

Consequences by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/consequences/>

Story Notes:

Dedication: For Raven: I hope you're doing okay now!!

Background: In the episode "Two Cathedrals" we see a 17 year old Jed trying to have a conversation with his father, which is cut short when his father lashes out and hits him for no real reason. Jed is visibly shaken by this but it clearly isn't an isolated incident and has happened often before. The flashback part of this story takes place the night after that incident. The present day part of the fic takes place after Jed has been censured by congress for not revealing to the nation that he had multiple sclerosis before he was elected.

Canon note: We don't know how Jed and Leo first met. Leo states at different times that he's known Jed for 40 years, or 32 years. It's not remotely canon that they went to school together but I liked the idea as a flight of fancy .

Distinctly unbeta'd.

Chapter 1 by Xanthe

"Hey – you alone now?" Leo put his head around the Oval Office door and gazed at the President searchingly. Jed looked tired and his shoulders were hunched and defensive, if not quite defeated. He looked up at Leo and waved him into the office with his hand.

"Yeah," he replied. He flashed him a smile – one of those smiles he saved for Leo alone.

"Are you done here?" Leo asked. "It's late."

"Yeah. I'm done. Sit with me? I need a cigarette," Jed said. Leo nodded and followed the President outside. It had been snowing on and off for a week now and while the snow was no longer falling, it was thick and heavy on the ground outside, draping the world in a beautiful white blanket. They sat down on the bench outside the Oval Office and Leo glanced at Jed as his friend lit a cigarette.

"It's over with now," Leo said.

"Yeah."

"The worst of it," Leo added. "The worst of it happened today and now it's over."

"Yeah. I wonder what the newspapers will lead with in the morning?" Jed quirked a grin at his friend.

"I wonder." Leo returned it

Jed gave a wry smile and flicked his cigarette absently. The ash fell onto the snow beneath, tarnishing the pristine whiteness with a little grey hole. "First President since Jackson to be censured," he murmured. Leo sighed.

"People will forget," he said softly.

"Not me," Jed replied.

"No," Leo acknowledged. "You did well today, sir. When Congress passed the resolution censuring you. You took it well."

"I deserved it." Jed shrugged. "I don't like that it happened but I deserved it. We both know that."

Leo nodded. They'd had a conversation like this a few days before, when Jed had first told him of his intention to take the censure for not having told the nation he had multiple sclerosis until after he had been elected. Jed had admitted to Leo for the first time that it had been the wrong thing to do and Leo thought that was probably the only thing comforting his friend right now. A congressional censure was a huge deal and it didn't help that the only president who had ever been censured before in the nation's entire history had managed to have his censure expunged a few year's later. Jed was going down in history – but for all the wrong reasons.

"Want to talk about it?" Leo offered. Jed thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No. I'm tired." Jed finished his cigarette, rolled his hunched shoulders experimentally, as if they pained him, and then got up. "I'm going to bed."

"Abbey's away?" Leo looked up at his friend.

"Yeah." Jed nodded absently. "Good night, Leo."

"Good night, sir," Leo said softly.

He watched as Jed walked slowly up the Residence, every line of his body showing the strain of what had happened to him today, even if he refused to talk about how much it had taken out of him. Leo saw 40 years of their personal history in that hunched, tense body. 40 years as friends and lovers and something even more than either of those terms implied. Today's events and something about the way Jed was walking, reminded Leo vividly of the night they had first met...

Leo sat on the chair he'd pulled up beneath the window and read by the light of the moon gleaming through the partially opened drapes. His latest flashlight – the third – had been confiscated four nights ago and he hadn't had a chance to buy a new one yet. He was growing irritated by this school and its absurd obsession with arcane rules. As if losing the flashlight wasn't bad enough, he'd taken 2 strokes from the housemaster's cane for the infraction, which was adding insult to injury as far as Leo was concerned. He was starting to seriously hate this place; he'd won a scholarship partly because of his father's suicide which had apparently, made him a 'deserving case' and partly because of the fact that his test results at his old school had always been off the scorecard. At first he'd been pleased – this school had a good reputation and an excellent academic record. Reality had set in once he'd actually started boarding here; the place seemed to have been modelled on those old English schools that he had always thought were a fiction, but having attended this place he was starting to wonder whether Tom Brown's Schooldays hadn't actually been understating the case. It was all so different to what he was used to back in Chicago, and he missed his mother and sisters. He hated the feeling of not belonging; he was an outsider, and the other boys treated him that way too. Despite all his best efforts to fit in, he was always the scholarship kid and the fact he'd only arrived here last year, aged 16, hadn't helped things. Most of the other kids had known each other for a few years and he was the latecomer. To make things worse, he wasn't very good at sport, although he was good with his fists as a couple of the other kids in his year soon found out, so at least he wasn't bullied. All the same, he was lonely, plain and simple. He found some solace in reading, which he liked to do at night when his loneliness and homesickness were at their worst. Being caught in the act of reading by flashlight after lights out on several different occasions - a crime which, Leo thought, harmed nobody and was policed with a relish that was entirely unnecessary - meant that even this simple pleasure was often denied him and there were some nights when there was nothing to do but stay awake, staring at his room mate, a large boy called Dawson who had a sinus problem that meant he snored like a miniature buffalo making it impossible for Leo to sleep even if he had been able to. So many nights had passed in this haze of misery that he'd lost count. At least tonight he was spared Dawson's snoring – the other kid had come down with the flu and was spending a few nights at the San under the watchful eye of the school nurse. It had taken Leo awhile to figure out that 'San' was an abbreviation for Sanatorium; this school even had its own language – an unfamiliar, inaccessible language that the other boys seemed to know by rote but which he constantly

tripped over, and which marked him out as different just as much as his clipped Chicago accent which the other kids made fun of behind his back – or to his face if they dared, which they had gradually stopped doing on receipt of a bloody nose or a cut lip. He'd taken a few stripes with the housemaster's cane for fighting too, but he'd borne those with the same stoicism with which he bore everything else about this school he had come to loathe; some things were worth fighting for and worth being punished for. That was a lesson he doubted they had intended to teach him but it wasn't one he was ever going to forget.

