Playing by the Rules
by Evilida

Summary

House goes to Wilson's loft to watch football. A slightly melancholy story about the rules that govern their friendship. This is set immediately after Wilson broke up with Sam.

House still has the keys. He opens the building door, goes up in the elevator, and is about to use the key to the loft when he remembers that he doesn't live here anymore. He has to knock like everyone else.

Wilson answers the door. He hasn't changed from his work clothes, though he's taken off his tie. There's a can of beer in his hands, and House looks at him closely, but decides that his best friend isn't drunk. Not yet anyway.

"She's left?" he asks cautiously, peering into the apartment as if Sam might be hiding behind the door, ready to leap out at him.

"Yes," Wilson says, "She dumped me, but you don't have to worry. I'm not going to talk about my feelings or anything. All I'm planning for this evening is beer, pizza and football."

"If you really want to talk..." House suggests half-heartedly.

"I don't," Wilson says, shaking his head. House is undeniably relieved.

"I was just about to phone for take-out. What do you think of tandoori chicken pizza?" Wilson asks.

_Sit as close as you want, breathe in the air he breathes, but don't ever touch. That's how it works._
Wilson and House are side by side on the couch, two cans of beer and a pizza box on the coffee table in front of them. Wilson takes a piece of pizza and slides the box towards House.

House is finding it difficult to concentrate on the game. He watches Wilson out of the corner of his eye. At the commercial break, Wilson stands up and stretches, yawning. He goes to the refrigerator to get them both another can of beer.

House shakes his head. "I'm driving."

"You can stay over," Wilson offers. "The bed in your old room is already made up."

He pours the beer into chilled mugs, gets out a bag of pretzels and pours them into a bowl, and then sits back down beside House. House, takes a sip of cold beer, and then takes out his cellphone to tell Cuddy he won't be back that night. He can hear the strain in her voice and knows that this is the sound of Cuddy reaching the outermost limits of her patience.

She thinks that he's been spending too much time with Wilson lately. He hangs up quickly before she can deliver her speech again. She's going to tell him that he's coddling Wilson. The oncologist will be just fine if he's left to heal by himself, alone. Lord knows he's experienced plenty of break-ups before.

House sinks back into the couch. Being in a relationship with Cuddy is hard work, but he knows that she's worth it. After all, he has wanted her forever, hasn't he? Well, maybe not forever. Since he came out of Mayfield anyway. She's the key to getting his life in order, to keeping himself off Vicodin. Dr. Nolan told him so. House is no longer seeing Nolan, but he still has to give him fair credit for his role in his recovery. Nolan can't have been wrong about everything.

House shifts uneasily and Wilson moves in response, maintaining that essential distance between them.

Lost in his thoughts, House has missed the best play of the game. The televised crowd is on its feet and roaring, and Wilson is too, tipping over the bowl of pretzels in his excitement.

"Did you see that?" he asks. "What a catch!"

There's an instant replay: the football sailing the length of the field, one player leaping into the air with almost balletic grace to snatch it in the air. He lands, cradling the ball to his chest, stands triumphantly for a fraction of a second, and then disappears from view, tackled by at least three opposing players simultaneously.

Wilson kneels down to pick pretzels off the floor. He heads towards the kitchen to throw them out, carrying the empty bowl in his other hand.

"Want some more?" he asks, holding up the bag of pretzels. House shakes his head and takes another sip of beer.

Wilson comes back and sits next to House, his feet on the coffee table, next to the empty cans of beer and the pizza box. The rest of the game is uneventful, and he slumps, head resting against the back of the couch. House has noticed how quickly Wilson tires these days.

The game's over at last and the commentators are showing that one fantastic catch, over and over again. Wilson is hardly listening; his eyes are half-shut. He's too tired to look for the remote, too tired to get up and go to bed. House turns his head to look at him. His best friend is rumpled, exhausted,
depressed...and beautiful... he's always been beautiful.

*Don't touch. That's the rule that makes their friendship possible.*

But House is a rule-breaker, and Wilson knows it. And sometimes Wilson wants him to break the rules.

House reaches out and his hand brushes against Wilson's cheek. Wilson's eyes open in surprise. Soft, brown eyes, vulnerable... he's so easily hurt. House doesn't care.

"House..." Wilson says, and House knows that he's going to remind him about Cuddy, about all the reasons why he shouldn't do what he wants to do, but House won't let him. House leans forward and their lips meet.

Once the rule is broken, it's shattered. So House can fall asleep in Wilson's bed next to his best friend. He can wake up feeling overheated - Wilson sleeps with far too many blankets - and with Wilson's still slightly beery breath in his face.

The ringtone of his cellphone has woken him up. It's playing La Cucaracha, Cuddy's tune. He eases himself away from Wilson, groaning, and crosses the room to pick up the phone. He's naked and there's a chill in the air. He glances at Wilson's clock radio – only seven a.m. – and pulls off one of the blankets from Wilson's bed to cover himself.

House can't keep the irritation out of his voice when he answers the phone. He's not an early riser, and the sun is barely over the horizon. Cuddy has a packed schedule, as usual, and she wants to go over with House how she is going to fit him in. Today, House would just as soon skip his designated Cuddy time, but that isn't an option. House grumbles his assent to her plans. He agrees to meet her for lunch at twelve-thirty and hangs up as quickly as possible. He should feel guilty about cheating on her, but he doesn't. Maybe he will later.

House limps back to bed, where it is warm, and Wilson sits up.

"Are you going to tell her?" His voice is still muzzy with sleep.

"No," House says.

"If you change your mind about that," Wilson says, "give me some advance notice before you tell her. I'll want to emigrate to South America first, and I think there's a fair amount of paperwork involved."

Wilson moves towards him and lays his head on his shoulder. House takes Wilson in his arms, closes his eyes, relaxes. He lets his irritation drift away.

This is not the first time he's ended up in bed with Wilson. It's happened maybe five or six times over the entire course of their screwed-up friendship. So House knows how it works. When he leaves Wilson's apartment, what they share will be over. It will be more than over - it will never have happened at all. The rule will once more be in operation.

Until then, he can hold Wilson, kiss him, make love to him. House calculates that it will take him half an hour to get dressed and drive to the restaurant where he is meeting Cuddy. That gives him almost five hours. House is determined to make every minute count.
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