

June 17th by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/june-17th/>

Story Notes:

Pic courtesy of Bluespirit



Outstanding Jed/Leo story - 2nd place

June 17th was one of my first serious Jed/Leo fics and a story I loved writing. As I was writing in a new fandom I was thrilled to do so well in the **2002 Jed Awards**.

I'm really absurdly proud of this story. I started becoming fascinated by the Jed/Leo relationship while writing *The Friday Night Club* and then this story idea popped into my head and it was one of those I just **had** to write. It was a fantastic writing experience and I'm very fond of the story so I hope you

enjoy it too!

Dedications: Heartfelt thanks to dot for support, information, pic URLs, bucket-loads of encouraging feedback, general pickiness and beta advice.

Special thanks to Phoebe for the usual great beta and for knowing just about everything about just about anything

Grateful thanks to Bluespirit for making me yet another beautiful West Wing pic and for managing not to include Orlando Bloom in it despite being verrrrry tempted

1. June 17th by Xanthe

2. Chapter 2 by Xanthe

3. Chapter 3 by Xanthe

4. Chapter 4 by Xanthe

5. Chapter 5 by Xanthe

June 17th by Xanthe

June 17th, 2002

"And before you all go..."

The senior staff all gave a faintly audible sigh – the meeting had already lasted for well over two hours and they were all eager to leave the Oval Office; apart from anything else it was lunchtime, a fact that was signalled all too clearly by the sounds emanating from Josh's stomach.

"This won't take long," the President continued, ignoring the sigh. "I just wanted to ask if any of you are aware of the date?"

He glanced around the room at his senior staff - who all gazed back at him blankly with the exception of Leo, who sighed.

"Uh...it's June 17th," Josh supplied helpfully, and then he coughed extravagantly in a clear ruse to hide the noises coming from the direction of his midriff.

"It is indeed June 17th," Jed said. He glanced at his staff over the top of his spectacles, gazing at each of them in turn, and pausing to glare particularly meaningfully at Leo who rolled his eyes at him. Jed ignored his Chief of Staff's discomfort and continued.

"June 17th. There are many important events in history that took place on this date; on this day in 1579 Sir Francis Drake claimed San Francisco Bay for England; on June 17th, 1885 the Statue of Liberty arrived in New York City aboard the French ship Isere, and..." The President paused for a beat, and glanced at Leo again. His Chief Of Staff raised an eyebrow and winced slightly while waiting for the conclusion of the President's sentence. "...On this day in 1972 five men were arrested for breaking into the Democratic Party Headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington, DC.," Jed finished with a slightly smug smile in the direction of his oldest and closest friend. Leo's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Thank you, Mr. President, for reminding us that extraordinary things can happen on the most ordinary days," Leo said, getting to his feet and thereby signalling that the meeting was at an end. The staff all got up eagerly, and there was a minor scramble to see who could be first out of the door, a contest that CJ won, with Josh close on her heels, his stomach still protesting.

The President took off his glasses, waited until everyone had gone, and then turned to face his Chief of Staff's extremely hard stare.

"What?" He shrugged, opening his arms expansively. "Just a little history lesson. It didn't do them any harm – I like to think that they learned a thing or two."

"I hadn't forgotten," Leo said firmly.

"Good – because you do sometimes," Jed replied, rifling through the papers on his desk.

"I do not," Leo said hotly.

"Yes, you do. Or at least you would if I didn't remind you."

"We'll never know seeing as you always do remind me," Leo protested.

"Well that's because I'm not sure whether you've remembered or not," the President said. Leo gave a heartfelt sigh and threw his hands up in the air.

"I remembered!" He said in an exasperated tone.

There was silence for a moment. Both men stared at each other.

"I know you think I make an unreasonable amount of fuss about this but it's important," the President said finally. "I know you don't have a romantic bone in your body and I know that you think I make way too big a deal out of what is 'just another goddamn day in the year, Jed'" He mimicked his Chief of Staff's dry tones with unerring accuracy. "But indulge me." He spread his arms wide. "Because it is just one day, Leo and as you refuse to allow me to get romantic at any other time in the year I think I'm owed this one."

"Okay." Leo shrugged.

"Okay then." Jed put his glasses back on and picked up a sheaf of papers from his desk.

"Okay," Leo said again, turning to go.

"I'll see you at the Residence at 8pm?" Jed said.

"Yes you will." Leo turned back, nodding.

"Okay. You do know this is a big, important anniversary don't you?" Jed said, glancing at Leo over his spectacles again. Leo hesitated, looking confused. Jed made a clicking sound in the back of his throat and was about to launch into another tirade when Leo grinned and inclined his head.

"I had you then," he said.

"You did not!"

"Sure I did. Yes, I know this is a big one, sir. I'll be there at 8pm."

"I'll be cooking," Jed warned.

"I'll come anyway," Leo replied.

"I'm not expecting a present or anything – just for you to show up. I know that unromantic old heart of yours doesn't stretch to presents – so just your presence will do," Jed said, chuckling at his own, slightly old joke.

"You mean that's not enough?" Leo grinned in a way that was almost impish, reminding Jed of a boy a long time ago who had looked at him in just the same way. Jed gazed at Leo hungrily and then sighed.

"Yeah, that's enough, Leo," he said. Leo nodded, and then turned on his heel and returned to his own office. "That's always been enough for me, Leo," Jed said softly, under his breath, watching his old friend go.

June 17th, 1962

Jed Bartlet gazed morosely at the assembled group of boys from under his floppy dark bangs. It was the first day of the Boy's Nation camp and he was delighted to have been given a much-coveted place on the camp despite his father's objections, but was now feeling somewhat put out that two other boys had been chosen to lead the first debating exercise. He had volunteered with all the enthusiasm in his 17 year old heart, brimful of the confidence that he had acquired as Captain of his school debating team, but had been passed over in favour of a tall, dark haired kid from New York and a wiry, blond haired boy from Chicago.

It was a bright, sunny day, and the two boys were standing on a platform examining the

history of US isolationism, arguing its pros and cons and whether it was a policy that still had merit despite the Kennedy administration's current active promotion of US involvement in the rest of the world. The dark haired kid had rambled on, arguing that isolationism had served the US well in the past, but failing to make any of the more obvious points that Jed would have made if he'd been the one up there on the platform. Jed couldn't help himself – he was someone who got involved and sitting on the sidelines was anathema to him so he was just itching to get up there and start participating. The first boy finished and stepped back, to a smattering of polite but unenthusiastic applause.