Leo looked up from his book and glanced out of the window at the moonlit night outside. The moon illuminated the old stone architecture of the chapel and the opposite wing of the school; this place was so beautiful – Leo wished he could appreciate it more for the honour it was to have won a scholarship here, but the final year and a half of his schooling stretched ahead of him like a wasteland and he longed for it to be over. He had never known such aching loneliness; he'd never lived away from home before and this place was so alien to him that it made it a hundred times harder to bear being away from his mom and his beloved little sisters. Since his father's suicide he'd had to grow up fast and as his mother had fallen apart, Leo had always had to be the responsible one – the one who made the decisions in the house and looked out for his sisters. Here, he was just another boy to be kept in line – and he'd soon found that displays of initiative or an independent spirit weren't approved of. The flashlight rule was a case in point; he just didn't understand it and because it made no sense to him it wasn't a rule that he could, in all conscience adhere to. Leo sighed and rested his head back against the wall, and it was at that moment that a movement outside caught his eye. He frowned and, leaning forward, caught sight of a furtive figure running across the quadrangle. The figure moved momentarily into a patch of moonlight and Leo took a sharp intake of breath as he recognised him; the boy outside was none other than Jed Bartlet, the son of the headmaster of this godforsaken place. What the hell was he of all people doing wandering around in the middle of the night? Leo was sure that if reading by flashlight was against school rules then scampering around outside under cover of darkness was definitely frowned upon. Maybe not if you were the headmaster's son though, he thought bitterly to himself. There was probably one rule for the Leo McGarrys of this world and another for the Jed Bartlets.

All the same, Leo was curious to know what Jed Bartlet was doing wandering around the school grounds at...he checked his watch...one thirty in the morning. Leo watched as Jed hurried across the quadrangle and then ducked into the chapel. What on earth was he going to do there, Leo thought to himself? He considered it for a moment, trying to decide what to do. The truth was that he had developed something of a fascination for Jed Bartlet over the past couple of months. He wasn't sure what it was – he didn't even like the kid that much, but somehow he felt drawn to Jed in a way that he'd never experienced with anyone before. It didn't help that his raging hormones were insisting that his attraction to Jed was something more than mere curiosity about a boy who seemed to have everything he did not. Maybe at first it had started out as curiosity – Jed seemed to lead such an easy life here. He didn't have to struggle to fit in – he had been born to this place and was even, Leo thought bitterly, its natural heir. Like some ancient rite of kingship, he could see Jed one day returning here to take over from his father as headmaster. However, Leo knew that at some point his fascination with Jed had become something else; he had found himself day dreaming about the other boy – wondering what it would feel like to kiss those privileged,

know-it-all lips, to silence Jed's arrogant mouth by placing his own over it, to push Jed against a wall and tangle his hands in his floppy dark hair. Such fantasies tormented him most at night when he lay in the dark, unable to distract himself even by reading when his flashlight had been confiscated, gazing, glumly, at Dawson snoring like a pig beside him. Then he'd think of Jed and wonder how the other boy would taste under his questing mouth, and the frequency and heat of his fantasies had begun to disturb him. Now, the object of his fantasies was creeping around in the middle of the night and Leo couldn't help but wonder why.

Intrigued, he got up, pulled on his sweats and sneakers, and then slipped silently out of his room. His heart was pounding in his chest as he tiptoed down the stairs. Being caught out of bed for any other reason than using the bathroom was punishable by more than just a couple of strokes of the housemaster's cane, but Leo had become used to the fact that just living and breathing in this place carried risks of this kind and he wasn't going to let it stand in the way of his curiosity.

He slipped out into the cool night air, and followed Jed's path over to the chapel. He tried the door, only to find it locked, but when he followed the old stone walls he found another, smaller door, set in the side half way down, and that opened easily when he pushed it. He entered the chapel silently, looking for signs that Jed Bartlet had come this way. He paused by the old wooden pews, slightly awe inspired despite himself by the way the moonlight filtered through the stained glass windows. It was beautiful – but he doubted that even Jed Bartlet would feel so attracted by the beauty of the place that he'd come visiting it at 1.30 in the morning. Leo looked around, but he couldn't see any sign of Jed. Maybe he hadn't come in here at all – maybe he'd imagined the whole thing. Leo didn't know Jed very well; the other boy always kept himself pretty much to himself and he was always surrounded by a coterie of fawning followers. Not that Leo got the impression that Jed actually liked any of the sycophantic kids who trailed along in his wake. He probably thought they were beneath him, Leo thought bitterly; Jed Bartlet always walked around as if surrounded by his own arrogant, impenetrable little bubble, looking down on everyone else around him. He liked to show off – making speeches, taking prayer sessions with the younger kids, writing articles for the school magazine and generally throwing his weight around as, Leo supposed, befitted the son of the school's headmaster.

Leo's attention was suddenly caught by something over to his left, in the darkness of one of the pews. He stared for a moment, and then smelt the faint scent of tobacco, and caught sight of a little plume of smoke. He almost laughed out loud! So, Jed Bartlet came here to smoke in the middle of the night did he? How were the mighty fallen! Smiling to himself he turned to go, satisfied that the mystery was solved. As he did so, his foot caught in the end of a carved wooden pew and he bumped into it noisily trying to stop himself from falling.

"Who's there?" Jed hissed. He stood up, hiding the cigarette under his hand, in the time honoured way of illicit smokers everywhere. Leo hesitated, and then decided that he had nothing to lose by showing himself.

