

In the Shadow of Two Fathers by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/in-the-shadow-of-two-fathers/>
Story Notes:

Spoilers: In the Shadow of Two Gunmen. Noel.

This story is set in my June 17th universe

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Dedications: Thanks to Phoebe as always :-). Any continuity, canon-errors etc are all mine. UK spelling and grammar used. :-)

This fic takes place during and immediately after the events of Noel. One of the flashback sequences in this story takes place during events described in one of my other stories, Old Friends. You don't have to read that to understand this story though. The dates I used in this story are consistent with the June 17th universe.

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December 24th, 2000

The musicians in the lobby finished a spirited rendition of Good King Wenceslas and then fell silent for what felt like the first time in hours. Leo shifted in his chair, waiting for the music to start again, *needing* the music to start again. He didn't want to examine the reason

why, but he didn't like the silence. Leo gazed into space, thinking about Josh. It was easier to focus on Josh than to worry about why he didn't like that silence. He was worried about his deputy – Josh had been falling apart, slow piece by slow piece, in front of their eyes. Leo wondered how long this had been coming on – they'd all started noticing Josh's increasingly erratic behaviour three or four weeks earlier, but had he been struggling before then? He had been so bright and energetic when he'd first returned to work, and Leo knew that the weeks of enforced inactivity while he recovered from his life-threatening injuries had rankled with Josh, who hated sitting around doing nothing. However, somehow, somewhere, along the way Josh had faltered. His energy had almost turned in on himself, tearing at him from the inside out, until finally they couldn't ignore his distress any more. Leo had been worried about Josh for days before his deputy finally asked for help, in the only way his muddled mind would allow – by pleading with them all, in the Oval Office, to listen to him. He didn't know what he was trying to say, but he did know it needed to be heard – and Leo had heard. He had called in a psychiatrist, Doctor Stanley Keyworth, from the American Trauma Victims Association, and Josh was sitting with him right now – had been sitting with him all day. Leo thought of Josh, yelling at the President in the Oval Office in a way he would never have done if he hadn't been falling apart, and then he thought of all those weeks when Josh had been walking around, seemingly perfectly normal, and nobody had known that already he was starting to break down inside.

Leo shifted in his seat, wishing the music would start up again. He would sit here for as long as it took, until Josh emerged from his meeting with the psychiatrist. He'd sit here all night if he had to. There was nowhere else he needed to be, and he wanted Josh to know that someone was here for him right now. He knew what it was like to feel as if you couldn't cope with what was going on inside your own head any more, and he wanted Josh to know that he didn't have to face that alone. Leo knew that if he hadn't had Jed beside him every step of the way through his first tentative steps in recovery from his alcohol and drug addictions, then he wouldn't have made it. It helped for there to be someone around who cared whether you made it or not.

The musicians still hadn't reappeared, and a familiar ringing sound was starting to build up, slowly and inexorably, just behind his ears. He wasn't hearing it so much as living inside the sound. It was always there, had always been there since he was 13 years old, only usually it was easier to forget about it. Now, and ever since the shooting at Rosslyn, it had been more insistent, nagging and worrying at him, reminding him of emotions he had thought long since dead and buried.

Damn but why didn't the musicians start again? Leo got up and paced around the lobby urgently, trying to block out the sound, but it was no use, and he sat down again, resting his chin on his hands. The noise rang in his ears, filling his senses. It wasn't the sound of a gunshot. It wasn't the sharp, staccato crack of bullets being fired, as they had been just a few short months ago, slicing into the flesh of his deputy and his president, and scarring them all in their different ways, both physically and emotionally. No, it wasn't the sound of the gunshots themselves.

It was the deadly, ringing silence of their aftermath.

March 27th, 1958

"Leo – are you done yet?"

Leo suppressed a sigh as his mom poked her head around his bedroom door for the 4th time that evening. He knew she was lonely, and with his little sisters in bed he was the only company in the house, but all the same, he was trying to do his homework and he was in the middle of writing an essay. Most teenagers would have jumped at the chance to skip their homework and sit downstairs watching TV and chatting idly by the fire, but Leo wasn't one of them. He enjoyed his schoolwork, and, much as he loved his mom, he also liked taking a break from her and retreating to the comforting solitude of his own room, where he could bury himself in his beloved books.

"I'm almost done," he told her with a smile. "About another half an hour?"

She wavered in the doorway, and he could see from the redness around her eyes that she had been crying again. Her soft blonde hair was tucked prettily behind her ears, and she had applied lipstick and eye make up, as she always did after she'd been crying. She was a beautiful woman and Leo knew her folks had doted on her as a child partly because of her doe-eyed good looks, and partly because she was the beloved baby of the family, who everyone was always taking care of. It was those good looks, however, that had determined her destiny, and she had married the sweet-talking man with the twinkling blue eyes who had courted her so relentlessly because of them. Leo's father wasn't a particularly handsome man but nobody could deny that he was charming. From Irish stock, he had met his future wife while serving at the Navy base in Chicago during the war, and, mistaking infatuation for love, and in a burst of wartime madness, they had married after only knowing each other for a very short time. While he was off to war, she stayed in Chicago with her parents, waiting for him to come home, and Leo showed up 9 months later. Their married life together didn't really begin until he came home from the war, swept his bride away from her native Chicago, and took her back to his home in Boston, where he joined the police – and where she knew nobody. Being from a Polish family, she had a tough time fitting into the very clannish Boston Irish society and, from being the spoiled youngest child of a loving family, she found herself isolated, expected to cope by herself, and soon the mother of three small children. She also found that she was married to a man she barely knew, and, as time wore on, it became clear just how little they had in common. Her beauty and his gift for charming the birds out of the trees were not enough to glue a marriage together. Leo McGarry Senior had a wandering eye, and soon became irritated by his wife's constant moping and, in her loneliness, she became even more insecure, scared of letting him out of her sight for fear he would lose interest in her. Inevitably this became a self-fulfilling prophecy as her insecurity fuelled his increasing revulsion, and before long he was lying about his shifts, staying out late, and coming home either drunk, reeking of cheap perfume, or both. Leo was old enough to have figured out that his father was seeing other women, and his mom knew instinctively, which only increased her desperation as she tried to cling on to her failing marriage, using the one weapon she had in her armoury – her looks. She always made an effort to look immaculate, even when she'd been crying all evening from fretting over where he was – and, more importantly, who he was with.

Leo had been the main witness to his mother's slow unravelling, and did his best to comfort her. She treated him like a companion, not her 13 year old son, and leaned on him as she had leaned on people all her life. He loved her dearly, but sometimes he wanted a break from the constant onslaught of her emotional vulnerability, and his schoolwork was just the escape he needed.

"Just half an hour," he reassured her, as he saw the tears well up in her eyes again. "Then I'll come downstairs and we can watch TV together."

She nodded, but made no move to go. Leo turned back to his essay, ignoring the sad gaze she had fixed on him. If he relented, she would always know she could manipulate him, and as he grew older he had become wary of the web she liked to spin around him, entangling him so tightly that sometimes he felt he could barely breathe.

When he had been younger he had been happy to run around after her, being as in love with his mother as most small boys are, but over the years he had been hurt too many times by her and had grown wary. When his father was having one of his numerous affairs she leaned on Leo, treating him more like a close friend and confidant than a son, but when his father was between his amours she shut Leo out and focussed all her love and attention on her husband. Leo McGarry Senior would breeze back into their lives for a few short weeks, oozing charm, and full of amusing stories and little gifts as if to say sorry, and for awhile the entire family would have a thin veneer of happiness – until the next time he went on a drinking binge, or strayed, as he invariably did.

Leo had grown as wary of his father as he was of his mother. He couldn't help but love them both, and they were both intensely loveable in their own ways, but he had developed a suit of emotional armour to save himself from the thousand little hurts they handed out so casually and so often in the course of their ongoing battle with each other.

"I'll be downstairs then," his mother said.