The other boy stepped forward, and paused for a moment before speaking. Jed looked up, intrigued despite himself – it took a lot of confidence to pause for so long in front of a crowd of hostile 17-year-old boys who all thought they could argue the point better. The boy's thin blond hair was blowing in the slight breeze, and he had a smattering of freckles over the bridge of his nose. His blue eyes sparkled confidently as he picked up the microphone and introduced himself.

"My name's Leo McGarry but that's not important; there is only one name that's important in this debate and that's the name of the person who shows us why the old US policy of isolationism wouldn't and can't work in the modern world. That name is Adolf Hitler."

Jed stared at the other boy, completely spellbound. He didn't know whether he agreed with Leo McGarry's points or not, but he felt a thrill of something creep up his spine. This boy was someone like him - he knew it instinctively. This sandy haired, stocky young man had the same passion in his voice when he spoke that Jed had when he captained the school debating society on one of their many victories. Jed listened, enthralled, and then, at the end, when the debate was opened up to questions, he was the first on his feet. He tore into Leo's arguments, and was rewarded when the other boy, far from falling apart and getting defensive or belligerent as so often happened when Jed brought the full array of his debating talents to the fore, instead responded in kind. He threw Jed's arguments back at him, twisted and turned the words as if they were a living force, and soon the two boys were engaged in a full blown debate to the exclusion of the rest of the camp. Jed had never felt so exhilarated in his life. Here, at last, was a debating opponent worthy of his skills, someone who could match him as an intellectual equal – and maybe even outclass him - someone he didn't have to hold back with, or let up on for fear of going too far, for fear of being perceived as a show-off – something that always brought his father's wrath down on his head in full force. No, with Leo McGarry it was like dancing with words – and part of his enjoyment was derived from the fact that he knew the other boy was enjoying it as much as he was.

Finally, the debate was brought to a close, and the boys were told to split into two teams, depending on which side of the debate they agreed with most, and draw up their main points on a large sheet of paper.

Jed was sitting right at the back and it took him several minutes to elbow his way to the front of the throng of boys who had gathered around Leo McGarry. As he got close, Jed felt a thrill of recognition. He knew this boy. He wasn't sure how, but it was as if all of the previous 17 years of his life had been a rehearsal, waiting for this one important moment,

when it would all make sense. Leo's blond hair, sharp-eyed blue gaze, and little twisted grin were instantly familiar to him, as if he'd already spent a lifetime in the other boy's company. He reached the front of the crowd of boys and found Leo, who was starting to write up the points of the debate on the piece of paper they'd been given.

"Hey," Jed said, feeling suddenly, inexplicably shy. Leo glanced at him, and their eyes met, and their gaze held. And held. And held. Then Leo visibly shook himself.

"I'm surprised to see you on this side," he said with a nonchalant shrug. "I thought judging by how many holes you found in my argument that you'd be on the other side for sure." He glanced over at the other group of boys. Jed shook his head.

"You think because I got into a debate with you that I don't agree with you?" He said with a sly grin. Leo's expression changed, became animated, his blue eyes sparkling with recognition of a shared passion. He grinned delightedly back at Jed, and then turned to his writing once more.

"Damn..." Leo shook the pen he was using as the ink faded on the page.

"Here." Jed took his pen out of his pocket and handed it to him. Leo looked at it and gave a slight smirk as he saw it was engraved. Jed winced – he knew what Leo was thinking – how many 17 year old boys had a pen engraved with their own names? "It was a present," he said defensively. It was – and it was a present that meant a great deal to him as it had been given to him by his father's secretary, Mrs. Landingham, a woman for whom he had a great deal of respect and affection.

"J. Bartlet," Leo read, tracing his finger over the engraving. "What does the 'J' stand for?"

"It stands for tolerance, education and equality of opportunity for all men and women whatever their colour, religion or bank balance," Jed replied. "It also stands for Jed."

Leo stared at him for a moment and Jed hoped, desperately, that he hadn't just come over as unbearably pompous and precocious. He had just wanted to make an impression. He so wanted this boy to like him. Finally Leo's features broke into a grin and he held out his hand.

"Jed Bartlet – I'm Leo McGarry," he said. Jed took the proffered hand and there was a brief moment when the world seemed to have stood still. Jed had the feeling that something had just happened here, something that was very important to both of them not only on a personal level, but somehow on a wider level too.

Jed didn't think he'd ever talked so much in his life as he did during that summer. Within a couple of days he'd arranged to swap rooms with Leo's roommate so that they could keep on talking, long into the night, sharing an intellectual passion that intoxicated them both. Leo was quieter than Jed, more thoughtful, prone to making sharp, pragmatic observations that punctured Jed's more flowery language and folksy notions – but Jed felt he was sparking off the other boy in a way he had never known before. In fact, until he had met Leo, Jed sincerely doubted whether he'd ever even been truly alive before. Leo seemed to

feel the same way, and as each day passed Jed found himself growing more and more obsessed with his new friend and, at the same time, also growing confused by the amount of sheer emotion that he was channelling into this friendship. He had close friends at school whose company he enjoyed, and he'd had a severe crush on David Wheaton's sister, but this was like a combination of both of those. Sometimes he just liked to sit and watch Leo talk, to follow the movement of his lips, and now he found himself wondering what it would be like to kiss those lips. Was that wrong? Jed wondered. It didn't feel wrong. He'd never had feelings like this for another boy before but then he'd never met anyone like Leo before.

One night, as they sat in their respective beds in the dark in their room, finally silent after several hours of impassioned debate, Jed turned to Leo, and asked him a question that had been on his mind for some time.

"Leo, have you ever..." He hesitated. "Have you ever been with a girl?" he asked at last, flushing slightly. He truly felt there was nothing he could not discuss with his new friend and he wanted desperately to discuss this. Leo looked at him, and then nodded, slowly.

"Yes, Jed," he replied. "You?"

"No...I...it's kinda hard for me to meet any girls where I live," he sighed finally.

"I can understand that." Leo nodded again. "You will though."

"I know." Jed shrugged.

"I've read about all male boarding schools," Leo said, looking at Jed steadily. "Have you ever been with another guy, Jed?" He asked.