"It's okay. It's just me." Leo moved into a patch of moonlight so that Jed could see him.

"Who...? Oh, it's McGarry isn't it?" Jed said, squinting at him in the half light.

"Leo," Leo offered. Jed relaxed, visibly, and crouched down again in the darkness of the pew.

"Well don't just stand there," Jed hissed. "If anyone came in they could see you. Come here." Leo walked silently over to where Jed was sitting on the floor, his back against the pew in front, his knees up against his chest. He was wearing a dark shirt, open slightly at the collar to reveal his neck, his dark hair brushing seductively against the fabric, making Leo want to reach out and smooth it away. "What the hell are you doing here?" Jed said to him. Leo crouched down on the floor opposite the other boy with a shrug.

"I could ask you the same question," he replied.

"I asked you first." There was just a hint of a grin on Jed's lips and Leo liked his attitude.

"I saw you come in here. I wondered what you were doing. I had no idea you were sneaking a smoke."

"Yeah." Jed gave a little grimace. "So, Leo McGarry, are you going to tell or is my ass safe?"

"You think I'd...?" Leo gave the other boy a quizzical look. "Uh uh." He shook his head. "Where I come from we don't tell tales, Bartlet."

Jed considered him for a moment, and then he gave a little smile. "Jed," he said, holding out his hand. Leo found himself taking Jed's hand and giving it a firm shake, thrilled, despite himself, to finally be touching the boy who had been such an endless source of fascination to him. "Here." Jed pulled a slightly crumpled packet of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Want one?"

Leo grinned. "Yeah." He sat down opposite Jed, his back against the pew behind him, his knees a little cramped in the small space, and took the offered cigarette. Jed lit it for him and Leo took a long drag on it. He didn't smoke very often although he did still bum an occasional cigarette from the friends he hung out with back home during the vacations.

"What the hell were you doing following me?" Jed asked. Leo shrugged.

"I couldn't sleep and those bastards stole my flashlight so I was making the most of the moonlight to sit and read by the window. I saw you. I was bored." He shrugged. "So I thought I'd follow you." That wasn't quite the whole truth but it was near enough. He doubted that he'd have risked his ass by following anyone other than Jed Bartlet for example, but he didn't say that.

"Ah. Curiosity. Plain and simple." Jed grinned and his teeth looked very white in the dark church. "I can understand that," he sighed. "Curiosity is always getting me into trouble – along with a lot of other things."

"I didn't think you could get into trouble," Leo commented with more bitterness than he'd intended. "Doesn't your father run this place?"

"Yeah. He's one of those bastards you just referred to. In fact he must be the bastard in chief seeing as all the rules come, ultimately, from him." It wasn't possible to tell by Jed's tone of voice whether he felt that Leo had insulted him by referring to his father as a bastard, however obliquely. Leo grimaced.

"Sorry. I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. I know what you meant." Jed shrugged.

"Why do you come here to smoke?" Leo asked, changing the subject, still unsure how Jed had taken his comment.

"You're thinking it's a bit sacrilegious?" Jed's teeth gleamed again in the moonlight and his floppy bangs fell into his eyes in a way that Leo found intensely attractive.

"Well...yeah," Leo replied, blowing out a mouthful of smoke.

"You're probably right. I know I shouldn't." Jed nodded, blowing out a mouthful of smoke of his own. Leo liked the way his Adam's Apple bobbed in his throat as he exhaled. He wanted to lean forward and kiss it. A strange expression passed over Jed's face – defiance warring with guilt, and Leo was fascinated by it. "It's kind of a compulsion," Jed said. "I don't come that often...just when I feel I need to." He finished his cigarette, and stubbed it out on the floor beside him. Leo winced.

"Aren't you going to take that with you?" He asked. "Someone could find it."

"Yeah." Jed gave a faintly malicious grin. "Someone usually does. It drives him nuts."

"Who?" Leo frowned.

"It doesn't matter." Jed reached into his pocket for another cigarette. "It's the small victories, Leo, that make life worth living. I know I shouldn't do it, but...I have to have something for myself, some small victory, don't I?" He whispered. Leo wasn't even sure Jed was talking to him – he sounded as if he was talking to himself.

"I'm just surprised, that's all," Leo commented. "You're the one who is always telling the other boys not to leave cigarette butts in the chapel. Your fa...the headmaster is always going crazy about it – it seems one hell of a risk...oh." He sat back and gazed at Jed thoughtfully, thinking that he was starting to understand.

"Yeah," Jed said softly. "Like I said – it drives him nuts. So..." Jed smiled brightly as he lit his new cigarette. "You hate it here do you, Leo McGarry?"

"I didn't say that." Leo shrugged, unsure how much of his soul he wanted to bare to Jed

Bartlet. He might find he'd regret it in the morning; Jed might use it against him.

"You're the scholarship kid aren't you?" Jed murmured thoughtfully, taking a drag on his cigarette. Leo stiffened.

"Yeah. In case you're wondering my dad committed suicide leaving us without much money." Leo said it quickly, in a bored tone of voice. He found it better to just tell people why he was here and be open about his family's poverty and get it out of the way than endure their prying questions and the sniggering speculation that went on when they thought he wasn't listening.

"My god, Leo, I'm so sorry," Jed said and Leo was completely taken aback by the shocked sincerity in the other boy's voice. "That's a tough one," Jed added in a heartfelt whisper. Leo was even more surprised by the lump that rose in his own throat. He was so used to telling his story, dispassionately, as if it was something that hadn't even happened to him, that it sometimes took him by surprise that it could still hurt so much. "Here I am feeling sorry for myself..." Jed leaned forward with a gently self-mocking smile on his lips, "Then you tell me that...I have no right to wallow in my own problems. I haven't suffered anything like you have."