"Mmm." Leo didn't look up.

"I'll make us both a nice cup of cocoa," she added. Leo made no response and, finally, she retreated, leaving the door ajar.

Leo sat back in his chair with an explosive sigh, hating being mean to her but hating her neediness too – and, most of all, hating his father for creating the situation. His father had a way of making you feel special – he'd sometimes take Leo down to the ocean and they'd sit watching the water ripple while his father told him stories about the war. When his father turned the full force of his charm on you it was like basking in a warm light, as if the two of you had a special bond and nobody else mattered – but Leo had come to realise that his father could make everyone feel that way – and that that light could be just as easily switched off as it was turned on. It was on one of those trips to the ocean that he had felt bold enough to confront his father about his affairs, but the man had just given a rueful smile, those bright blue eyes of his dancing with mischief.

"You'll understand one day, my boy," he'd said, tapping the side of his nose in a conspiratorial way. "When you're older, you'll be the same."

I damn well won't, Leo thought to himself. He had seen the pain his father caused his mother and didn't ever want to do that to someone else.

"Don't look at me like that!" His father chided. "You don't know anything yet, son. Wait 'til you're man," and he gave Leo a knowing wink, as if it was something to be proud of; as if Leo would one day gain entry into this mysterious men's club, where affairs were a badge of pride, and other men colluded with you as you colluded with them to deceive the wife waiting at home. Leo knew for sure that his father's partner, a massive, bent-nosed cop called Mike Murray, who lived 2 blocks away, covered for his father. He remembered running to Uncle Mike's house when his mother had gone into labour with his youngest sister. He could still recall the look in the big man's eyes as he had reached for his coat, saying:

"I'll go and find your father."

"Isn't he here?" Leo had asked, in all innocence. His father's excuse for any absence was always that either he had been at work or that he had been at Uncle Mike's house.

Uncle Mike burst out laughing. "No, sonny. He's not here, but I'll find him. I've got a pretty good idea where he is. But don't tell your Mam – we wouldn't want to worry her when she's about to have a baby. Here." He'd reached into his pocket and handed Leo a couple of dimes. "Now run back home and take care of your Mam, son. Your dad will be home soon."

Leo had known even then that something else was going on. Something sly and yet not so bad that a man like Uncle Mike, who Leo knew to be a good man, and a brave, strong cop, wouldn't cover for his dad.

Leo turned back to his homework, and had just finished his essay when he heard the front door slam downstairs.

"Lee?" His mother often abbreviated his father's already short name, as a term of endearment. "Where have you been? It's late. I was worried."

Leo winced. It always started the same way – his mother seemed to know how to rile his father without even trying. He could see the same old argument happening, the same way it always did. His mom never learned how to avoid it. He felt sorry for his mother, but all the same he was torn; while he resented his father's cheating and drinking, he also had a certain sympathy, or at least an understanding, for him wanting to escape his mother's smothering.

"I just stopped off for a drink or two with Mike," he heard his father reply, his voice loud and slurred.

"Are you drunk again? Is it fair that you stay out all night drinking while I'm stuck at home with the kids?" She demanded, launching into what was an age-old bone of contention

between them. She was a woman used to being doted on and adored, and she could stand anything except her husband's indifference – even his rage was preferable to that, for at least it was attention of sorts.

"Ah, don't nag me, woman. I had a hard day today. I needed to unwind," his father replied.

"With your hussy?" His mother hissed. "I can smell her on you. Did you need to unwind with her? Did she make you feel more of a man? Did she give you something I couldn't?"

"Yes!" His father roared. "She gave me peace and quiet!" There was silence for a moment, and Leo flinched, imagining his mother's reaction to this news. His father usually either denied having affairs, or neatly sidestepped the questions, but he had never openly acknowledged them to his wife, as far as Leo knew anyway. He bit down hard on the end of his pencil, wondering what would happen next.

"So you admit it then? What's the slut's name? Who is she? Do I know her?" His mother's torrent of questions were accompanied by a series of high pitched, searing wails. "How could you do this, Lee? What did I do wrong? I make myself pretty for you. Why? Why do you do this to me? I've been a good wife. Don't think I don't know that you've cheated on me – over and over again. How long after we married were you out screwing around, Lee?"

"Stop it – you're making a fool of yourself. Get up, for god's sake! Mary...get up!" Leo could tell by the sounds downstairs that his mother was prostrate on the floor, and he guessed she was flailing at his father's legs. His father hated emotional confrontations, so this was not the best way for his mother to deal with the situation, but he didn't think she was ever able to think clearly enough to understand that. "It's not you," his father said, and his voice changed suddenly, becoming maudlin with drink and the agony of the situation. "It's me, Mary. It's me," he said, in a voice hoarse with despair. "I'm no good for you – I never was. This isn't the right life for me, Mary. I can't be with just one woman – any woman, no matter if she's the most beautiful creature in all the world, and you are, Mary, lass. You truly are. I should never have married you."

"What are you saying? Are you leaving us?" His mother cried, voicing a fear that Leo knew was never far away for her. "You can't walk out on us! How will we live?"

Leo felt his own throat constrict. He knew how his mother could bind you to her with the flurry of her emotions and her vulnerability, and he knew, also, how exhausting and frustrating that could be. All the same, divorce was surely unthinkable. They were a good catholic family and in this neighbourhood a man didn't just walk out on his wife and children. It simply didn't happen.

"No...no..." His father soothed, as his mother's wailing reached fever pitch. "I'm not leaving, Mary."

"But you want to! You want to go! You just said so!" Leo got up, and quietly shut the door. Sometimes they argued passionately and then made up just as passionately afterwards, a fact that was virtually impossible to ignore in the small house with the paper thin walls.

Their tragedy was that beneath all the lies, and arguments, and their essential incompatibility, on some level they were infatuated with each other in an almost childish way, and so their lives had become an endless pattern of attraction and repulsion.

Something must have been different about tonight though; something that Leo only understood later. His father was, at heart, a weak man. While he didn't mind causing his wife all kinds of pain with his affairs and his drinking, he hated having to see the evidence of that pain. He wasn't a bad man, but he lacked constancy, and the integrity to face up to the consequences of his actions. He could be funny, kind and brave, and he was a damn fine cop, much loved and respected in the neighbourhood, but he didn't have the strength to change himself in order to be the sort of husband and father he should have been.

Leo didn't hear the rest of the conversation, just the low rumblings of voices and the hysterical screech of his mother's sobs, but after another half an hour of that, there was a sudden silence, followed by the slamming of the door leading to the garage. The garage was his father's den. There was an old couch in there where he sometimes passed out after a hard bout of drinking or a particularly vicious row with his wife, and it was where he stowed his secret bottles of whisky – whisky which Leo had found when he was ten years old and started drinking himself, just a sip here and there, never enough to get drunk. His father hadn't said a word about it, although he must have noticed, but what could he say without drawing attention to the fact that the liquor was hidden there in the first place? Maybe he even approved of his son following in his father's footsteps - he'd given Leo his first taste of whisky when he was 8 years old, allowing him to sip his drink during a family gathering, and laughing out loud when Leo made a face at the sour taste.

Leo guessed that his father had gone to ground again in the sanctuary of his den, as he so often did. He'd spend the night there and leave for work the next morning without facing his wife again. That was what usually happened. Leo had no inkling that tonight would be any different - until his entire world was shattered by the sound of a gunshot.

December 24th, 2000

"Hey." CJ plunked herself down on the chair beside him, a broad grin on her face. "Hello! Leo!" She waved a hand in front of his face.

"Oh. Hey." Leo smiled at her as she came into focus. "Sorry – I was miles away."

"Yeah. What are you doing out here?" CJ glanced around the lobby. "Was your office too quiet for you? My guess is you wanted to be right out here by the musicians. Despite that Scroogelike exterior, I think Leo McGarry is a secret follower of the cult of all things Christmas." Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Yeah. You guessed my guilty secret." Leo smiled weakly and glanced around. "Where'd they go?" He asked, with a frown.