Jed knew that if anyone but Leo had asked that question he would have jumped up and hit him where he stood, but with Leo it was different. With Leo it wasn't an accusation or an innuendo, it was a genuine attempt to communicate and understand, to get to the truth.

"No. Never," he said quietly. "I'm not saying it doesn't go on – just that it hasn't ever interested me. Well..." He hesitated again. "Not until now," he said softly. Leo's blue eye's glittered in the dark as he registered what Jed was saying to him. "How about you?" Jed asked. Leo thought about it for a long time, and then cleared his throat.

"It's interested me...I just never did anything about it. I like girls – a lot," he added, a grin on his features. "But I just think there are a lot of things out there I want to try before I die, and..." He shrugged. "Is that normal d'you think? Having those kinds of thoughts?"

"What's normal?" Jed shrugged. "Surely any emotion is valid and as long as it doesn't hurt anyone then it's up to the individual to assess whether it's something he wants to do or not."

"Only you could make that sound like something out of a political manifesto," Leo grinned.

"Leo..." Jed bit on his lip and brushed his floppy hair out of his eyes. "I meant what I said. About you...I've never felt like this before. Is this what falling in love is like?"

Leo stared at him for a long time and then shook his head. "I don't know, Jed. I don't know what falling in love is like."

"What about the girl you went with?" Jed asked, a little bit shocked.

"There were two." Leo smiled impishly. "First Anna Linden when I was 15. Then Sharon Dewy last year. I don't think I loved either of them though, Jed." He shrugged again.

"That's so romantic," Jed commented acerbically. Leo grinned at him.

"Yeah. Well. I know I didn't feel the same way about them as I feel about you," Leo said softly. Jed looked up, surprised to learn that his own feelings were reciprocated. Leo got up, and came to sit on Jed's bed. He leaned forward and brushed Jed's wayward hair softly with his fingers and Jed felt a warmth start in his groin and flood all the way up his body, straight to his heart. "People always talk about love as if it's such a big deal. How you shouldn't have sex until you're in love and all that crap but I don't know. Sex was pretty good without me being in love with either Anna or Sharon," Leo commented. "But..." He paused, looking into Jed's eyes, his face so close that his breath was warm on Jed's cheek. "I've sometimes wondered what it would be like to do it with someone I feel something for, someone who excites me." His face seemed to be getting closer and his fingers were caressing the back of Jed's neck, making him tingle.

"Well, then, purely in the interest of academic study..." Jed murmured, his face closing what was left of the distance between them. Their lips closed on each other and Jed honestly felt as if a huge voltage of electricity had shot into his body. Leo felt it too – he could tell by the way the other boy pulled back for a second, his eyes full of wonder, and then returned for more, his lips claiming Jed's hungrily.

It was over so fast that both boys barely had time to draw breath. Leo's hand found Jed's cock and Jed rubbed himself against Leo's hard member, and soon their bodies were entwined, their lips unceasing as they kissed, long and hard...and then, within seconds, unable to control themselves, they'd both come. They lay back, squashed close together on the narrow bed, panting, staring at each other with slightly shocked but gleeful looks on their faces, and then, after several minutes, Leo propped himself up on one elbow.

"You know," he said, with a thoughtful frown on his face. "That was way too fast to prove anything. I think we need to do it again...purely in the interest of academic study of course."

"Of course," Jed agreed happily, and within seconds they were undressing each other. They went more slowly this time, now that the initial urgent rush was over. Leo took the lead, and Jed was never sure if that was because he was the one with the experience or whether it was just his personality, but either way, Jed gave as good as he got, and matched Leo's passion with his own. They were doing a different dance now, no longer a dance of words and intellect but a dance of smooth young skin pressing on smooth young skin, hot, wet

kisses, and hungry, questing hands and tongues.

Purely in order to satisfy academic study they both found it necessary to repeat the experience every night thereafter, spending their days verbally jousting and their nights jousting in a more physical manner. By the end of the summer, Jed knew that this was not a friendship that was going to be just a passing phase. Leo would be with him for life – and he knew that Leo felt the same way. Not that they didn't both have independent destinies to fulfil, but their friendship was an important part of that.

On their last day at the camp, there was a mock Presidential election, which Leo won hands down. His first act as President was to make Jed Bartlet, who had been his 'campaign manager', his Chief of Staff. That night they tumbled into the room they shared, breathless with the excitement of the day, and Leo caught Jed around the waist and held him tight.

"One day, we'll make it come true," he whispered in Jed's ear, his breath warm and caressing. "One day we'll really do this. I'll be President and you'll be my Chief of Staff."

"D'you think they'll let us sleep together in the White House?" Jed grinned, angling his face in and trailing his tongue languorously along the side of Leo's neck. Leo gave a soft moan and grabbed Jed's head, kissing him firmly.

"Who'll be able to stop us?" He whispered fiercely between kisses.

Chapter 2 by Xanthe

June 17th, 2002

"Leo! You remembered!" Jed said, waving his arms extravagantly as Leo entered the kitchen. Leo sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Let's not do this again, sir. It wasn't all that much fun first time around. You're wearing an apron," he observed.

"And you, I see, are still wearing your work suit," Jed commented, gazing at Leo's dark grey suit with an air of ever-so-slight disapproval.

"You wanted me to change?" Leo raised an eyebrow. Jed shrugged.

"Oh I don't care, Leo, but I rarely get to see you in jeans these days and I miss the old, casual, Leo. You know, blue jeans, boots, open necked plaid shirts..."

"Is that why you keep going on at me about keeping a change of clothes in my office for when we work late?" Leo grinned.

"Maybe," Jed said with an air of someone who doesn't want to give too much away.

"Well why didn't you come straight out and say it?" Leo grouched. Jed grinned and turned

back to the stove. He had changed into a pair of navy chinos and a blue polo shirt, mainly because they were comfortable but also because on this anniversary he wanted to differentiate between Jed Bartlet, President of the United States and Jed, Leo McGarry's lover. He suspected that Leo didn't care about such subtleties although he was also pretty sure that at some point in the next few weeks Leo would show up wearing blue jeans and an open-necked plaid shirt. He wouldn't say anything, he'd just do it, and they'd both know why.

"Here, come and smell this." Jed lifted the lid on a saucepan and beckoned Leo over.

"What is it?" Leo ventured cautiously, bending slightly to sniff.

