

## Hour 15 by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/hour-15/>

### Story Notes:

This is an unbeta'd, post "25" vignette. Many thanks to Anne for sending me the tape. This one is for you.

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Leo pushed open the door to the Lincoln bedroom with a weary sigh. Jed was standing by the window, his hands buried deep in his pockets, gazing into space.

"Hey," Leo said softly, entering the room and shutting the door quietly behind him. Jed swung around, his eyes lighting up with a hope that died instantly as Leo's demeanour made it clear that he hadn't brought any news. "So, I just spoke to the doctor," Leo murmured.

"Yeah. He sent me up here. My blood pressure's sky high - he told me to get some rest." Jed glanced at Leo, and stretched out his arms in a gesture of futility. "As if that's even remotely possible." Jed shook his head.

"Abbey..." Leo began.

"Yeah - he sedated her. She's curled up in our bedroom, her arms wrapped around Ellie as if she'll never let go." Jed gazed blankly out of the window again. "There's nothing I can do, Leo," he whispered. "I can't help her. There's nothing I can even say to her. When she looks at me..." He faltered, his voice choking in his throat. "When she looks at me, I can see her thinking, 'This is your fault. You did this to Zoey, to us. You insisted on running for a second term...we had a deal, Jed and you broke it, and now we've lost Zoey and we might never get her back...'" His shoulders heaved, worn down by the burden of the pain, guilt and sheer agony of what he was currently enduring.

"Abbey doesn't think that, Jed," Leo said quietly, coming into the room. "That's just you,

taking responsibility for something that isn't your fault." He came to a halt a few feet from his friend and just stood there, waiting, watching his friend patiently. Jed was still wearing the same shirt and tie he'd been wearing all last night. The collar was open and the tie loosened, the shirt creased all over and the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He looked utterly weary, and very close to despair. There had been many times during the long, heartbreaking night they had just lived through, when Leo had wanted to pull Jed close and just hold him, but they'd both been focused on what needed to be done, and hadn't had a moment alone together until now.

"How's the acting president doing?" Jed winced slightly as he said those words and Leo didn't blame him.

"Fine - but there's no news yet, Jed. You'd be the first to know if there was," Leo said gently. "He's doing okay though."

"And the staff?" Jed glanced at him and Leo smiled.

"They're doing fine. Josh and I have worked out a rota - that's why I'm here. Either Josh or I will be with the acting president at all times. When Josh's asleep I'll be at the office, and vice versa. Josh will call me if there's anything he thinks I should know. I'm sorry I couldn't get here to see you any sooner but there was a lot to sort out."

"Yeah." Jed shook his head and gave a wry grunt. "Hell, yeah," he muttered. Leo still gazed at him, watchfully. There was a long silence. Jed dug his hands even deeper into his pockets. Leo just waited.

"She'll be so scared, Leo," Jed said, finally, breaking the silence. "She acts all grown up and brave but inside she's still just a kid - a little girl who was afraid of the dark. I used to have to scare the monsters out from under her bed at night before she'd go to sleep."

Leo said nothing, just continued waiting.

"I'm her father - that's what fathers do. They protect their kids...keep them safe. I didn't keep her safe, Leo, and I can't protect her from whatever is happening to her right now, and that's tearing me apart..." Jed stopped, and leaned against the window, his hands clenched into fists of hopeless frustration. Leo swallowed down his own emotions; Mallory had dropped by a few hours earlier, coming to his office as if by some instinct, knowing he needed to see her. He'd pulled her into a hug and held her for several minutes, just glad that he *could*, and all the time his heart had been aching for Jed, knowing that the one thing in the world his best friend wanted right now was to wrap his arms around Zoey, and know that she was safe.

"I keep worrying about what they might be doing to her." Jed turned to look at him and Leo saw a multitude of worst case scenarios playing out in his friend's eyes. "What if they're...?"