"The musicians? It's late, Leo. It's Christmas Eve. They went home."

"People go home for Christmas?" Leo raised an eyebrow. "Damn. I knew there was something I was forgetting to do all these years."

CJ gave a little chuckle. "What **are** you doing for Christmas?" She asked.

"I wasn't kidding before - I'll be here." Leo shrugged. "For some of the time at least. I expect Mallory will turn up at some point and drag me out somewhere before the day is through though."

"I should think so! I thought you might be spending the day with the President and his family," CJ said. Leo shook his head.

"Nah. He sees enough of me the rest of the year. Poor guy." He gave a self deprecating little smile, but the ringing sound in his ears intensified. The truth was he didn't want to spend the day with Jed – and Jed hadn't offered in any case. Leo thought it was for the best. Jed needed some time with his family, this year of all years, after that near miss at Rosslyn a few months previously.

Leo gazed blankly into space again, the silent aftermath of two sets of gunshots reverberating through his mind, melding as one.

March 27th, 1958

Leo leapt down the stairs three at a time, dimly aware that the loud boom of the gunshot had woken his two little sisters, who were standing at the top of the stairs in their nightdresses, their hair tousled with sleep, their eyes wide with fear. His mother was standing stock still at the bottom of the stairs, staring at the door leading to the garage.

"What was that?" She whispered to her son. "What was it, Leo? Is someone in there? Did someone break in? Your father's in there..." Her voice trailed off, full of fear.

"It's okay, Mom, it's okay," Leo said, knowing that wasn't true. "Go take care of Josie and Beth, they're scared. I'll go make sure dad's okay."

"No!" She clung to his arm. "Someone might be in there. They might have hurt your father!"

"I gotta go look. We can't just wait here," Leo told her. "Go upstairs, Josie and Beth need you. I'll be fine."

She didn't go upstairs. She just stood there, frozen to the spot, as he walked slowly towards the door leading to the garage. Leo heard her hiss of concern as he grabbed his baseball bat from where he'd left it a few days earlier, lying against the wall; he needed to have something to make him feel stronger as he went in there. He put his hand on the handle, and took a deep breath. He was only 13 years old but there was nobody else who could do this. He had long been used to shouldering responsibility in the wake of his father's many absences, and if there was an intruder who had hurt his father in some way, then he had to protect his mother and sisters as best he could.

He opened the door slowly, and reached for the light, then, taking all his courage in his hands, flicked the light switch. Nothing happened, and Leo remembered that the bulb had blown several weeks ago, and his father hadn't replaced it yet. The only light in the garage was an old flashlight that his father kept on a rickety wooden table beside the couch.

Leo stood in the doorway, gazing into the darkness. The light from the room behind him didn't penetrate into the recesses of the garage, and he couldn't see much.

"Hello?" He called softly, cautiously. "Dad? Are you here?" There was no reply. The dark garage looked eerie; every day items, like packing cases and boxes that they stored in here, took on a strangely sinister aspect in these circumstances. Leo fought down his fear, and took a faltering step forward. The door swung shut behind him and he hesitated, a wave of panic threatening to overwhelm him. He had to do this. There was nobody else. He felt his way carefully into the garage, trying to ignore the dull thudding sound of his heart beating in his chest, beating so loud that it was all he could hear. He wished it would shut up for just a moment so that he could listen out and find out if there was an intruder lurking in the garage. He stopped for a second, straining every sense to see if he could glean some clue as to what awaited him here. It was then that he smelt it. It was a sweet, sickly scent, combined with something else, something he thought might be gunpowder, and he felt a metallic taste in his mouth. Leo gripped the baseball bat even more tightly.

"Dad?" he called again, in a whisper this time. There was still no reply. Leo knew he had no choice but to edge forward and find the flashlight. He went slowly, gingerly. His eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dark, and shapes loomed out at him as he walked. He was close to the couch now, and he felt something wet underfoot. He hesitated, every sense in his body screaming at him to run, imploring him to leave, shouting at him that there was something wrong here, something he didn't want to see, didn't want to know.

"Dad?" He whispered again. Still there was no reply. He edged forward, slipping slightly on the slick fluid underfoot. The smell was stronger here, and the atmosphere so tense that his heart was booming like a bass drum, making it impossible to hear anything else in the small, enclosed area. Leo fumbled forward, and his free hand found the edge of the rickety old table. He patted the air fruitlessly for several seconds, and then his hand closed on the flashlight. It was wet and slippery, making it hard to pick up, but he finally managed to get a grip on it, and, taking a deep breath, he turned it on. His shaking hand were unable to control the focus of the beam and it zigzagged wildly around the garage, illuminating boxes and various bric a brac, and hitting, momentarily, on a man's body, sitting strangely upright on the couch, with half his head missing, then bouncing erratically onto his own bike, perched against the wall. Leo recoiled in horror, his senses barely taking in what he had seen in the shaking beam of the flashlight, and then he swung it back, wanting to close his eyes, wanting not to see, but knowing he had no choice. This time his hand froze as the light of the flashlight fell on his father's disfigured corpse. Blood was still pouring from the massive head wound, and the only reason the body hadn't fallen was because it was wedged up between the couch and the table. A dozen thoughts flashed through Leo's mind – not least the fear that his father's murderer was still in the garage, waiting to kill him too, perhaps some vendetta by one of the criminals his father had caught during his time with

the police...and then Leo's eyes alighted on the gun, still clasped lightly in his father's hand, and it was at that point that he understood.

"Daddy?" He whimpered, becoming, for just one second, the child he would never be again. "Dad?" Now he realised the sickly scent in the air was fresh blood, and that his shoes and hands were covered in it, as was the flashlight he was holding tight in his shaking fingers. One realisation hit him straight after another. He had always known, deep in his heart, that although his father was a good cop, and an indulgent if often absent father, that on some fundamental level he was weak. Now he knew that in a moment of supreme weakness, trapped in marriage that was suffocating him, and with no means of escape, his father had taken the easy way out. A brief vision of his future assaulted him, and Leo knew that with this one act, his father had altered his son's life, and the life of everyone Leo loved, with one small movement of his finger. Everything would be different from now on, for how could anything ever be the same again?

Leo stood there, unmoving, just gazing at the corpse in front of him, frozen to the spot by one last realisation: He had to tell his mother. There was no question that his father was not dead. One of his eyes was missing, but the other stared eerily at him, blood streaking down the side of it.

"You coward. You fucking coward," Leo snarled, and it was the last thing he ever said to his father. He took a deep breath, and then turned and hurried back towards the house.

His mother was standing where he'd left her, with his sisters standing pressed against her. Her eyes widened as she saw him return, covered in his father's blood.

"Lee?" She whispered, somehow knowing the truth without being told.

"I'm gonna go get Uncle Mike," Leo told them. "Just wait here. I won't be long. You'll be safe. There's nothing to be scared of. Nobody's gonna hurt you. No-one's in there. Just sit down at the table and I'll be back soon."

His mother's eyes met his, and in this ultimate adversity she was braver and more together than he ever would have expected.

"Lee?" She whispered again. Leo shook his head, an almost imperceptible motion.

"Don't go in the garage while I'm gone. Don't any of you go in there," he warned her and his sisters in a hard, stern tone, needing to impress on all of them how important that was. He decided to lock the door anyway, just to be sure. He couldn't have them seeing his father's sightless corpse. It was terrible enough that he had seen it, but they shouldn't have to.