"It's chilli. Now, I know that you and everyone else in the entire universe like to make fun of my cooking but I think we both secretly know that it's actually quite good," Jed said, replacing the lid on the saucepan. Leo leaned against the kitchen counter and surveyed his old friend with a fond smile on his face.

"Where's Abbey?" He asked.

"She's gone to stay with Liz – you know she always makes herself scarce on June 17th," Jed told him.

"What about the staff?" Leo looked around the empty kitchen.

"I told them all to go away."

"They hate it when you do that," Leo remarked.

Jed ground some pepper into the saucepan and then took a taste of the chilli and nodded to himself. "I know but I'm the President and I figure that I should be entitled to spend some time in my own kitchen every once in awhile."

"Well technically speaking it's not your kitchen, it's the White House kitchen," Leo commented, sneaking a look in one of the other saucepans on the stove.

"Leo – shut up," Jed ordered.

"Yes, sir." Leo nodded.

"And don't call me sir, Leo. It's June 17th for god's sake. You promised never to call me sir when we were in bed together."

"Well in case I missed something we aren't...sir," Leo grinned.

"You're just playing around with technicalities now – and it's only a matter of time anyway."

"Yeah," Leo's grin broadened somewhat lasciviously and he glanced around. "What about

the security staff?" He asked.

"I told them to go away too," Jed replied. "Although I think they only went down the hallway."

"They hate it when you do that as well," Leo commented.

"Leo, I don't care if the world and his wife disapprove of me wanting to spend an evening like an ordinary human being. I want tonight to be special – I'm getting tired of half hour quickies in your hotel room with you hissing 'sssh' in my ear every time I give so much as a low groan of passion. Tonight we're spending the entire night together, just like every other June 17th for the past 40 years."

"39," Leo said. Jed raised an eyebrow. "Technically it's 39 because that first year we didn't actually make love until June 26th as I recall," Leo said. "We always celebrate the anniversary of when we first met and not when we first made love."

"I see you can remember some dates if you try," Jed commented dryly.

"I've already told you that I can remember this one," Leo replied smoothly. "You just don't like to put it to the test." He stepped back a bit and looked at his old friend, a mischievous smile spreading across his features – a smile that Jed knew very few people had ever witnessed. "So, we're alone, huh?" Leo said.

"Yeah." Jed grinned at him.

"Hmmm." Leo leaned forward and Jed wondered how it was possible that at the grand old age of 57 that particular gleam in Leo's blue eyes could still make his skin tingle and his groin fill with a warmth that shot all the way up to his heart. "Sooo," Leo said, his lips grazing Jed's neck suggestively. "Wanna fuck?"

June 17th, 1970

Jed glanced at his watch. He had been waiting in the hotel bar for three hours and he had gone through boredom and was now starting to get genuinely worried. He wondered whether to go up and check the room again in case Leo had gone straight there when a movement over by the door caught his eye. His eyes travelled over the handsome stranger in the Air Force uniform, then dropped back, disappointed, to his drink once more. A few seconds later the stranger sat down beside him. Jed scooted up a bit, annoyed at the interruption and with the other man for invading his space.

"So, no kiss hello then?" A familiar, slightly gruff voice asked in an undertone. Jed looked up and straight into the blue eyes of the handsome Air Force officer sitting beside him.

"Leo?" He said, and then..."Leo!" He grabbed the other man by the lapels of his uniform and gazed at him, his eyes roving over Leo's face, and down over the toned body encased in its uniform. He could feel the hardness of Leo's muscles even through the uniform – Air Force

life had obviously made him fitter and tougher than ever. Jed fought down a wave of envy – Leo was out in the world, fighting for what he believed in, while Jed was stuck at home, struggling to make ends meet on his small lecturer's stipend while Abbey started out as a doctor and they both juggled the childcare arrangements for their baby daughter.

"Oh, so you do recognise me?" Leo grinned. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me."

"It has been too long," Jed agreed, shaking his head.

"A year." Leo nodded.

"I know – when I said we should spend every June 17th together I didn't mean that was the only time during the year we should meet up," Jed commented, his eyes still devouring his friend's face. It was always the same, this electric charge of passion and connection that he felt whenever he was with Leo, and yet still it always took him by surprise. He had never felt the same about any other man – had never taken another male lover or even wanted to. He was heterosexual in every other area of his life apart from his relationship with Leo. He had tried not to question it – he knew, deep in his heart, that his relationship with Leo was non-negotiable. It was a constant in his life, something he needed. Even when their busy lives meant they barely got to see each other, when they did meet up, Jed was reminded all over again why his relationship with Leo was so important. A few years after meeting Leo he had met Abbey at college and had felt a similar surge of emotion towards her as well. It had confused him at first – how could he possibly feel so strongly about two such different people? Was there room for both of them in his life? He had tried hard to choose between them, had chosen Abbey, wanting the comfort and security of a normal life, without all the attending problems and issues that arose from his relationship with another man – but in the end it had been hopeless. He had confessed to Abbey about his relationship with Leo, and how he didn't think he could live without it. She had looked at him for a long time, then nodded, and said, "Well then, Jed, I'd better meet this Leo McGarry." She had met him, and the two of them had gotten along fine, in a kind of spiky, slightly jealous way – but what they both had in common was that they loved him, and they wanted him to be happy. Jed wasn't sure what he had done to deserve two such understanding people in his life, two people who were so devoted to his welfare, but he guessed that he must have done something right by both of them for them to care so much about his happiness. Abbey had thought about it for a couple of days and then told him that she was happy to share him with Leo – on two conditions.

"One, this is just Leo we're talking about. You tomcat around with any other man and we're through, Jed."

"Just any other man?" Jed had questioned. "Does that mean I have carte blanche to tomcat around with any other woman?" He grinned. Abbey fixed him with one of her Looks and that wiped the smile off his face extremely fast.

"Try that and see if you can walk after I find out," she murmured. "I should remind you that I'm training to be a doctor and I know exactly where to dig the heel of my shoe to cause the most pain," she said pointedly.

"Understood." Jed smiled at her. "Did I ever tell you how much I love you?"

"Not often enough," she smiled back. "Honestly, Jed. I can see that you and Leo have something special together – I can't stand in the way of that. You've known him longer than you've known me - I'm flattered that you want me enough to even try to give him up for me but we both know that won't work. He's too important to you."

"What's the second thing?" He asked, drawing her to him and kissing her soundly on the lips.