Leo gazed at the other boy thoughtfully for a moment. Maybe not, he thought to himself, but it seemed to him that Jed Bartlet carried a different kind of sadness with him. He didn't know what form that sadness took but he could see it in Jed's unguarded blue eyes. Leo was of the opinion that only people who had undergone some kind of great unhappiness in their lives could empathise with others who had also experienced a great loss or tragedy. It was a kind of understanding or recognition of how much something could hurt, and Jed Bartlet had it in a way that none of the other kids in this school did.

"The other students give you a hard time?" Jed asked. "About being a scholarship kid?"

"Yeah." Leo shrugged and flicked cigarette ash onto the floor.

"Damn." Jed shook his head. "No wonder you hate the place so much."

"I didn't say that," Leo pointed out again.

"No need." Jed shrugged. "I can tell - and I'm not surprised. It must feel lonely." There was a wistful sound in his voice.

"Yeah," Leo agreed, because there didn't seem any point denying it.

"Dumb, isn't it? All these kids around and it's lonely. Nobody to talk to. Always feeling like you're the one on the outside, the one who doesn't fit in, who doesn't belong."

"You wouldn't know," Leo said gruffly, almost angrily, wondering whether Jed was taking the piss out of him. "What the hell would you know about it? Nobody belongs here more than you do! Your father runs the damn place. You're smart – everyone says so, and you

have that whole tribe of fucking sycophants who follow you around and laugh and clap at everything you do like a pack of performing monkeys."

Jed surprised him by not reacting angrily to his outburst. Instead he just sat there, and gave a strangely twisted little smile. "Yeah," he murmured. "Who was it who once said that sometimes you can be lonelier in a crowd than you can ever be on your own?"

Leo gazed at him incredulously. "I don't believe you," he said. "You're like the little emperor here."

"I'm sure it looks that way," Jed agreed. "Think about it, Leo. I know that group of 'fucking sycophants' don't like me for me. They hang around on my coat tails because of who my father is and that always sets me apart. There isn't one of them I like or trust."

Leo gazed at him, shocked. "I always thought it was arrogance," he said. "I thought you felt you were above the rest of us."

Jed laughed out loud. "What the hell do I have to be arrogant about?" he lamented, leaning back against the pew and exhaling a long plume of smoke. Leo gazed at him, transfixed and Jed's deep blue eyes never left Leo's face. "I always wanted a good friend, Leo. You know, the kind you can really talk to, really trust, but I'm always on the outside here, just like you. The other kids don't really trust or confide in me because of who I am and who I might tell...there's always a barrier there. If only they knew," he murmured, sounding suddenly very tired.

"Knew what?" Leo asked, transfixed.

"Nothing." A little flicker of some unreadable expression crossed Jed's face. "If only they knew they could trust me. That I wouldn't say anything," he backtracked although Leo was sure that hadn't been what his comment had referred to. "I thought...when you came in here tonight, I thought you'd give me up for sure. Just for the power and pleasure of getting Jed Bartlet of all people into trouble."

"I didn't know it would get you into trouble." Leo made a face.

"Because of who I am?" Jed gave a wry laugh. "Oh, trust me, Leo – the many rules around here apply doubly to me."

"I wouldn't anyway." Leo shrugged. "I was just curious. I'd never say anything. It's not how we do things where I come from."

"Well I am eternally grateful for that," Jed grinned.

"I'm sorry," Leo said suddenly, unexpectedly.

"For what?" Jed asked, surprised.

"For judging you the same way everyone always judges me. I assumed you were..." he paused.

"The little emperor," Jed supplied. "That's what you said earlier."

"Yeah." Leo made a face. "I just assumed. I didn't think..."

"It's okay. Like I said, I'm just feeling sorry for myself tonight. It still has to be easier for me than it is for you. For what it's worth, Leo, I get free tuition here too. Just like you. So I guess we're more alike that you thought."

Leo considered that for a moment. Until tonight Jed Bartlet might as well have belonged to a different species for all the things Leo felt he had in common with him. Now all that had changed.

Jed gazed at Leo speculatively. "Do you want a friend, Leo?" He asked. "A real friend?"

"Yes." Leo felt a little tingle travel up his spine as Jed said those words. The other boy's deep blue eyes were sparkling in the darkness of the church. "Do you, Jed?" He asked in return.

"Oh god yes," Jed said in a heartfelt tone. Leo held out his hand and Jed slipped his own into it. Jed felt warm and solid and very real and Leo felt that warmth travel all the way up his arm and into his heart. Somehow he had the feeling that Jed wasn't someone who gave his friendship easily, and this was something else he had in common with Leo McGarry...but, once given, Leo's friendship was real and solid, and he felt sure that the same was true of Jed Bartlet.

"So – why did you come here tonight?" He asked. Jed frowned. "You said you only come here when you need to? Why did you need to tonight?" Leo pushed, genuinely curious. Jed hesitated, and then clearly remembered his own words about having someone to confide in and decided to take a risk.

"I had an argument with my father this afternoon. I went to see him...he got annoyed with me about something. I said something that upset him...I dunno." He shrugged. "He didn't give me a chance to say what I wanted to say. He was too pissed off about something I wrote in the school magazine. So..." Jed shrugged.

"So you came out here to get your own back on him." Leo gave a wolfish smile. "Tomorrow he'll find another pile of cigarette butts in the chapel and throw a fit about it. I like the way your mind works, Jed."

"You do? I think it's probably a pretty childish thing to do." Jed winced.

"Who the hell cares? Sometimes, in a place like this, you have to find some way of beating the system or else it feels like you've just given in," Leo said more forcefully than he'd intended. Jed gave a delighted grin.