He ran all the way to Mike's house, still reeling from what had happened. It only took him a couple of minutes and then he was standing on the doorstep, his breathing coming in harsh gasps, telling the whole hideous story to Uncle Mike. The big, genial cop stood there, motionless, his face crumpling as he listened. When Leo had finished Mike offered up a quick prayer, and then, mercifully, he took over, and from then on it was all out of Leo's

hands. It was only then, when Mike took charge, that Leo started shaking. He was dimly aware of Mike's wife leading him into the kitchen and cleaning off his bloody hands in the sink, hugging him all the time, trying to soothe him with empty phrases, and meaningless words of comfort. His entire body shook uncontrollably, and all the while there was this ringing in his ears that refused to go away, a ringing sound that he realised had been there since his father had pulled the trigger that would change all of their lives forever. It wasn't the sound of the gunshot that had taken his father's life. It was the deadly, ringing silence of its aftermath.

December 24th, 2000

"Are you okay, Leo?" CJ leaned forward in her chair, gazing at him anxiously.

"Me? Sure. I'm fine." He smiled at her.

"Then may I ask why you're sitting in the lobby?" She had a gentle little smile on her face.

"I'm waiting for Josh. I didn't want him to go home without seeing him." Leo shrugged.

"Oh." CJ sat back in her chair. "You called someone in to speak to him?" He didn't ask her how she knew – he hadn't told anyone but it was possible Josh had told her himself. Josh had been loud enough in his protests that he didn't want to see Stanley that Leo could imagine he'd gone around the building grumbling to his closest friends about it. Or maybe she'd found out some other way, through the office grapevine. Everyone knew Josh had been having a tense time recently, and he was sure most of them had worked out the reason why as well.

"Yeah." Leo shrugged.

"Good, we've all been worried about him," CJ murmured.

"Yeah." Leo shrugged again, and then he focussed on CJ suddenly. "Are you okay, kid?" He asked, unexpectedly.

"Me?" She looked surprised. "Sure. I'm fine." She grinned as she realised she'd echoed his words back to him. "Why?"

"It's just...you know, Josh was walking around for weeks before this suddenly kicked in. I wondered...you were shot at too. I wondered if anyone else was feeling like this?"

CJ's face softened into another of those gentle smiles. "You always worry about everyone don't you?" She murmured.

"Nah – I was just thinking...you know, while the guy's here...maybe I could get a good rate for a group booking." Leo grinned. CJ shook her head, still smiling.

"I'm fine, Leo. Honestly. I wasn't the one who took a bullet. I haven't had to cope with that

like Josh has – or the President." She shook her head again. "You know, he's amazing, Leo. I was just over at the Residence with Toby and Sam. He invited us into his study for a private Christmas drink, and he was on fire. I swear it was like being in the room with a stand up comedian – except for, you know, all the Latin. In fact...he's been incredible since it happened. I don't think there's been one moment when I've been worried about how he's taken it. Even when he was in the hospital, straight after the shooting, he was joking around with everyone. Amazing." She shook her head again.

"Yeah. Amazing." Leo gazed at his hands, that deadly, ringing silence in his head so loud now that it was deafening him.

June 18th, 1963

"Hey, Leo – are you awake?" Jed's head appeared around Leo's bedroom door. His friend's hair was tousled, and his blue eyes were shining. There was no trace of the uncertain, unhappy youth from the previous day, when Leo had found the bruises on his body and discovered that Jed's father was beating his son.

"Yeah. I've been up since 5 – when I left your bedroom." Leo grinned. He had showered earlier, and was now sitting in bed, with Jed's copy of "The Illustrated Man" on his knee. "This book is good," he commented.

"Speaking of books – Dad wants me to re-catalogue some of the books in the school library over the summer vacation. I thought we could grab something to eat before everyone else is up, and then go over there and start work on the books. It'll be fun - we'll be alone in the library and there are some books I want to show you."

"Sure." Leo closed the book on his knee, and gave his friend a slow, steady smile. There was something a little frenetic about Jed this morning, and he was surprised by how changed his friend seemed from the previous night. "Sounds good," he added. Jed nodded eagerly, his bangs falling into his eyes.

"I'm gonna take a shower. See you in five minutes!" He said, scampering back to his own room. Leo got up slowly, wondering what all the hurry was about. It crossed his mind that Jed was trying to avoid his father over the breakfast table and that made sense. He had no wish to run into Mr. Bartlett himself, as he wasn't entirely sure he could keep a civil tongue in his head having seen those bruises on Jed's body yesterday. Still he knew that this was Jed's battle, and he'd have to fight it in his own time.

Jed seemed to be ready in lightning quick time, and he came into Leo's room and watched as Leo got dressed, keeping up a very amusing running monologue the entire time. Leo chuckled as he listened with one ear to Jed's ramblings. His friend really could be very funny and Leo always enjoyed just listening – he loved the way Jed talked, and the myriad amount of topics his friend's quicksilver mind supplied.

When he was ready they walked downstairs – or at least Leo walked and Jed ran on ahead, still full of that strange energy he seemed to have woken up with. They grabbed some food

from the kitchen and then went over to the library, with Jed still talking the whole time. He stopped only in order to take some mouthfuls from the sandwich he'd made, and then continued almost immediately, chewing and talking at the same time. Leo barely got a word in edgewise, but he soon realised that this wasn't a conversation – this was Jed putting on some kind of performance – but for what reason, Leo had no idea.

They spent a couple of hours in the library; Leo would have thought Jed would be quiet while he concentrated on the task of cataloguing the books, but he wasn't. He kept a running commentary on the books and kept disappearing to bring Leo another one that he thought his friend would enjoy. He'd open up each one, tell Leo exactly why he'd enjoy it, give a little summary of the salient points, complete with the occasional memorised quotation, and then, just as quickly, hop off to find the next book.

Leo soon had a messy pile of books on the table in front of him and the chair beside him, and was feeling as if he'd been hit by a very charming, very amusing, but somewhat volatile and alarming whirlwind. He'd never seen Jed quite this enthusiastic and vibrant, and while it was a pleasure to listen to him, for, to Leo at least, Jed was never less than compelling, he was starting to wonder why his friend was putting on such a virtuoso performance for him.

At first, he wondered whether it was to avoid talking about his father, and all that had happened the previous day, but he had no intention of pressing Jed on the subject – and he'd told his friend so. He'd done enough by forcing Jed to show Mrs. Landingham the bruises and how he had come by them, and he didn't want to push Jed further than he wanted to go. He knew Jed would confront his father at some point before the Summer was through, and he also knew that something like that was hard, and it would take Jed some time to get used to the idea after having lived in silence with the situation for the past 6 years.

They finished in the library, and Leo suggested a drive into the country. It had been several hours since they last made love, and Leo was so enchanted by his friend that he didn't want to wait much longer before touching him. He also felt a need to silence Jed's endless stream of talk – he wanted to slow Jed down, to silence him with kisses and with long, slow, caresses. He wanted to run his hands all over Jed's golden skin again, and claim that talkative mouth with its full, sensuous lips with his own. That gave him an idea – thus far they'd only had full sex in Jed's bedroom at night when everyone was asleep – but Leo didn't want to wait until bedtime before sliding into his lover's body again. Jed looked too beautiful, with those sparkling blue eyes and that lock of hair that he was always brushing impatiently aside when it fell into them.

"Hey," Leo said, interrupting Jed in full flow as they got to the car. "Why don't you wait here for a minute? There's something I want to get."

"What?" Jed asked, frowning.

"Guess." Leo gave him what he hoped was a suitably lascivious wink, and he could tell by Jed's delighted but embarrassed reaction that his friend had guessed precisely what he was referring to. Leo ran back to his bedroom, grabbed the lubricant, and slipped the tube into

his pocket, then began running back downstairs again. The headmaster's house was near the library and the school quad, and on his way back he glanced out of the landing window onto the quad, to see Jed standing idly beside the car...and something made him pause. Jed's entire demeanour had changed. He was standing with his shoulders hunched, and his arms clasped around his body, leaning back on the car. He looked as if he was locked up in some misery of his own – and his body language was in complete contrast to the expansive, hyperactive person Leo had spent all morning with. Leo frowned, and continued back down the stairs more slowly, trying to figure out what was going on in his friend's complex mind. He reached the bottom of the stairs and emerged into the sunlight of the quadrangle just in time to see Mrs. Landingham approach Jed. His friend's body language changed immediately, and he straightened up and, to Leo's surprise, launched straight back into the performance he had been treating Leo to all morning.