"Just keep me informed. Don't let anything you do with Leo be a secret," she told him. "I don't want you skulking around behind my back because you're scared of hurting me. I know there will be times when you spend more time with him than me, and vice versa and I promise I'll try not to get jealous when I feel like I'm the one who drew the short straw. I love you, Jed Bartlet – but I have other things in my life. I'm not the little woman sitting at home and I won't be lied to. Promise me you'll always be honest with me."

"That is one thing I definitely can promise, Abbey," he had told her, kissing her again.

So he and Abbey had got married, and Leo had, naturally, been best man. At first he'd continued to see quite a bit of his old friend, but then Leo had joined the Air Force, determined to fight in Vietnam. Jed had talked to him at great length about that – it had been one of the biggest intellectual arguments they'd ever had, rendered all the more passionate by the fact that Jed was scared stiff of losing his friend.

"Jed, when we met I was participating in a debate about US isolationism," Leo had protested. "That wasn't all talk – I honestly believe that the US has a duty to get involved in the affairs of the world. You saw what happened in World War 2 – if we hadn't gotten involved there..."

"Leo, this isn't World War 2," Jed argued. "It isn't anything like it."

"I believe in this, Jed," Leo told him, his blue eyes flashing. "And what does all the rhetoric mean if we don't put our beliefs on the line and follow them through? It's all very well to say I'm in favour of the principle of other young men risking their lives for a war that I believe in, but I have to put my money where my mouth is or I can't hold my head up high. I don't want an easy life, Jed, I never have. I want an honest one – I want one where I'm true to myself and my ideals. That's why I'm still with you, after all." He grinned. "It would have been a lot easier and a lot more sensible to say nothing of socially acceptable to ditch you and find a woman to spend the rest of my life with."

Jed shook his head. "I do understand that, Leo. I'm not going to try and talk you out of doing something you believe in. I just wish..." He hesitated, then pulled Leo into a hug. "Just come home safely, Leo," he whispered, burying his face in his friend's neck and taking a deep inhalation of his lover's scent, worried that this might be the last time he ever smelled it, ever touched Leo's skin, ran his hands through that wispy blond hair, or looked into those

sharp blue eyes, those eyes that missed nothing and understood him so well.

Now that conversation seemed a very long time ago, and this man sitting here in his Air Force uniform was someone so changed that Jed's eyes had initially passed over him, dismissing him as nothing more than a handsome stranger. Jed took a closer look at his friend, trying to figure out what exactly about him was so different. There was something about those eyes, something that held a warning, or a barrier, and Jed knew instantly that there was a distance between them that had never been there before.

"I need a drink," Leo commented, raising his hand to call the bartender over.

"I've spent three hours in this bar, Leo, and I don't want to spend another second longer," Jed complained. "You can't come in here looking like this in this goddamn sexy uniform after I've existed a whole year on just letters and expect me to sit there and watch you have a drink."

"I need a drink," Leo repeated, his lips crinkling up at the edges anyway.

"Then buy a bottle and bring it up to the room. I can't wait," Jed ordered brusquely.

"Yessir!" Leo tipped up his cap in a mock salute, paid for a bottle of whisky, and then followed Jed up to the room he had booked.

The room was small, dank and cheap but Jed didn't care about that. He charged through the door, turned in one quick motion, pulled Leo in by the lapels of his uniform, slammed the door shut behind them, and then pinned Leo to the wall with a kiss that sent that familiar megawatt charge of electricity through them both. Leo responded with equal vigour, his hands grabbing Jed's ass as his tongue plundered forcefully down his lover's throat. They parted for a second, coming up for air, their breath coming in heaving gasps, eyeing each other speculatively, and then, without speaking, went straight back in for another deep, long kiss. Jed felt Leo's hands disappearing down the front of his pants and the next thing he knew his pants were on the floor and his cock was being expertly massaged to climax. He came all too quickly, in a way that was reminiscent of their first time, and then sank to his knees, undid Leo's pants and took his lover's cock in his mouth, relishing the taste and feel of it after a year's deprivation. Leo's climax was just as swift as his own had been and then they both gazed at each other, still panting, Jed still on his knees and Leo still leaning back against the wall. There was silence between them and it felt so wrong to Jed. There was never silence between them – they always had far too much to talk about.

"So," Leo commented after several long minutes. "How's Abbey?"

"She's fine." Jed nodded.

"And little Lizzie? How's my god-daughter?" Leo questioned, doing up his pants and opening the bottle of whisky he was holding. Jed felt somehow rejected – their initial quick coupling had just been a prelude to the long lovemaking that they usually enjoyed. He didn't know why Leo was making small talk and getting dressed again.

"She's fine too. Leo..."

"You want some?" Leo took a long swig of the bottle, his lips making sensuous contact with it in a way that made Jed's recently sated cock begin to twitch again. Then he offered the bottle to Jed.

"No. I want you." Jed got up and went to sit on the bed where he began unbuttoning his shirt. Leo watched him, those sharp blue eyes brooding and watchful. Jed suddenly felt uneasy, as if there was a caged tiger in the room instead of Leo, the man he loved more than any other in the entire world, a man he knew better than any other – or at least he had thought he did. Now he wasn't so sure. Leo watched him get undressed, that whisky bottle plastered to his lips as he took generous gulps from it. He looked utterly dangerous and sexy as he stood there, his eyes shadowed, and his tautly toned body encased in his uniform, still, unmoving, looking at Jed as if he was prey.

"Are you coming over? I want to talk, Leo. It's been a year," Jed said. Often they would just lie on the bed, naked, and talk in between love making sessions. Jed loved their physical intimacy but their mental and emotional intimacy was at least as important to him – it was the lubricant that kept the wheels of their relationship turning so smoothly.

"I don't want to talk," Leo said dangerously, walking over to the bed. "I wanna fuck."

Jed suddenly wondered who this man was and began to think he had been right in his first estimation of Leo as a handsome stranger. Maybe it's just been too long, he thought to himself, as Leo prowled over to the bed, the whisky bottle hanging from his hand. Leo put the bottle down on the nightstand and sat down on the bed. He didn't even undress – he just reached for Jed, his hands claiming him as if he was a prize, something to be devoured whole, like a starving man attacking a meal. Jed didn't even try to fight him off – somehow he recognised that this was something that Leo needed, that there was something hollow in Leo's soul, a gap that needed to be filled, and if he was the instrument by which his friend gained some peace then he was happy to offer himself up. Leo wasn't gentle – his hands, hands that could fly a F-105 at high speeds over enemy terrain - were insistent and rough on Jed's body. The buttons on his uniform were hard, cold and unyielding against Jed's warm skin as Leo turned him over and reached into his pocket for lube.