"Oh, I just remembered - you're the kid who's had three flashlights confiscated in the past month!" He exclaimed.

"Yeah." Leo shrugged.

"One of the other boys said you were dumb to just keep buying 'em and having 'em taken over and over again but I liked that you didn't give in."

"Feels like I'm banging my head against a brick wall sometimes," Leo admitted. "But it's a stupid rule and I don't want them to think they've won."

"They always do in the end – win I mean," Jed sighed, leaning his head back against the pew. Leo wanted to lean in and kiss him he looked so perfect, framed there in the moonlight.

"Nah," Leo said again. "Every time they catch me with a flashlight I get it confiscated and take a couple of stripes...but that doesn't matter; I know what the consequences are and I take 'em because it's worth it to me. It's the same for you - if you got caught out here, and your father gave you the worst punishment he could, you have to ask yourself whether it's worth it. If it is, then you take whatever you've got coming to you – if it isn't then you shouldn't do it. So – is it worth it?" He watched as Jed considered this question; and then, finally, his friend's blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight and he nodded his head vigorously.

"Yeah," he said, chuckling to himself. "Yeah, it's worth it. Sometimes I even think it'd be worth it just so I could see the look on his face when he finds out it's me who leaves cigarette butts in the chapel."

Leo laughed out loud at that. "So, if you're prepared to accept the consequences, whatever they are, then it's worth it." He shrugged. "If you aren't then you shouldn't break the rules – and you sure as hell can't whine about it later when you get caught."

Jed's grin widened. "I like the way you think, my friend," he said. Leo grinned back.

I like everything about you, he thought to himself, but he didn't say anything. They talked for another half an hour – it was so easy talking to Jed. Leo had never met anyone else who he could talk to so animatedly, about so many different things. He told Jed about his family and his home and Jed told him a little about his own family in return, until, finally, reluctantly, they knew they should think about leaving.

"We should get back," Jed murmured. His blue eyes looked happier and livelier than Leo had ever seen them. "Where's your room?"

Leo told him and Jed nodded. "I'll walk back half the way with you."

"Same time tomorrow night?" Leo asked as they got to their feet.

"I'll be counting the hours," Jed replied. Leo knew how he felt; after so many long months of loneliness it felt good to have connected with another person – to have made a friend.

They slithered silently out from the pew and began walking back towards the door...when suddenly it opened, without warning, and a figure loomed up in front of them, waving a flashlight. Leo ducked down behind a pew, but Jed was caught in the full glare of the light.

"Who's there?" A stern voice demanded and Leo shivered as he recognised the headmaster's firm tones.

"It's me, sir," Jed said, in a resigned voice, stepping into the beam of the flashlight, obviously having realised it was too late to try and hide.

"Who...Jed? JED!" Leo winced. Mr. Bartlet's voice was icily angry. "What the hell are you... never mind – I'll deal with that later. Who was that with you?"

Leo held his breath.

"Nobody, sir," Jed replied, and Leo saw him cross his fingers behind his back.

"I saw someone." Mr. Bartlet shone his flashlight around and Leo ducked even further down, hoping the beam wouldn't fall on him.

"There's nobody, sir, just me," Jed said desperately. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't be here but I couldn't sleep and I..."

"You thought you'd come here and pray?" Mr. Bartlet asked, in incredulous tones. Jed hesitated, clearly unsure whether to continue with that particular lie.

"I don't know what I was thinking," he muttered. "Please, Dad...I'm sorry." He started to walk forwards, past his father who was facing in the opposite direction, clearly hoping to draw his father away from where Leo was hiding.

"I know there's someone else here," Mr. Bartlet said, ignoring his son. He took a step forward, and the beam of his flashlight lit on Leo. Leo tried to scuttle out of the way only to find his sweater seized and then he found himself being dragged ignominiously out of the pew and into the aisle. "You – who are you?" The headmaster shone the flashlight directly into Leo's face and Leo put his hands up automatically to shield his eyes. "McGarry?" Mr. Bartlet snarled.

"Yes, sir," Leo said, recognising that they had been well and truly caught. Now their conversation of a few minutes ago seemed ridiculously full of bravado. He had no idea how much trouble they were in but he guessed that it didn't come much worse than this.

"So you were alone, were you, Jed?" Mr Bartlet sneered, turning back to his son, his hand still clasped firmly around Leo's upper arm. Jed met Leo's gaze in the gleam from the flashlight and there was a wry, resigned expression in his friend's expression, tinged with

just a hint of defiance.

"Sorry, Dad," Jed murmured.

"You will be," Mr. Bartlet promised and the way he said those words sent a shiver up Leo's spine. Mr. Bartlet glanced at him, and then sniffed his sweater and a look of realisation came into his eyes, followed almost immediately by an expression of such incredible anger that Leo found himself ducking again, almost by instinct. The headmaster dragged him along the pew, his fingers digging uncomfortably into Leo's upper arm, waving his flashlight around until he found the little pile of cigarette butts. He gazed at them in wordless anger for several seconds and then released Leo and turned back to give both boys a disdainful glare. Then, making an almost visible effort to control his temper, he said:

"You two. Come with me," before turning on his heel and stalking back towards the door.

Leo gazed at Jed helplessly and Jed just shook his head, his eyes wary. Leo sighed; there was no way on this earth that this was going to end well. He hoped he wasn't going to be thrown out of the school; much as he hated it here, he knew how devastated his mother would be if he was expelled. He wondered whether it was even possible that Jed could be thrown out and then realised that however hard this was for him, it must be excruciating for Jed. Not only had his headmaster caught him out here smoking in the chapel in the middle of the night, but the man also happened to be his father. Leo couldn't even conceive of how bad that must be for Jed.

"I'm sorry, Leo," Jed whispered as they walked back to the school. Leo grinned and nudged his friend in the ribs, trying to rally his spirits for the ordeal ahead.