"I'm just checking that you're okay, Jed," Mrs. Landingham was saying, as Leo came into earshot. "I said yesterday that I'd check on you every day – and I want you to tell me if anything has happened - or if your father has hurt you again."

Leo saw Jed almost visibly wince, and then his friend came back out, all the forces of his considerable charm fully blazing.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Landingham. Isn't it a beautiful day? We're going out for a drive in the car. Leo got it working yesterday – we just spent a couple of hours in the library doing the cataloguing but it's too sunny to spend the entire day indoors. I want to make the most of the great weather – 'Summer's lease hath all too short a date.'" He waved his arm around to illustrate this point.

"Well if you're going to start quoting Shakespeare at me then you must be fine," Mrs Landingham retorted. "I'll leave you two boys to enjoy the day. Leo." She nodded at him, and they exchanged a wary, knowing glance as she passed. They both shared a common love for Jed Bartlet, but neither of them entirely trusted the other yet. Leo suspected that on some level Mrs. Landingham had sensed that his relationship with Jed wasn't entirely innocent, and she wasn't comfortable with it. He could understand that; she didn't know that he wasn't going to march into Jed's life and royally screw it up, and he knew she was worried that he'd lead Jed astray – and possibly she even had concerns that whatever sexual experimentation Jed was toying with right now, might cause him considerable problems in a society that wasn't exactly tolerant of such things. All the same, she had to acknowledge that it was Leo who had discovered that Jed's father occasionally beat his son, and it was Leo who was standing by Jed right now and doing his best to help his friend deal with it.

Leo got into the car, and watched as Jed stood for a moment, his shoulders dejected again as he gazed at Mrs. Landingham's retreating back, and then he visibly cranked the charm back up a gear as he joined Leo in the car and began talking again. By now, Leo was sure this wasn't just Jed being in high spirits – this was a strange sort of behaviour that he didn't fully understand.

Leo drove as Jed directed him towards a nice, quiet area of countryside where they could walk, or sit and read. There was a blanket and several books in the back of the car. And as

they drove, Jed talked, and talked...and talked. Finally, Leo stopped the car.

"Not here, Leo. If you drive on about half a mile down the road then there's this great place where..."

"I like it here," Leo interrupted firmly.

Jed glanced around the green rolling hills. "Well, here's fine. I'm just saying that it's better down the road. It's where Mom takes me and Jon on picnics when she's here, and there's this amazing view of..."

"I want to stop here," Leo repeated.

"Okay, here's fine...if we walk down the hill over there, I could take you along to..."

"Jed...please." Leo placed a finger over his friend's mouth, and then pulled Jed close and kissed his friend's lips firmly. Jed came eagerly, unresisting.

"I can see you can't wait," Jed grinned. "Did you get the...stuff?" He lowered his voice and said that in a conspiratorial whisper although there was nobody around.

"Yeah. I got it, but first I wanna talk," Leo said. Jed's eyes reflected a moment of startled panic and then it was gone.

"You do know that we don't have to talk any more about your dad if you don't want to, don't you?" Leo said, rubbing his thumb sensuously along the little crease where Jed's neck and shoulder joined.

"Yeah. I know that." Jed shrugged. "There's nothing more to say. We talked about all that yesterday."

"I know. I'm just saying...you seem really hyper today, Jed. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Okay? I'm fine!" Jed gave the biggest grin Leo had ever seen. "I'm just enjoying the day, Leo. Hell, look at the blue skies, and the colours, and it's so sunny...and like I was saying to Mrs. Landingham..."

The realisation hit Leo with a dull thud as he watched Jed talk, that he had unwittingly stumbled on what the problem was. Jed wasn't fine – a couple of days ago his father had beaten him to the floor with his fists, and then Leo had been the first person to find out about the dark secret Jed had carried around with him for the past 6 years. Leo had told Mrs. Landingham, and now the two people closest to him knew his humiliation, embarrassment and shame about what his father did to him. Leo didn't know why it should be shaming to Jed that people knew, but he did understand that it was. Now, Jed was putting on the best act he'd ever seen, trying to convince Leo that he was fine. No – that wasn't it...as Leo watched his friend talk he realised it wasn't just Leo Jed was trying to

convince; it was himself too.

"Do you do this every time?" He asked suddenly. Jed paused in the middle of some quotation from Aeschylus in the original Greek.

"What?" He frowned.

"This. Every time he hits you, do you do this? All this performance? Trying to show him, to show everyone else, even if they didn't know what was going on, and to show yourself that you're smart, and bright, and that nothin's wrong - everything's fine. Is that what you do, Jed? Every time?"

Jed fell silent for a moment, and the hunched, dejected look returned.

"I can't give into it," he muttered sullenly. "If I do, people will notice something's wrong...that happened the first couple of times...I couldn't hide the way I felt and people started asking questions."

"So you learned to cover up the way you're feeling with this goofy façade?" Leo continued gently massaging Jed's neck with his thumb. Jed shrugged.

"It helps. It helps me. Otherwise it gets very dark." Jed scowled out of the window, not meeting Leo's eye. "In my mind, it can be a dark place sometimes," he muttered. "I'm just trying to head that off. It works."

"I understand." Leo nodded thoughtfully.

"You're not here for very long. I don't want your whole visit to be about this. About my damn problems," Jed growled. Leo nodded again. He knew that Jed hated being perceived as weak in any way, and loathed the idea of being pitied.

"Jed...there's something maybe I oughtta tell you. About my dad," Leo said softly. He wasn't sure why he was doing this, only that it seemed the right thing to do, and so that Jed should know that it wasn't just him – that other people had stuff like this too. "I told you he blew his brains out in the garage?"

Jed nodded, his eyes wide, and Leo could already see his friend's innate sense of empathy and compassion kicking in. He knew it would be very easy for Jed to forget his own problems when faced with those of someone he loved.

"I was the one who found him," Leo said carefully. Jed's eyes flickered as he took in this news. "We heard the shot, and there was nobody else to go and see what happened but me," Leo continued softly. "The air smelled of warm, freshly spilled blood combined with gunpowder – it was all I could smell for days after, kinda like the stink of it was stuck up my nostrils. He was just sitting there, with his gun in his hand...and half his head was blown away...but the other half was totally normal, and he had one eye open... and it kinda looked like he was staring at me."

"Jesus, Leo...that's terrible." Jed shook his head, those blue eyes of his radiating his concern. "How d'you ever get over something like that?"

"I dunno. I used to try not to think about it and that worked okay for a while...but...when he fired that gun, there was this noise – not the noise of the gunshot itself...but after. Kinda like the ripple you get when you throw a stone into a pool...if I close my eyes I can still hear it. I think I might be able to hear it forever."

"What kind of noise?" Jed asked quietly.

"I can't describe it. Sort of a ringing sound – but sorta silent too, if that makes any sense." Leo shook his head. "That gunshot changed everything, Jed. I used to think that all the colour leeches out of my world that night. Everything turned grey, and all the time I could hear that ringing sound as my whole life changed completely. It's incredible to think that one thing can make so much difference, change everything out of all recognition."

Jed's hand came to rest on Leo's knee, encouraging Leo to talk, and Leo found, suddenly, that he wanted to talk about this – he wanted to share this thing that he'd never spoken about to anybody else, ever before.