"I bought some on the way here," he growled, his teeth scraping the back of Jed's neck. "Figured we'd be needing it." Jed had brought some too, and somehow he had the feeling that Leo was lying – a quick look at the tube of lubricant convinced him that this had not been a hastily bought item. For a start, where the hell was Leo going to find a shop selling lubricant at such short notice and in addition, there was less than half a tube of it, so Leo had obviously used it already – on someone else. Jed's heart missed a beat. They'd never talked about exclusivity – Jed knew that as a married man he was on weak ground there. He could hardly insist that Leo remain faithful to him if he was sleeping with Abbey...and yet...and yet...somehow he thought that they had an unspoken agreement that while they might form relationships with women, they wouldn't sleep with other men. Jed knew, as Leo entered him roughly from behind, that there had been no such agreement. Leo had

definitely had other male lovers – and recently. Was this the kind of soulless sex he was having with them, Jed wondered? And why the hell did he think he could get away with it with him? He was Jed Bartlet, he and Leo had something special – didn't they? This clearly wasn't the time to talk about it - Jed braced himself as Leo thrust into him, hard, an edge of desperation in his movements, as if they were a pair of animals rutting. All the same, hard and edgy though the sex was, Jed couldn't help but relish the feel of Leo's cock inside him again after so long without. It was a need for him too – he needed to feel Leo's hard length, needed to be pounded within an inch of his life, and yet, as he gazed around the dirty room, he knew deep inside that what they were doing was something just as unclean.

Leo gave Jed's cock a few cursory tugs until Jed came, and then finished off himself, coming inside his lover's body. Then he withdrew, much to Jed's intense disappointment – he loved it when Leo stayed inside him after their love-making, and they shared precious moments of intimacy. Leo rolled over and reached for the whisky bottle again and Jed watched him, feeling increasingly angry.

"Can we talk now?" He asked.

"Sure. About what?" Leo took a lazy hit on the bottle and gazed at the ceiling.

"Christ, Leo, you've been gone a year – and you've barely written these past few months. I didn't even know if you were receiving my letters or if you had been shot down or captured or even if you were dead," Jed remonstrated. Leo's eyes flashed with some emotion Jed couldn't understand. "I didn't even know if you were going to show up here tonight – I didn't know if you got my letter telling you where we going to meet – would it have hurt you to have replied just to let me know? And then you show up three hours late, looking like this and behaving like this." Jed shook his head.

"Behaving like what?" Leo turned his face towards his friend, his speech slightly slurred.

"Like a fucking animal!" Jed roared, getting up. He wrapped a blanket around his body and moved away, wincing slightly as he realised how sore he was. "You didn't even apologise for being late – where were you, Leo? Did you hit the bars before you came here? Are you drunk, Leo?"

Leo gazed at him with a hard look in those blue eyes. "Not nearly drunk enough, old friend," he whispered. "Not nearly drunk enough." Those words sent shivers down Jed's spine. It wasn't so much what Leo said, as the way he said it.

"Christ, you didn't even get undressed. You fucked me like I was a fucking animal," Jed snarled. "How many others have you fucked like this, Leo? Anonymous strangers in anonymous hotel rooms - is that all I am to you now? Is that all we have?"

"You're being dramatic – as always." Leo studied the label on the bottle of whisky intently, not meeting his friend's eye.

"This is me you're talking to, Leo," Jed said in an exasperated tone. "What the hell happened

to you?"

"What do you mean what happened to me?" Leo shot back angrily. "You're the one who couldn't wait to get me through the door before you jumped my bones, Jed. Don't sit on the fucking moral high ground pissing down on me. I don't need it – okay?"

"Okay. Yeah, okay." Jed got up and walked angrily over to the window.

There was silence for a long time, and then Jed heard Leo sigh behind him. He heard his friend get up and then a few seconds later a pair of hands found their way around his stomach and Leo's chin came to rest on his shoulder.

"Hey. We don't have long – let's not argue," Leo said softly. "I'm sorry. It's just...this is what we do, isn't it? We meet up, we make love...that's what we do, Jed."

"And we talk, Leo. We talk," Jed told him, glancing sideways at his friend. The shadows in Leo's eyes became even denser and he felt Leo shrug.

"We are talking, Jed."

"Tell me about Vietnam. Are you still flying the same plane? The F105?"

"The Thud? Sure." Leo's grip loosened a fraction. "You still teaching?"

"For now. I'm working on a research grant."

"Good. That brain of yours is too good to waste on those kids for the rest of your life," Leo commented with a grunt.

"Hey, I thought I was going to be your Chief of Staff when you made President. Are you withdrawing that job offer, Leo McGarry?" Jed replied, relaxing into their old banter, feeling the familiarity warm him, like slipping his hand into a comfortable, worn old glove.

Leo's grip slackened even more. "Job offer still stands, Jed," he said softly, but there was no fire in his voice any more, and no belief. Jed knew that something very fundamental had happened to Leo McGarry – he was a changed man. They always used to talk about politics with a passion that matched their physical passion and they both genuinely believed that one day they might make it to the very top. It wasn't just idle fantasising – they believed it.

"Good." Jed nodded, wondering how he could get to the root of what was bothering his friend. Leo snuggled closer to him and kissed the back of his neck wetly. They were quiet for a long time; Leo's arms were strong and warm around Jed's body but Jed didn't know how to breach the unexpected silence. His relationship with Leo had never involved silence before and he didn't know how to handle it.

"So," Leo said finally, clearly as unable to bear the silence as Jed. "Wanna fuck?"

June 17th, 2002

Jed gazed at Leo, the past standing between them as if it were only yesterday. Leo's scent was as familiar to him as his own and Abbey's, and his lover's nearness made his skin tingle with need. The warm hum of fizzing water from the saucepan beside them hissed in the air and Leo's blue eyes bored affectionately into his soul. They had been here so often, on this date, renewing the bond they'd made when they'd barely been more than children, and each time it brought something up, something new or something old – a memory or the creation of a new one.

