while. When it was Kathleen, I didn't feel so guilty. A kid, though...and no one asks guys like me to—whatever." He turned away to go retrieve his wine.

But then it was him pinned to the floor, and he'd never seen Wally so physical and aggressive before, not even when he was pissed. If he wasn't more interested in feeling anxious and sorry for himself, he'd be seriously turned on.

"I didn't think you'd say yes, asshole. You like your jet set, playboy life."

"It keeps me busy," Antoine said, then just gave the fuck up. "It kept me distracted while you played house with that dumb bitch. If you're offering a different way to keep me busy, then say so."

Wallace attempted to glare, but a smile was clearly battling for dominance. "I'm going to fucking kill you one of these days."

"You have no room to talk," Antoine replied, fighting a smile of his own, "and I'd really prefer you fuck me rather than kill me."

"I can do both, depending on the order," Wally retorted, then bent and prevented Antoine's reply by kissing him senseless.

It was better than every last fantasy he'd had over the past fifteen years. They didn't even come close to the reality, hot and male, with a hint of wine and that vague hint of something tropical that had forced Antoine to avoid coconut and pineapple for fear of finally driving himself crazy.

Christ Wally could kiss for a man who'd only ever had a handful of women in his life, and stopped after his first girlfriend at college. "The hell?" Antoine demanded when they finally paused for air. "Seriously. Why would she cheat on you if this is how you kiss, Wal—"

"Shut up," Wally interrupted, and went back to kissing him.

Antoine didn't need to be told twice. Damned if he was going to give either of them a chance to come to their senses or whatever. He didn't want to find out if that was going to be a problem. He fisted a hand in Wally's hair, pulling just enough to irritate—and got his lip bitten again for it, but somehow it only made him laugh.

Wally smiled at him. "You really are a brat. How do you get away with it?" When Antoine smirked, he rolled his eyes and said, "Never mind."

"Come here," Antoine said, and tugged him down again, and this kiss was one of the slow and sweet and long ones he'd always wanted most to give.

The expression on Wally's face then—of real happiness—took Antoine's breath away. He could not believe he'd been the one to finally put it there.

"As wonderful as this is," Wally said, "we're a bit too old to be going at it on the floor like teenagers."

Antoine smirked and helped himself to a generous handful of Wally's ass. Oh, yes, that was already proving to be well worth the wait and better than all those enthusiastic, torturous fantasies. "You're the one who tackled me that last time. This tackling and throwing punches and being all aggressive is a whole new side of you. It's kind of insanely hot."

"I'll keep that in mind," Wally replied dryly. "For now, take me to bed."

Antoine groaned at the words, and how easily Wally said them. "If I wake up soon, and realize this is all a dream, the real you is going to get smothered with a pillow."

"Do you always talk this much when you're about to get laid?" Wally asked. "No wonder you—"

This time, Antoine bit Wally's lip, then kissed him hard and deep. When they broke apart, he shoved Wally off, rolled to his feet, and then shoved Wally into the nearest wall and went at him like the world was ending in five minutes.

He didn't relent, not when he could tell every protest and curse and threat was half-hearted, not when Wally tasted and felt and sounded like heaven. He pushed and took and gave until Wally was shuddering in his arms and muffling a cry in his mouth. He stole a handful of sloppy, lazy kisses at the end, before finally drawing back enough to say, "Certain we're too old to go at it like teenagers?"

"Mentally, you're always a teenager, I think," Wally replied, then made Antoine forget what they were talking about by shoving a hand down his pants and wrapping a hand around his cock.

Antoine gasped, and jerked, and thrust, and it was only then that it suddenly occurred to him—"That reminds me—"

"Shut up," Wally said, and kissed him hard, and really, Antoine wasn't going to argue if the man wanted revenge. But even coming in Wally's arms wasn't enough to make him forget his original question, and he voiced it the moment he could think and speak again. "Since when do you like boys?"

Wally just gave him a look. "Antoine, you're the one who says nothing is definite, least of all sexuality. And, you're almost as pretty as Mal, though you don't do drag half as well."