"We had to move." Leo gazed out of the window. "We went back to where Mom's folks lived – in Chicago. There was nothing to keep us in Boston but I miss the place all the same. I had some friends there and I'd lived there all my life. We were settled. Mom's folks were great to us though – they doted on her and they found us somewhere to live close by. My granddad..." Leo paused again. "He's a good man. He really helped. He made me believe college was still possible, that I still had a future...but without Dad's money things were pretty tight. I got a paper route and did odd jobs after school and during the summer, and Mom had to get work. It all changed, Jed. Everything. It's taken a long time – 5 years – for the colour to come back, and for that damn ringing sound to start going away. Matter of fact..." He glanced at Jed and gave a faded grin. "That only really happened last year, at Boy's Nation, when I met you."

Jed reached forward, took Leo's face in his hands and kissed his friend gently on the mouth.

"Probably 'cause you talk so much that no other sound could be heard over the noise, that explains it," Leo mused thoughtfully as Jed released him. Jed grinned.

"Yeah. Right. You know what, Leo McGarry – I don't want to talk right now. I want to do something else." Jed opened the car door, grabbed the blanket from the back, and got out. "Coming?" He said huskily, a knowing grin playing around those sensuous lips.

"Over and over again, hopefully," Leo replied in kind, getting out of the car.

They walked a little way and found a secluded area beneath a couple of trees, where nobody would see them. Jed laid the blanket on the grass and as soon as he straightened up, Leo grabbed his arm and turned him around. Their lips met and parted, tongues darting

fiercely, needily inside each other's mouths. Leo pushed Jed against one of the trees, and pulled at his shirt urgently. Jed's hands came to rest on Leo's butt, pulling him close. He parted his legs and Leo ground his crotch urgently against Jed's erection, straining through the jeans he was wearing.

Leo unbuttoned Jed's shirt and pushed it off his lover's shoulders, then his questing mouth roved down, seeking Jed's nipples. He took one in his mouth and rolled the swollen nub of flesh under his tongue, loving the way Jed moaned and whimpered under the loving caress. His hands stroked their way down over Jed's torso. He traced Jed's bruises with his fingers, barely touching them, caressing them like a whisper, and when he looked up, Jed was gazing down at him, his fingers lightly entangled in the back of Leo's short blond hair. Something passed between them in that moment, although Leo wasn't sure what. He had already acknowledged Jed's bruises when they'd made love the previous night, but today, here, in the dappled sunlight, it was different. Today it wasn't just Jed who was wounded, but him too – and that wasn't something he'd ever acknowledged to anyone else before. Today, somehow, a new level of trust had been forged between them – he'd shown Jed a glimpse into his own hurts and weaknesses just as Jed had shown him his. Leo didn't like being pitied or thought of as weak any more than he knew Jed did, but somehow telling Jed hadn't made him feel weaker – if anything he felt stronger.

Leo knelt down and undid Jed's jeans, delighting at the thick, hard cock that sprang up immediately it was released. He took Jed's cock in his mouth and sucked on it for a couple of seconds, until the tightening in Jed's balls made him stand back.

"Oh god...that was so close..." Jed sighed. He looked beautiful, Leo thought, as he knelt there looking up at his lover. Jed's pale blue shirt was scrunched up behind him, hanging off his shoulders, and his jeans were around his ankles, his swollen cock showing his arousal.

"C'mere. I want you to come with me inside you," Leo said, taking Jed's hand and drawing him down on the blanket beside him. He covered Jed's body with his own, and kissed Jed's mouth again, for several long minutes, coming up for air every few seconds and then going in again, and all the time he could feel their penises throbbing in time together. Leo reached down and undid his fly, releasing his own eager cock, and then he took the lube out of his pocket. He pushed Jed's legs up, positioning them over his shoulders, and then slathered lube over his fingers and pushed them inside his lover. Jed gave a little yowl of pleasure and opened up his body under Leo's caress, and Leo knew he was ready. He put lube on his cock, and then nudged it cautiously into Jed's anus. Jed moaned again, and his blue eyes locked onto Leo's.

"Do it...oh god...quickly," Jed urged, and Leo grinned, and, taking hold of Jed's hips, thrust deep into his friend's body with one smooth motion of his hips. Jed threw his head back, revealing the long line of his tanned jaw, and his bobbing Adam's Apple, and Leo reached forward and grabbed Jed's cock in his hand. Jed gave another mewl of pure pleasure and Leo grinned, loving the way Jed always responded with such abandon to his love making. He moved in and out of his friend's body, sliding Jed's cock in his lube-slicked hand as he went. They hadn't done this often, but already Leo knew he couldn't get enough of the way it felt when they were joined together like this. It felt so perfect, so right, as if they were one,

sliding and riding together, their bodies in perfect synchrony. He became lost in a haze that was all the smell of Jed, and the feel of being inside Jed, and the sight and taste of Jed. Jed filled his senses and when he came, he saw starbursts of gold and white colour exploding in his mind, and, instead of that ringing sound that had been with him for so long, all he could hear was the fantastic sound of Jed's orgasm, yelled out loud over and over again as he came all over Leo's hand.

December 24th, 2000

"How about you, Leo?" CJ asked, gazing at him thoughtfully. "You were shot at too. How are you doing?"

"You know what – I'm fine." Leo nodded firmly. "You're right. I didn't take a bullet." He glanced at his hands.

"You were in Vietnam," CJ said softly. "Did Rosslyn bring back any bad memories?"

"Of Vietnam? Nope." Leo shook his head. "I got shot at every day out there – maybe I just got used to it in the end." He gave another watery smile.

"Will Josh be okay?" CJ asked. "Only he cut his hand...and..." She trailed off and shrugged. "He says he cut it on a glass but..." She shrugged.

"I know. Donna doesn't think it was a glass either." Leo glanced around, wondering what was happening in that room, where Josh had been ensconced with the psychiatrist for the better part of the day.

"You don't think he'd deliberately hurt himself do you?" CJ asked.

"I don't know." Leo shook his head. "Something like this, something big...that can do strange things to people. You might not even recognise you've been affected until..." He thought of Jed, holding court in his study in the Residence. Thought of himself, sitting out here, hoping desperately that the musicians would start playing again so he could drown out that ringing sound in his ears. "He's in good hands though," Leo finished, glancing over at CJ again.

"Yeah. Yeah he is. Bless you, Leo; for always taking care of everyone and for always knowing the right thing to do." CJ got up, and, much to his surprise, dropped a little kiss on his head. "Merry Christmas, Leo," she said in a quiet, heartfelt tone, and then she was gone, leaving just the faintest trace of her perfume trailing behind her. Leo gazed after her. He didn't feel as if he did always know the right thing to do – sometimes he didn't even know there was a problem until it was almost too late – like with Josh. Like with...Jed?

He reached for his paper and tried to read, and a few minutes later he heard the sound of footsteps behind him and Josh walked past.

"How did it go?" Leo put his paper down and got up, and Josh turned around, startled.

"Did you wait around for me?" He looked surprised.

"How did it go?" Leo repeated.

"He thinks I might have an eating disorder," Josh said.

"Josh," Leo chided gently.

"And a fear of rectangles – that's not weird is it?"

Leo gazed at his deputy steadily, seeing behind the words. Josh crumbled.

"I didn't cut my hand on a glass – I broke a window in my apartment," he said wearily, warily, looking at Leo for a reaction.

"I'm not as good at this as everyone seems to think," Leo thought to himself, wondering what to do next, and finally deciding to launch into a story as the best way he knew of explaining it.

"This guy's walking down a street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up: "Hey, can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up; "Father I'm down in this hole – can you help me out?" and the priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me, can you help me out?" And the friend jumps into the hole. Our guys says; "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says; "Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."

Leo paused and gazed at Josh steadily. "Long as I've got a job, you've got a job – you understand?"

Josh gazed back at him, and Leo knew he'd reached him, and at least put his mind at rest on that score, although he guessed that was only one of the problems Josh was concerned about right now. He watched as Donna wrapped Josh in his coat and escorted him to the ER to have his hand examined. Then Leo smiled, and walked away, past the beautifully lit Christmas tree. Maybe he wasn't so bad at this after all, he thought to himself – which was a good thing because now it was time to tackle someone else – someone he should have tackled weeks ago, and if it hadn't been for this damn ringing sound in his head, then maybe he would have done.