"I was just kidding," Leo said softly. "Jed, you don't have to remind me about June 17th – I always remember. If I don't often get you a present it's because I have no idea what to get you. Presents aren't really my thing. You know that."

"Yeah." Jed smiled. "Leo, when did you last even go in a store?"

"I have no idea but however long it's been it hasn't been long enough." Leo grinned. He reached out and placed a proprietary hand on Jed's ass.

"They have the internet nowadays. You can shop online," Jed pointed out.

"I'm too busy running the country," Leo countered.

"And I'm not?" Jed raised an eyebrow.

"You have people to do these things for you."

"Oh, you think I went to Charlie and said, 'Here's a 100 bucks, please go out and buy an anniversary present for Leo McGarry to celebrate our 40 years of intimacy together?'" Jed raised his other eyebrow.

"I would so love to see Charlie's face if you said that," Leo laughed, his hand stroking Jed's butt insistently.

"If you do that for much longer then we won't even get to eat," Jed commented, making no move to stop the caress all the same.

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing – d'you remember the days when we couldn't wait to get our hands on each other the moment we were alone together?" Leo said.

"Yeah, but then we'd often been apart for months. Now, we get to have sex every few days," Jed replied. "And besides, we're getting way too old to be that horny."

"Speak for yourself," Leo retorted. "So what was the longest time we ever went without seeing each other?" he mused.

"A year," Jed said softly. Leo glanced at him, his blue eyes full of memories.

"Ah. Yes," he said sadly.

June 17th, 1970

"No, I don't." Jed pushed Leo's questing hands away. "I'm way too sore for a start."

"I'm happy to bottom." Leo shrugged.

"Since when?" Jed asked incredulously – Leo invariably went on top and it suited them both well enough.

"Since whenever." Leo shrugged again.

Jed sighed – holding a conversation with this Leo was like walking through maple syrup and he'd had enough of even trying.

"I'm going to get some sleep," he muttered, returning to the bed. "How much leave do you have?"

"Just tomorrow and then I have to report back." Leo took another swig out of his whisky bottle. Jed's heart fell. Just a day? They only had a day together? He couldn't bear the thought of parting from Leo so soon when something was so very wrong between them – or was it between them? Had they outgrown each other or was the problem just Leo and this weird, uncommunicative mood he was in?

"Come here," Jed said, deciding to try again. Whatever had happened to Leo, he was his oldest and best friend and he deserved that someone made an effort with him – if he wouldn't help himself then the least Jed could do was to make him know that he was loved. He opened his arms and Leo came towards him. He sat on the side of the bed and Jed drew him down and wrapped his arms around him, covering them both in the blanket.

"Here, let's get you undressed," he said, his hand going to Leo's shirt, which he started to unbutton. Leo's hand came up and grabbed his wrist hard.

"No," he said sharply, and then, more softly. "I'm fine like this. I don't want to get cold." The room was warm and it was the middle of summer – Jed didn't think there was any way that Leo could get cold but it clearly wasn't a good time to push his lover on this. He knew Leo of old – his friend could be the most stubborn, obstinate man in the world when his back was against the wall – and right now, it seemed as if his back was pressed right up close against the stone, leaving neither of them with much room to manoeuvre. Jed did the only thing he could; he held Leo tight against him, kissed his lover's neck, and whispered to him over and over again that he loved him until gradually he felt the hard lines of Leo's body start to relax. At some point they fell asleep.

Jed woke halfway through the night and gazed around, disoriented. He wondered briefly where Abbey was and then reality kicked in and he realised why he had woken; Leo was

making strange noises – and he wasn't safely wrapped up in his arms any more. He'd somehow managed to roll over to the other side of the bed and was curled up in a ball, his hands covering his head as if he was being attacked.

"Leo?" Jed whispered softly, uncertain what to do.

Leo was clearly asleep, but there was a sheen of sweat on his face and he was muttering to himself in a strangled, sobbing tone that broke Jed's heart.

"Leo," he said again, reaching out.

Leo came to with a start, gave a bellow of sheer fear, and then leaped off the bed and stood, breathing heavily, by the table. He looked at Jed as if surprised to see him, and then, without warning, he bent over double and was violently sick. Jed winced as waves of whisky scented vomit assaulted his nose. He got up, went over to his friend, and rubbed gentle circles on his back as Leo heaved his guts out.

"It's okay," Jed muttered, wondering privately if it was, or if it ever could be again.

When Leo had finished, Jed grabbed a towel from the grubby en suite shower room, and cleaned up both Leo and the mess on the floor. Leo sat down, shaking his head, one arm resting limply on the table.

"I'm sorry, Jed," he said, utterly dejected, his tones full of despair. "I'm so sorry."

"That's okay." Jed sat down opposite his friend and reached out and covered Leo's hand with his own. "Do you want to tell me what's going on now?" He asked gently. Leo's blue eyes met his own and Jed knew that more than anything else in the world Leo didn't want to talk about what was going on, and, equally, that he would, because while he didn't want to he needed to, and Jed was the only person on this planet qualified to listen.

"I've lost my way, Jed," Leo said softly. "I don't believe any more."

"Don't believe in what? In the war?" Jed asked.

"No...it's worse than that," Leo replied, a haunted look in his eyes. "I don't believe in anything, Jed. Nothing. All those things we used to talk about – politics, education, religion, race...I don't care about any of it any more. How can I talk about something I don't care about any more, Jed? I know what you want from me but it isn't there any more. I'm empty inside. Numb." He gazed at Jed imploringly, his eyes full of despair.

"What happened to you out there, Leo?" Jed whispered, squeezing Leo's fingers hard.

"I saw things, Jed – things that made me question myself. I was so sure that I was right, that America was right...but you know something? We're not always the good guys. We do stuff that we shouldn't. I genuinely believed we were helping the South Vietnamese but when I got over there I saw how different it really was. I began to question whether we had a right

to interfere and I asked myself how I could have been so wrong," Leo said softly. "I struggled with it for a long time – I still believed partially in what we were doing – intellectually maybe, but I stopped believing it inside, and at some point...at some point I stopped believing in anything at all. It's easy, Jed, really easy if you try. You numb one part of yourself so that you can keep going and pretty soon all of you is numb and you can't feel anything."

"Leo, you've been fighting out there for a long time. You're just tired," Jed said softly. "Anybody would be in the circumstances."