"Worth it, remember," he whispered..

They followed Jed's father back to his study. Leo had only been in the headmaster's study once before, when he'd first arrived at the school, and even then his eyes had been drawn almost morbidly to the cane hanging on a hook on the wall, clearly intended to serve as a constant warning to any boy unlucky enough to end up being sent here. Now Leo's eyes sought it out again, drawn to it like a moth to a flame. He swallowed hard as he came to a halt beside Jed in front of the headmaster's desk and it didn't escape his notice that Jed's eyes flickered over towards the cane as well. Would Mr. Bartlet cane his own son, Leo wondered? He couldn't imagine his own father ever doing anything like that to him when he'd been alive but then he couldn't even conceive of how weird it must be for your headmaster to also be your father.

Mr. Bartlet shut the door behind them and then began circling them both. Leo clenched his fists hard, reminding himself constantly that if this was bad for him then it had to be almost unbearable for Jed, standing beside him. The headmaster studied them silently for several long minutes and then went to stand behind his desk.

"Jed...words almost fail me," he said. Leo felt Jed tense beside him and he gazed at the floor. "All this time...I've been telling you all this time how someone has been smoking in the

chapel and it was you all along. You KNEW how angry it made me. You KNEW and you did it anyway." Mr. Bartlet slammed his fist down on the table both times he said the word 'knew' and Leo felt Jed jump beside him on both occasions.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jed sighed.

"When I spoke to you about this you agreed with me. You said how disrespectful it was for people to leave their cigarette butts in the chapel," Mr. Bartlet continued. "God knows – it's bad enough that you were smoking in there, let alone leaving the evidence there for all to see." Leo shot Jed a sideways glance to find his new friend's expression both guilty and defiant at one and the same time. It wasn't, after all, as if they hadn't known they were breaking school rules and doing something pretty sacrilegious into the bargain. Leo knew Jed's faith to be very real, and he guessed that his ongoing battle with his father must be equally fundamental to his friend's existence to have made him choose this particular method of rebellion.

"Yes sir. I... don't have an explanation for that," Jed said quietly.

"You have disobeyed me on so many levels, Jed. You've broken school rules – you've even involved another boy in your misdemeanours." Leo shifted nervously. "You – McGarry. You haven't been sent to my study for punishment before, have you?" Mr. Bartlet barked.

"No, sir," Leo replied.

"I hate to say this about my own son but you should keep away from him, McGarry," Mr. Bartlet hissed. "He's a trouble maker. He writes insolent articles for the school magazine. He pretends to be a model student but behind your back..." Mr Bartlet paused in mid-rant and visibly got a grip on himself. "What do you have to say for yourself, McGarry? Were you smoking in the chapel tonight as well?"

"Yes, sir. I was." Leo nodded.

"Why?"

Leo glanced at Jed who made an expression with his eyes encouraging Leo to explain what had happened. Leo knew that he could probably get away with a greatly reduced punishment if he just said he had seen Jed and followed him but he had no intention of doing so. He wasn't about to bail out on Jed, and anyway, he deserved to take his equal share of the punishment, although looking at Jed's father right now he somehow doubted that would happen; the headmaster clearly had Jed in his sights and Leo was just along for the ride. All the same, he wasn't going to make any excuses for himself. Jed had offered him his friendship and they'd shaken hands on it; and when he'd been caught Jed had done his best to cover for Leo so Leo was happy to stand side by side with Jed and take the consequences of their actions. It wasn't as if they hadn't known what the likely penalty would be. They had known and although he felt far from brave right now, Leo had to acknowledge that they deserved all they got. By any standards of behaviour, let alone those of this school, sneaking out in the middle of the night for a cigarette in the school chapel

was deserving of some kind of retribution and he was prepared to take his without complaint or excuse.

"For the same reason as Jed, sir," Leo replied.

"I see. Well then, you won't either of you be surprised to receive an extremely severe punishment, will you?" Mr. Bartlet surveyed them both for a long time, and then, without saying another word, he strode over to the wall and removed the cane from its hook. "Come here, McGarry and bend over the desk."

Leo felt his stomach do several somersaults all at once but he stepped forward anyway, glancing at Jed as he passed him. Jed's eyes flashed with sympathy and a staunch kind of support and it was that which gave Leo the strength to see the next few minutes through. The headmaster pointed at the desk and Leo bent forward, gripping the sides of the desk tightly with his hands. He felt Mr. Bartlet's hand on his back, pushing his face onto the desk and he closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of the dark wood. A second later he heard a swish and then an almighty streak of fire blazed across his buttocks. He bit down hard, aware that Jed was watching, not wanting either to disgrace himself or to make this harder for his newfound friend than it already was. Leo didn't know whether it was just because the headmaster was incandescently furious or whether his punishments were always this harsh, but his strokes hurt far more than those he'd received from the housemaster. He'd barely recovered from the first when the second one bit into his backside, sending another flash of pain through his entire body. Now he wished he'd pulled on his school pants or jeans and not his sweats when he'd gone after Jed – his sweats didn't seem to afford him any protection at all from the savage bite of the cane. Leo fumbled to retain his grip on the side of the desk as his sweaty palms slipped on the highly polished wood and all the while the cane continued its inexorable work. Leo had never experienced anything like this punishment in his life; each stroke was intensely painful and his one instinct was to stand up and run away and that was the one thing he could not do. He counted 6, which was more than he'd ever received before, but the caning did not stop there. Leo wanted to howl as he took a 7th and then an 8th stroke and only his pride kept him from doing so. He honestly wasn't sure he could bear any more when the 9th landed, closely followed by the 10th, and suddenly it was over. He lay over the desk, gasping like a stranded fish, unsure whether he could even stand up. His legs felt like jelly and his butt hurt beyond endurance.