First he stopped off at his office, and opened the locked drawer where he kept something he thought he was going to need this evening. Then he made his way slowly to the Residence. This would be different. This would be more difficult. Where his relationship with Jed was concerned, this kind of stuff was never easy. They could talk freely, on so many levels, with the relaxed intimacy of people who have been involved, emotionally, physically and mentally for nearly 40 years...but there were some areas where Jed never liked him to go, and Leo didn't like to push it.

Leo knocked on the study door, and then poked his head around it.

"Leo! Come in, come in!" Jed said expansively, waving his hands around in a gesture of welcome. He was sitting at his desk reading, a small glass of scotch in his hand. Leo could almost smell the liquor as he entered the room, and he knew he wanted it. Badly. "Abbey's out getting drunk with her doctor friends so I thought I'd have a little drink myself," Jed said, swirling the amber fluid around in his glass.

Leo stepped inside, shut the door behind him – and then locked it. Jed raised an eyebrow.

"If you wanted some private time you only had to say," he commented, with a knowing grin. "I'm sure it's a criminal offence to keep the President locked up against his will."

"I was hoping it wasn't exactly against your will," Leo purred, making it clear to Jed that he was here as his lover, and not his Chief of Staff. Jed gazed at him, a slightly puzzled look in his eyes.

"You usually invite me to your room, Leo. There's a bed in there," he pointed out. "And besides..." He hesitated. "It's been awhile," he said softly. Leo nodded, slowly, and exhaled a sigh.

"I know. I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Abbey gave me the all clear several weeks ago," Jed reminded him. "Which was a good thing as I was practically climbing the walls by then. Three months without sex is the longest I've gone since...well, I don't know...since I met you I guess."

"That's ridiculous," Leo snorted. "I didn't even see you for nearly a year after we first met, and after that there was college and..."

"We didn't go for three months without sex while we were in college," Jed pointed out. "We'd always meet up. It might have been a few weeks but not three months - and besides it's been more than three months since we last had sex, as you well know. I was well enough after three months but you've been avoiding the subject ever since Abbey said I was good to go."

Leo gazed at Jed thoughtfully; he didn't bother trying to protest because Jed was right. He *had* been avoiding the subject of resuming their sexual relationship. They hadn't made love since before the Rosslyn shooting.

"I know," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

Jed looked surprised, as if he hadn't been expecting either the admission or the apology, and then he changed the subject, as completely as if they hadn't been discussing it at all.

"What happened with Josh?" He asked quietly. "Did you see him?"

"Yeah. I think he's going to be fine. I don't think he really knew what was going on in his head. Stanley helped him straighten a few things out."

"Is he going to need some time off?" Jed went over to the fire and warmed his hands on it.

"No. I don't think so – I think that's the last thing he needs right now to be honest."

"Poor kid." Jed shook his head. "I know he went off at me in the Oval Office but it was almost like it was a cry for help."

"I think that's exactly what it was." Leo nodded thoughtfully. "It's strange – you can't always tell how something like this is going to affect someone."

"No." Jed shook his head. "So, it's Christmas tomorrow, Leo!" He said, changing the subject yet again, with another of those lightning mood changes Leo had seen so often recently. "I've just been reading through some Christmas facts from this book Zoey gave me. I know, I know!" Jed laughed, and held up his hands, "I'm sure there are important matters of state I should be seeing to but this was more fun. Did you know that for 22 years back in the 17th century it was a crime to celebrate Christmas? Between 1659 and 1681 there was actually a law prohibiting people in Massachusetts from celebrating Christmas. Apparently those puritan tightasses viewed the holiday as 'another one of those idol-worshipping religious festivals well worth expunging.'"

"I saw CJ in the hallway just now," Leo said softly. "I was asking her how she was doing. She said she was doing alright, and she reminded me that she didn't get shot. Josh did. And so did you."

"I'm fine." Jed waved a hand around airily. "Observers of the holiday were subjected to fines and "mince smellers" – can you guess who they were? They were individuals who were paid to patrol streets to sniff out those who might be baking traditional mincemeat pies around December 25th."

"She said you were holding court in here," Leo commented, watching as Jed moved around the room at a dizzying pace, quoting and gesturing as he went.

"I invited Sam, CJ and Toby for a quiet Christmas Eve drink," Jed replied. "Because unlike 17th century puritan tightasses, and Scrooges going by the name of Leo McGarry, we *do* celebrate Christmas in this White House." He paused by his desk and took a sip of the whisky in his glass. Leo swallowed hard, trying to ignore how good that must feel trickling down Jed's throat. "And while personally I think it's fairly mild outside, Christmas seems to me to be an excuse for a roaring fire, don't you think?" He gestured to the fire in question. 'Heap on the wood!-the wind is chill; But let it whistle as it will, We'll keep our Christmas merry still.'" He quoted cheerily, waving his hand around again.

"Shakespeare?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"Sir Walter Scott," Jed corrected him, wagging a finger of reproof at him for not knowing the quote.

"Jed..." Leo began again.

"Join in the seasonal spirit, Leo!" Jed chided, interrupting him. "It isn't 1659. The mince smellers aren't lurking outside the door, waiting to trap..."

"Jed. Stop it," Leo said quietly.

Jed came to a halt beside the fire once more, and gazed into it wearily.

"I really am fine, Leo," he said.

"Someone shot you," Leo reminded him.

"Yeah – but it was just luck they hit me. They weren't aiming for me," Jed replied, with a weak little smile. "They could just as easily have hit you, or CJ or...they did hit Josh," he mused.

"I know...and I think it's fine to have a reaction to that," Leo murmured. "To being shot at. To people you know and care about being hurt."

"I know, but I really..." Jed paused, suddenly understanding that Leo wasn't talking about him, but about himself. "Leo?" He murmured softly.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about it before...but all I could hear was this damn ringing sound in my head," Leo said. Jed's blue eyes radiated that same concern and compassion that they had done nearly 40 years ago, back in the car, when he'd told him how he'd found his father's dead body in the garage.

"Not the sound of the gunshots...?" Jed said quietly, never taking his eyes off Leo's face.

"No. Not the sound of the gunshots...but after. The aftermath. Like a ripple in a pond. Last time someone I loved was shot, even though it was by his own hand, everything changed. I think, at the back of my mind, I haven't been able to stop worrying about what would have happened if it had been you this time – if a bullet had taken you, like it took him."

"Well, for sure you'd have been out of a job," Jed commented. Leo gave a little laugh.

"Yeah – and I kind of like this job." He gazed at Jed for a long time, and then sighed. "I've known you too long. You're kind of all woven up in the fabric of my life – of who I am and how I feel. The thought of you not existing...well, I'd have to listen to fewer damn quotes, but...you know, that's a price I'm happy to pay for having you around."

"Yeah," Jed chuckled, gazing into the flames leaping in the grate.

"You've been doing it again, Jed," Leo said softly. "Putting on the big act, convincing everyone that you're fine, that you're not hurting, that nothing can touch you, deflecting all attempts at concern. And I didn't stop you because all I could hear was this damn sound in my head, and all I could think about was how different it would have turned out if that bullet had hit you a few inches higher. I'm sorry."

"I don't know I'm doing it...but sometimes I feel so damn tired that I could sleep forever. Feel like I'm acting the whole time so they don't know – not the staff, or the country, or even Abbey and the girls – so they don't think I can't handle it, or that I'm about to fall apart because I'm not," Jed said firmly.

"I know that," Leo sighed. "And just in case you're wondering I'm not either. But you can't keep this up forever. You need to relax. The country knows you pulled through this. They know you not only survived but you've been back at work, doing your job, almost as if it never happened."