"No, Jed. We don't go there," Leo interrupted him firmly. "We don't know anything and it doesn't do you or Zoey any good for you to think about what's happening to her right now."

"I can't help it, damnit, Leo! Christ - why did this happen? Was it my fault? Was it because of what I did to Shareef? Oh god, where is she? Where the hell is she, Leo?" Jed yelled, and it was like a dam breaking, and all Jed's emotions - the helplessness, guilt, fear and grief, finally flooded out in a hopeless miasma of despair. He stood there, his entire body shaking, his eyes full of pain.

Leo didn't say anything. He just opened his arms. Jed gazed at him helplessly for a moment and then stepped into their warm, comforting circle. Leo wrapped his arms as tightly around his friend as he'd wrapped them around Mallory earlier, and held on tight, rocking Jed against his chest. Jed rested his head on Leo's shoulder and just stood there. There were no tears - Jed was beyond them, incapable of them, too wrung out to even know how to cry, and, Leo suspected, he was holding on, needing to be strong for his wife, for Zoey, for his other daughters, for his entire family - but who was there to be strong for him? Leo knew the answer to that question and held his friend for a long time, because it was what Jed needed, and because it was all he could do for him right now.

Finally, after several long minutes, Jed drew back.

"So," Leo said softly. "The doctor wanted to sedate you."

"Yeah. I told him no," Jed grimaced. "I can't be doped out of my head if there's any news. How did you know?"

"He told me," Leo shrugged. "He's worried about your blood pressure. I told him I'd make sure you got some sleep."

"Yeah?" Jed took a step back and raised an eyebrow at Leo.

"Yeah." Leo gave him a little smile. "Come on." He guided Jed over to the bed and sat him down on it.

"Leo, it's the middle of the afternoon," Jed protested.

"I know."

"I went five nights without sleep once - I can do it again," Jed snapped.

"You don't know if it'll be five nights," Leo pointed out gently. "You don't know how long it'll be." Jed gazed at him in glum recognition of that all too valid point, a point neither of them wanted to make, but both of them knew to be true. "And in addition, this time your blood pressure is going through the roof," Leo continued. "You have to get some rest."

He crouched down, undid Jed's shoes, slid his friend's feet out of them, and then pushed him inexorably back onto the pillows. Jed went, as if it was okay to sleep if Leo insisted on it, just as it was okay to be relieved from his duties as President if Leo said so. Not anybody else, and certainly not the new acting President - just Leo. Leo took off his own shoes and

his jacket, and then crawled onto the bed beside his friend. He put his arms around Jed and held him again, his hands resting on his friend's chest - and found that Jed's heart was beating way too fast under his fingers.

"Close your eyes, and breathe with me," Leo instructed, slowing his own breathing. He waited, listening, until he heard Jed match him, breath for breath, but Jed's body was still tense under his hands. Leo thought of Zoey, tiny and beautiful, just like her mother, and oddly vulnerable beneath that smart exterior, just like her father. She was also strong - like both her parents. If, no, \*when\* she came back to them, Leo thought there would be no shortage of people to surround her in a warm circle of love, and help her get over this. He suspected that even the President himself might have to wait in line behind a certain Charlie Young.

"You can't do anything for Zoey right now," Leo told Jed softly, soothing his friend's stiff muscles beneath his hands. "But when she comes home she's going to need you, and she's going to need you to be strong and to take care of her, so you have to get some sleep so you can do that, Jed."

Jed nodded and took another deep breath. Leo gave a little smile; Jed wouldn't be able to do this for himself, but if it was all he could do to help Zoey, then he'd try his best.

They stayed that way for a long time, until Leo heard a slight change in his friend's breathing and knew that Jed was, finally, asleep. Then and only then did he close his own eyes. He had promised Margaret that he'd only sleep when the President did and he had meant it absolutely literally.

Leo wrapped his arms tightly around Jed and held him close, his chin resting on Jed's shoulder, his entire body curved protectively around his friend, and then, finally, he slept too.

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