"Go and stand where you were, McGarry," Mr. Bartlet ordered. Leo found the strength from somewhere to lever himself up and then he turned, wincing, and walked, very slowly, on shaky legs, back to where Jed was standing. Jed's gaze remained locked with his for that entire walk – it felt like the longest walk of Leo's life and if Jed hadn't been there he wasn't sure he would have made it. Leo was sure the sweat was pouring off his face, and he wasn't sure what was worse – the pain in his own backside or the knowledge that the headmaster was undoubtedly going to make him watch Jed being punished the way he had made Jed watch him.

"Come here, Jed," Mr. Bartlet ordered and Leo's heart went out to his friend. It had been bad enough for him, but he wasn't sure he could even imagine how difficult this situation must be for his new friend. He watched, his mind still reeling with pain, as Jed slowly,

without any prompting, lowered himself over the wooden desk. There was something about the resignation in Jed's stance, and the ease with which he took his position that gave Leo a shock of realisation; now suddenly everything his friend had said earlier that evening slotted into place. This wasn't the first time Jed had been here, in this position. Leo suddenly knew, without any shadow of a doubt, that this had been a regular occurrence throughout Jed's schooldays, and that while on this occasion it had been some behaviour of his that had led to it, just as often the punishment was as severe as it was unjustified. What had Jed said? Every rule in the school applied doubly to him – Leo could see that Jed's father held him to impossible standards and enjoyed enforcing those standards in the most punitive way whenever possible, and for whatever reason. Far from being the little emperor he had imagined him to be, Leo now understood that Jed's life must have been filled with such difficult scenes for a very long time. He watched as his friend's fingers curled one by one around the edge of the desk, taking a firm grasp, and remembered Jed's words about loneliness. How lonely must it have been, growing up here, with this angry man as your father, Leo wondered? How lonely, complicated and difficult must your life be that you'd risk this kind of retribution just for a chance to get your own back, in however minor and petty a way, by smoking cigarettes in church in the middle of the night? How lonely never to have a friend you could confide in, or a home to escape to during vacations: Jed was trapped in this world, and for him there was never any way out. He remembered his friend's sad, resigned voice as he'd spoken of his life here, and he knew that whatever happened, he had connected with Jed on some fundamental level during this long, painful night; Jed understood his loneliness just as he understood Jed's and that gave them some kind of bond that transcended the differences in their backgrounds.

It was all Leo could do to stand and watch as Mr. Bartlet raised his cane again and brought it down, savagely, on Jed's backside. Leo couldn't be sure, but it seemed to him that the headmaster hit Jed with more force even than he had hit him; this time, it seemed, it was personal. Jed, for his part, kept as silent as Leo had. His face was turned to one side, his eyes open throughout. The resigned, dull and yet strangely victorious expression in them never changed, even as his entire body flinched with every new stroke. Leo wanted to close his own eyes, to shut out the sight of it, but he didn't; instead he kept his gaze locked with Jed's, sharing this with him. The noise was almost worse than the sight – Leo hated the swish of the cane, followed by the sharp thud as it made impact and the ragged gasp of Jed's rasping breathing. Finally, after what seemed like several hours, it was over. Mr. Bartlet strode over to the wall and replaced the cane on its hook while Jed made his slow way back to Leo's side.

"McGarry – I hope that taught you a lesson," the headmaster said. "I don't want to see you in here again. You can go back to bed."

"Yes, sir." Leo hesitated and glanced at Jed but his friend just gestured with his head that he should go and so, reluctantly, he did. He walked slowly back to his room, aching with every step. He hurt too much to even bother changing into his pyjamas and instead slid into the bed and lay on his front, trying to get his head around all that had happened during the night. His ass throbbed constantly but he resisted the urge to take a look at it; he could pretty much guess what the damage was. He rested his head on his hands and wondered when he could get an opportunity to check in with Jed and make sure that his friend was

okay. They sure as hell wouldn't be able to meet in the chapel at night any more. Leo was just dozing off when he heard a scraping at the door and then it opened, silently, and someone slipped into the room.

"Who...?" He whispered softly, and then he caught sight of Jed's tousled dark head. "Hey – aren't we in enough trouble for one night?" He whispered.

"Yeah – I figure we've used up our quota," Jed replied with a little grin. He glanced at the empty bed beside Leo's with a sigh of relief.

"My room mate is in the San," Leo told him.

"Good. I had to come to make sure you were okay," Jed said, leaning against the wall.

"I'm fine." Leo sat up in bed and then gave a yelp of pain and flipped himself onto his side. Jed surveyed him sympathetically.

"I'm so sorry, Leo. This is all my fault," he said.

"I don't know how you figure that out," Leo replied. "I made the decision to follow you. I accepted your offer of a cigarette. You did your best to cover for me before he caught me...none of this was your fault."

"Yeah. It was. He wouldn't have gone so hard on you if I hadn't been there. I made him that angry. I just seem to have this gift for upsetting him." Jed gave a tight, tired smile. "It's always been this way. Tonight...well, at least tonight I actually did something to deserve that kind of punishment," he said softly. "Usually..." He caught himself and shrugged. "Anyway, I just wanted to see if you were okay," he said, turning to go, and he sounded so dejected that Leo's heart went out with him.

"Hey. Don't go," Leo said. "Come here." He held up the blanket before he even knew what he was doing, and Jed hesitated for a moment, and then slid into the bed beside Leo, resting on his side. Leo pulled the blanket around them both and they lay there.

"I shouldn't have dragged you into it. I shouldn't have offered you that cigarette. Then this wouldn't have happened," Jed said.