"Well, I guess you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of time...but I could never fool you any of the time," Jed said wearily. "It happened, and I'm tired, Leo. There are times I just want to give it all up, forget the damn presidency, walk away from it all. Hell, people started shooting at me and I suddenly realized that I'm a walking target. It worries me that people could hate me that much that they want me dead."

"It wasn't you they wanted dead. It was Charlie," Leo pointed out. "He was the target."

"Yeah, and it worries me that anybody would hate someone that much for the colour of his skin that they'd take a shot at all of us. I know that kind of hatred exists, Leo. We all know that...but to be confronted with the all too real evidence of it." Jed took a deep breath. "It fills me with despair. Some nights I can't sleep – and I'm so goddamn tired but still I can't sleep. There are people out there that hate us so much, Leo. They hate Charlie for being black and daring to date my daughter, and presumably me too for allowing it. They hate you and Josh and CJ and everyone else to the point of not caring who gets hit in the crossfire. That keeps me up at nights, Leo. I gotta tell you."

"Yeah." Leo crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall. "But you always did want to be liked, Jed. That's why this is so hard." He thought of Jed's father, using his fists on his son, and how Jed never stopped justifying what the man did to him, because he wanted his father to love him. He didn't want to admit to the possibility that his father maybe didn't even like him, and Leo wasn't about to raise that now. Jed had enough on his plate just dealing with the shooting.

"Leo – come here." Jed beckoned him over, and Leo walked to where his friend stood beside the fire. Jed traced a finger down Leo's cheek and jaw, gazing into his eyes. "I didn't die, Leo. It didn't happen. Nothing changed so very much. We're still here. We're still the same."

"Almost the same." Leo laced his hands around Jed's back and pulled him close. "I should have done this weeks ago," he murmured, nuzzling at Jed's neck with his lips.

"I missed you," Jed told him, angling his mouth in for a kiss. Leo obliged, his lips catching Jed's and they both opened up greedily, wanting the reassurance of physical closeness after all the disruption of recent events.

"Me too," Leo replied throatily, his hands reaching for Jed's shirt. Jed drew back a little.

"Here?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Why not? We have a rug and a roaring fire..." Leo grinned.

"And condoms, and lube?" Jed enquired.

"I always come prepared. I thought it was time. It's been far too long," Leo said, taking out the condoms and lube from his pocket, where he had stored them after retrieving them from the locked drawer in his office.

"Are you sure you were never a boy scout, Leo?" Jed enquired mischievously.

"Positive," Leo grinned, swiping his finger through Jed's tie, and removing it from around his friend's neck with a sweep of his hand. He loved Jed's skin, and the way his flesh moved under his caresses; even after all this time, he never tired of making love to Jed Bartlet. This time would be different though, and they both had to acknowledge that if they were going to move on, so Leo went slowly, taking his time unbuttoning Jed's shirt, and Jed just watched him, a wary look in his eyes. Leo pushed the shirt back from Jed's shoulders, then undid his friend's pants, tucked his fingers into the waistband of Jed's briefs - and paused.

"It's healed," Jed told him quietly. Leo nodded, and slowly slid the briefs down. Then he knelt, and with gentle fingers explored the new scar on his friend's belly, just as he had gently explored Jed's bruises nearly 40 years ago. The scar from the bullet wound was pink and puckered – fresh, not yet white and faded with age. Leo touched it carefully, first with his fingertips, and then with his lips. It was part of Jed, a part of what they had both been through together, and it had to be treated as such. He lingered on it for a few moments, enough, but not too long, and then lowered his head further, and took Jed's semi erect cock in his mouth. Jed made a familiar mewling sound in the back of his throat as Leo deep throated him in earnest. He felt Jed's hands come to rest on his hair, stroking idly, and he concentrated on his work for the next few minutes, until Jed was hard beneath his expert tongue, and then drew back.

"Come and lie on the rug with me. We should make good use of Sir Walter Scott's heaped fire to keep out that chill wind, dontcha think?"

Jed grinned, and allowed Leo to pull him down on the rug and undress him properly. "This feels very naughty," he commented.

"It's your study. You can screw who you want in it," Leo pointed out sensibly.

"Well, it's not really mine. It's kind of on loan to me," Jed argued.

"If you want me to stop..." Leo ran his hand mercilessly over Jed's now naked body and Jed gave a little groan of arousal.

"I didn't say that," he protested.

"If that damn Christmas book has got you worried about Santa not visiting you because you've been naughty, I can assure you that he's right here, right now, waiting to deliver a very big present," Leo said wickedly, stroking his fingers along his own hard shaft, as he nibbled seductively at Jed's earlobe.

"I'm way too old to believe in Santa Claus," Jed objected.

"To me, fair friend, you never can be old. For as you were when first your eye I eyed, Such seems your beauty still." Leo quoted softly, gazing down at Jed as he lay, naked on the rug, with the fire dappling his golden skin. The 38 years since their first meeting seemed like no time at all. He barely noticed the scar on Jed's belly, or the changes that the years had wrought - he could still see the 17 year old body he had once made love to, could still catch glimpses of that young, eager, excitable Jed in the elder statesman with considerable gravitas that Jed had become.

"Shakespeare? During sex?" Jed raised an eyebrow.

"What can I say – you've been a bad influence on me," Leo grinned, lowering his head and catching Jed's mouth before his friend could reply. In fact, he didn't allow Jed to say another word as he explored his lover's body in earnest, with fingers and tongue, reducing Jed to a boneless heap beneath him. Only then, when he was sure Jed was totally relaxed, did he slowly slide into his friend's waiting, willing body. Jed felt as good as he always did, and Leo was quiet, lost in thought, as he lowered himself deep inside Jed, until their faces were so close they almost touched. He stole another kiss from Jed's mouth and then began moving, gently thrusting back and forth, sliding his hand along Jed's hard cock the whole time, until they were both coming, both gazing at each other with sex-stupid, satisfied gazes. Leo withdrew, and lay down beside Jed in front of the fire, taking his lover in his arms and spooning up against him.

"Are you coming over for Christmas dinner?" Jed asked. "You know you'd be very welcome."

"Nah. You, Abbey and the girls should have some time together without me being there. Besides, I have some stuff I need to do."

"Like what?" Jed turned in his arms, and gazed at him searchingly.

"Well, I know this is gonna seem stupid, but I've never visited my father's grave. Not since the day we buried him...and I think I'd kind of like to. I'm going to see if I can get a flight up to Boston. I might even drag Mallory along with me if she wants to come..." Leo broke off, and shrugged. "I thought he was a coward – I don't know, maybe in some way I still do," he

sighed. "But I'm not so spotless, am I? I wasn't the husband Jenny wanted me to be. I'm an alcoholic. I took pills. I might not have slept around the way he did, and I tried not to hurt Jenny the way my father hurt my mother but...I never gave up you for her, and that had to have hurt. Now I'm older, I don't know that I can judge him the same way as I once did."

"He wasn't strong enough. You are. You had to be to take care of your mom and your sisters when he was gone," Jed pointed out.

"Yeah – and in some ways his death shaped me – made me stronger than I might have been. I haven't had much time for his memory all these years. At his funeral all I could feel was this anger and sense of betrayal and I think maybe the time has come to say a proper goodbye. That anger...it's gone now. I didn't realise it before, but this whole thing since Rosslyn's made me think."

"He cast a long shadow, your father," Jed observed quietly.

"Yours too," Leo replied, kissing his friend on the mouth again. Jed felt warm and good, nestled up against him, his damp, still slightly sweaty skin pressed against Leo's own flesh. He felt very real, very solid. He knew Leo, knew him and understood him in a way that nobody else in the entire world did.

"It's after midnight. Merry Christmas, Leo," Jed murmured, resting his head on Leo's shoulder. Leo relaxed back into the rug, with Jed in his arms. They'd come through Rosslyn, the way they'd weathered many storms along the way in their 38 years together. It wasn't always easy, but somehow they always did come through.

"Merry Christmas, Jed," he said softly.

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