"Oh, shut up," Antoine replied with a grin, not really caring who or what Wally liked, so long as it began and ended with him. "You didn't look so great in the cheerleader uniform yourself."

"No, but the pictures were pretty damned awesome," Wally said with a laugh.

Antoine kissed the corner of his mouth, humming pleasure when Wally turned his head just enough to make a proper kiss of it. "Shower?" he asked breathlessly, some unknown time later.

"Yeah," Wally replied, then smirked. "Then you can prove to me you can do better than a teenager."

Antoine matched the smirk full measure. "Oh, will I ever."

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Wally made certain the baby monitor was on and working before collapsing on the couch with his beer.

The party to show off David was the day after tomorrow, and the house was in no condition for guests, but fuck if he could muster the energy to care quite yet. He picked up his cell phone for the millionth time, hoping for a missed call, a text, an email—anything. But the stupid thing only displayed date, time, and his new wallpaper of a sleeping David.

Antoine hadn't dropped him so much as a word since yesterday morning. Not a big deal, except he usually texted or something at least once a day. He wasn't answering any calls either. Probably just meetings or dinner or something. It shouldn't bother him.

Still, it did make him anxious and fearful all over again, no matter how stupid it was. All their conversations and emails and texts since Wally had returned stateside a few months ago, and they had never really discussed what they would do once Antoine was home as well.

They'd be forced to deal with it in three months, when Antoine finally returned to the states. Sometimes it felt like Antoine would never come home. Wally wondered sometimes if work was forcing the issue, or if Antoine was letting them.

But, he reminded himself, Antoine *had* said the three months were it. He'd definitely be home after that, and London could learn to manage without him.

Sitting suddenly like too much work. Finishing his beer in one long pull, Wally stretched out on his couch and closed his eyes with a sigh. Honestly, he needed to stop moping like a fucking girl.

He heard a car pull in, a car door open and slam shut again, followed by the beeping of it locking. Probably his neighbor, given the side of the house from which the noise came. Christ, he hoped she just went straight to her own house and didn't come over to pester him and hint with zero subtlety that he really needed a woman about the place.

He sighed again and wondered if he had the energy to fix dinner, or if dinner was just going to be another beer.

"Is there room on that couch for two?"

Wally jumped, and jerked upright, nearly falling off the couch. He stared in disbelief. "You—" Oh, god, was Antoine a sight for sore eyes. He looked exhausted and rumpled but still so goddamn good. "I know I wasn't lying on this couch for three months." He swallowed and stood up.

Before he could say anything further, Antoine took the few steps separating them and grabbed him, dragging Wally close and kissing him. Wally might have whimpered, just a bit, and kissed him until they had no choice but to draw apart.

"Missed you," Antoine said softly. "Was afraid at the last minute that my get home early plan would completely fall through."

Wally shook his head, unable to string words together. Instead, he just touched and pet, until Antoine being there, in his house, began sort of to feel almost real. "I can't believe you're here."

"Me either," Antoine said. "Can we sit down before I fall down?"

Wally nodded, and half-guided, half pushed Antoine down into his deep, soft leather sofa. He'd intended to sit down next to Antoine. How they wound up sprawled and tangled together, he wasn't quite certain, but he wasn't about to start complaining. "How was the trip?"

"Long and tedious, and I hated you weren't there to pick me up, but I didn't want to spoil the surprise."

"It's like Christmas and birthday and anniversary all rolled into one," Wally said with a grin.

Antoine laughed. "Speaking of, we have an anniversary soon."

Wally blinked. "We do?"

"Yeah," Antoine replied softly. "Next Wednesday, we'll have met exactly sixteen years ago."

"You remember the day we met?" Wally asked.

Antoine grinned, and kissed him. "Of course I do."

Wally was tempted to say he was sorry he'd taken so long, that he wished he'd figured shit out sooner—but he was sick and tired of the past. "You are proving to be entirely too sentimental for a player."

"Then I guess I should formally announce my retirement," Antoine said. He started to say more, but the words were cut off by a massive yawn.

"You should probably go to bed," Wally said reluctantly. "I'm sure you've been awake far too long."