"I'm glad it happened," Leo replied. Jed's blue eyes were quizzical in the half-light. "I am glad," Leo insisted. "If that beating was the price for making a real friend, then I'm happy to have paid it," he said. Jed smiled, a mega watt grin that went straight to Leo's heart.

"Thank you," Jed whispered. Leo smiled, and his arms went around Jed. He wasn't sure why, but this just felt right.

"So – was it worth it?" Leo asked with a smile. Jed thought about it for a moment and the grinned again.

"Yeah," he said. "Apart from the bit about you being caught too – that wasn't worth it, but other than that..." He nodded, a satisfied expression on his face.

"Ah well. It's not as if we didn't deserve it," Leo commented wryly. Jed laughed out loud.

"Yeah," he agreed. "We sure as hell deserved it."

Leo began to laugh too. "Oh boy – when he showed up in the chapel I thought I'd have a heart attack!" he said, giggling in earnest now.

"I know! The look on his face..." Jed convulsed against him and they laughed helplessly against each other for several minutes. Leo liked the sound of Jed's laugh and he was determined he'd hear it more often from now on in. He found it hard to believe that only yesterday he hadn't known Jed Bartlet and yet now he had seen a glimpse of the other boy's soul and knew things about him that he knew Jed hadn't told anyone. Jed was so far from being the little emperor he had imagined him to be that Leo could scarcely believe that had been his image of his friend. Jed's seeming confidence and obvious intelligence hid a streak of vulnerability a mile wide, and it brought out all Leo's protective instincts. He liked the way Jed nestled in against him, clearly craving some kind of physical affection, perhaps to compensate for what Leo could only assume had been a sterile, cold, even hostile childhood. Leo was acting on instinct again as he dipped his head slightly and caught Jed's lips with his own. Jed went very still for a moment and Leo wondered what the hell he was doing and whether he'd gone too far, and then it was as if a dam opened and Jed responded with a depth of passion and need that took him by surprise. They spent the night alternately kissing and talking until dawn and when Jed finally slipped out of his room, Leo had forgotten all about the pain in his backside or the traumatic nature of the night's events. He got up and stood by the window, watching the rosy glow of the sunrise with a smile on his face.

He wasn't lonely any more.

Leo left it for a few minutes and then walked up to the Residence. He and Abbey were the only people allowed to enter the President's bedroom without Charlie first checking with Jed. Leo knocked softly and then entered the room. Jed was in bed and he looked up, gazing at Leo blearily in the darkness.

"Leo? Something up?" he asked, fumbling for the lamp and turning it on.

"No. I just wanted to make sure you were okay – and I thought you could use some company tonight," Leo told him. Jed's features softened and a little smile tugged at his lips.

"I'm fine – although I won't turn down the offer of company," he said softly, and then grimaced as he tried to sit up in bed.

"Your back is hurting you isn't it?" Leo said. "You've been holding yourself hunched up all day."

"You try taking a Congressional censure without hunching," Jed riposted wryly.

"Lie on your stomach. I'll give you a massage," Leo said, going into the en suite bathroom to find some lotion. He returned to the bedroom to find that Jed had removed his tee shirt and was lying on his stomach, as ordered. Leo poured a liberal amount of lotion into his hands and then placed them on Jed's back and began to stroke him with long, soothing movements of his hands. Jed sighed, and laid his head on the pillow, relaxing visibly under Leo's tender ministrations. Leo massaged him hard for several minutes, his strong hands going deep and loosening some of the tense knots in his friend's muscles. "Was it worth it?" Leo said softly as he worked. Jed raised his head and looked up at his friend in surprise. "It was a close race with Hoynes for the Democratic nomination," Leo commented. "If you'd told the nation you had MS back then there's no way in hell you'd have got that nomination...and you wouldn't have ended up here." He gestured with his head at their plush surroundings.

"I was wrong," Jed said. "What I did was wrong."

"Yes it was." Leo nodded.

"But yeah," Jed sighed. "It was worth it. I've managed to achieve so much since I was elected, and I think I've done a good job. My MS hasn't interfered with my work at all – yes, I did the wrong thing, but I'd probably do it again," he sighed. Then he glanced over his shoulder at Leo, a wry light in his eyes. "Someone wise once told me that you have to be prepared to take the consequences of your actions. If you are then it's worth it, but if you aren't you can't go whining on about it when you get caught - and you can't try to wriggle out of whatever you have coming to you. I'm not making any excuses for myself. I deserved what happened to me today and I'm not whining about taking it."

"Someone wise?" Leo raised an eyebrow. Jed smiled at him.

"Yes, old friend, someone wise," he said. "God that feels good."

"Good." Leo finished massaging his friend's back, and then got up and dropped a kiss on Jed's face, pulling the sheet over his friend's body to keep the newly massaged muscles warm. "Get some sleep, old friend," he murmured, walking towards the door.

"Leo..." Jed stopped him. "Don't go." Jed moved cautiously over to the other side of the bed and held up the sheet.

"Come here," he said. Leo gazed at him quizzically.

"You know...I'm getting the strangest sense of déjà vu," he murmured.

Jed gave a wry chuckle. "Yeah. You know, I think we're getting too old for this bad boy crap but here we are, still getting into trouble and still sneaking around in the middle of the night." Leo's grin broadened as he returned to the bed, undressing as he walked. He slid into the bed beside Jed and his arms reached automatically for his friend. He pulled Jed close and dropped a kiss on his lover's warm, waiting mouth.

"You know...it's easier taking those consequences knowing that you're with me all the way," Jed told him after they'd finished kissing. "It always was."

Leo had a sudden vivid flash of memory of Jed lying over a desk several decades ago, his blue eyes locked with his own. He remembered also how it was Jed's look of sympathy and support that had given Leo the strength to see his own punishment through without sobbing like a baby.

"Yeah," he said softly, kissing his friend again. "It always was."

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