Antoine shrugged, or tried his best given their awkward arrangement, and said, "I'd rather have food and an ice cold beer, honestly."

"That, I can provide, even if I'd rather stay here," Wally said with a smile, and stole a quick kiss before rolling off the couch so Antoine couldn't keep him there. In the kitchen, he pulled out two beers and the stuff to make sandwiches.

A second later, he somehow found himself pinned to the counter and being kissed to within an inch of his life.

"Do you know what it's like to wait and wait for you, only to get you for a month, then to be deprived of you again?"

Wally shivered as teeth grazed his throat. "It was no picnic this side of the ocean, trust me." He went gladly with one more kiss, then attempted to push Antoine away. "Eat, dork."

"I'd rather devour you, honestly."

"And you'd fall asleep somewhere in the middle of it all," Wally retorted. "There's plenty of time for that later."

As if on cue, the baby monitor erupted with screaming and crying. Wally shook his head and chuckled. "Fix a sandwich while I go—" He blinked, and stared bemused, as Antoine more or less vanished up the kitchen stairs. "Upstairs," he finished unnecessarily. What the heck? He followed Antoine up the stairs.

At the top, he immediately saw the light on in the baby's room. Crossing the hallway, which was really just a wide loop around the grand staircase, he paused in the doorway of David's room. Antoine stood beside the crib, facing the doorway, arms full of baby and blanket. He was making soft, nonsensical noises, to which David was happily replying.

Try as he might, Wally could not think of a single thing to say.

"He's cute as hell," Antoine said after a moment, looking up with a quiet sort of smile Wally had never seen before. "Must take after you."

Wally smiled. "If we're lucky, he'll at least look like his mother. It would be hard on him if he looked exactly like whoever the hell his father is. Hopefully he gets nothing else from Kathleen."

"We'll make sure of it," Antoine replied, looking back down at David.

That little sentence, spoken so absently, made Wally even happier than the knowledge Antoine was home.

Though, that little thought reminded him, "How *did* you manage to get home so early?"

"I had a long talk with my boss," Antoine said. "The one I'll be replacing in a few months." He slowly dragged his eyes from David. "He wanted to talk about that, anyway. It was a rather amusing conversation. I told him I was looking to settle down, travel less, and I didn't know if that would be a problem. If so, I said they'd have to look for a new VP candidate."

"Antoine—" Wally started, shocked to his core. Antoine wanted VP more than anything; he'd worked for years to climb to the top of Amberton-Lord.

But Antoine kept talking, not giving him a chance to speak. He settled David, fast asleep again, back into his crib. "He said it was definitely not a problem, that they were rather hoping to convince me to move away from my player image and present a more stable one in my position as VP. I said perfect, so long as they understood settled for me meant you and David. He said it would be a bit ridiculous to take issue, given that the Lord ruling over Amberton-Lord had a partner himself."

"I see," Wally said, and drew him in for a kiss. "Using me to climb to the top, hmm?"

"You make for a very sexy rung on the ladder," Antoine replied, nibbling at his jaw.

Wally chuckled. "Come eat, dork. Then we'll go to bed. Tomorrow—when do you go back to work? Not right away I hope."

"I have two weeks off," Antoine replied. "I thought we could spend tomorrow getting ready for the party, and the day after the party, we could start moving my stuff over?" The last was asked a bit hesitantly.

Wally dragged him as close as he could manage, and kissed him senseless. "You don't mind living here?"

"Hell no," Antoine replied. "It's a gorgeous house, even in the dark and when I'm ninety percent asleep. It's got you, and David. The rest is details. If there's room for me here, I want it."

"I reserved a place just for you," Wally said with a smile, taking his hand and leading back to the kitchen stairs. He pointed to his own bedroom along the way. "My bed is brand new, and it has yet to be properly broken in."

Antoine smiled, slow and hot and sexy as hell. "Then we should eat, and fix that little problem."

Wally could not help but kiss him again, drunk on the smell and feel and taste of the person he'd always loved best in all the world. "Hey, player. Welcome home. By the way, I love you."