"I've lost so many friends, Jed – friend after friend, and good men too, lost to a war that looks as if it'll never end and all in the cause of a hugely corrupt regime."

"Leo..."

"I was dreading seeing you," Leo whispered and Jed felt as if someone had physically punched him.

"Why?" He shook his head.

"Because I knew you'd be like this. Unchanged, still with that stupid light in your eyes and that need to save the entire fucking planet," Leo snapped. "You're always the lucky one, Jed. You have a wife, a kid...you've moved on in your life and I'm stuck in mine. I don't even know what I believe in any more. I don't have any certainties left. You have everything, Jed and I have nothing."

"You've still got me," Jed replied, squeezing Leo's hand again. "Is that why you behaved like this tonight? Because you wanted to make sure I couldn't have something I want? That I couldn't have you?"

Leo shook his head. "I don't think I was thinking anything that clearly, Jed."

"Leo, when you came into the bar downstairs I was envious of you," Jed told him forcefully.

"Envious of me?" Leo raised his head, a dull look in his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I felt like you were the one moving on with your life and that I was standing still. I'm not doing anything I want to be doing, Leo. Somehow, life just got in the way of all our plans. I'm married, sure, and I have a daughter who I adore, but...everything else is a lot tougher than I thought it would be. I don't know how to get on the path I want to be on. There always seems to be another goal to aim for but I seem further away than ever from fulfilling any of my dreams. Money's tight so both Abbey and I are working all the hours god sends and I don't see as much of Lizzie as I'd like."

"Well at least money isn't something I have to worry about." Leo gave a self deprecating shrug. "They just keep putting it in my account and I never have a chance to spend it on anything except liquor."

"You're drinking way too much, Leo," Jed commented.

"I know. It helps." Leo shrugged.

"In the short term," Jed pointed out.

"I don't even know if I have a long term, Jed," Leo said softly. "I don't know how I've survived this long. I go out there every day and wonder how the hell I'm still alive."

"And the anonymous sex?" Jed asked. "Does that help too?"

Leo raised his eyes slowly to meet those of his friend. "How did you know?" He asked, his voice sounding almost toneless.

"I guessed. Tonight had a feeling of being rehearsed, as if it's something you do often – but you never did it like this with me so I figure you learned it someplace else." Jed felt as if someone had plunged a knife into his gut and twisted, very slowly.

"You're jealous?" Leo sounded surprised.

"Yes, I am," Jed replied heatedly. "I'm jealous of every man you touch, Leo McGarry, jealous of every man you sleep with, every man you kiss. Who are they? Do you even know their names?"

"I usually prefer not to," Leo replied, his lips twisting in distaste. "Jed, I have never yet had sex with a man and wished it wasn't you." He paused and then continued, his voice full of pain. "I get lonely, Jed. Without you, being in that goddamn hellhole, doing something I'm not sure I believe in any more...I get so fucking lonely. I want you. I want to feel you, to smell you and touch you and make love to you. While I'm fucking faceless strangers I can imagine they're you, just for a short while."

"I guess I should be flattered." Jed made a face. "I don't know what to say, Leo. I can't be there with you and I wish you could be here with me but that isn't going to happen – not for awhile anyhow - so we have to find a strategy to help you deal with all this."

"A strategy?" Leo laughed out loud. "Oh, Jed, you have no fucking idea – you still sound like a wannabe politician who thinks everything can be solved with strategies and manifestos."

"I won't give up on you, Leo McGarry," Jed said quietly. "Even when you give up on yourself, and even when you do your damndest to push me away. I won't ever give up on you." He squeezed Leo's hand again, tightly, and Leo looked at him with the faintest glimmer of hope radiating in those blue eyes.

"I'm so tired, Jed," he whispered. "I just want to rest."

Jed got up, went to kneel in front of his friend and put his hands on Leo's shoulders.

"Hey," he whispered. "I got you. I'm still me and you're still you somewhere inside there, Leo. I know you are."

The mask faltered for a moment, and then vanished, melting away, and suddenly Jed found himself looking at Leo McGarry again, his Leo McGarry, the 17 year old boy he had fallen in love with years ago. Leo reached out a hand and gently smoothed Jed's hair away from his forehead, an old, familiar gesture. Jed leaned into it, and rubbed his face against that caressing hand.

"Why did you stop replying to my letters, Leo? Why didn't you lean on me when all this was going on inside that dumbass brain of yours?" Jed smiled at his friend. "I could have helped."

Leo shrugged. "I didn't want to worry you; you were thousands of miles away and besides you have other responsibilities now. You have Abbey and Lizzie – they need you more than I do."

"No, that's not true," Jed told him, straightening up and getting to his feet. "You're part of my family too, Leo, and you're just as important as Abbey and Liz." He rested his hands on Leo's head and pulled his friend against his belly, holding him there. Leo came easily, beyond fighting, beyond anything right now, just needing to be loved and Jed knew that he could do that. It wasn't hard to love Leo McGarry. It never had been. "You should have told me," Jed told his friend firmly, stroking his fingers through Leo's hair.

"You know how you hate not being involved," Leo said with a shaky laugh. "I thought if I told you I'd wake up one morning and find you'd hitched a ride all the way out to Thailand to yell some sense into me. Doesn't mean I don't love you, Jed," he murmured apologetically.

"Show me then." Jed took a step back, and, grasping both Leo's hands in his own, pulled his friend to his feet. He put his fingers on Leo's shirt and began, slowly, to unbutton it. Leo just stood there, allowing Jed to undress him. Jed pushed Leo's shirt back from his body and found a shiny purple mark on his left shoulder that hadn't been there before. He paused, and then examined it with his fingers.

"What's this?" He asked.

"Shrapnel wound." Leo shrugged.

Jed gazed at his friend searchingly, saw in Leo's shadowed eyes something he had known, deep in his heart, from the very first moment Leo had stepped into the bar downstairs looking so much like a stranger, earlier that evening. "You got shot down, Leo?" He asked.

"Yeah - 4 months ago," Leo said softly, and then, hurriedly, after hearing Jed's sharp intake of breath, "It's all part of the job, Jed. Thud pilots are supposed to clear out anti-aircraft and SAM batteries to clear the way for other aircraft, and that means making ourselves targets."

Jed felt his stomach clench in distress. "That sounds incredibly risky," he whispered.

"It is. I told you, we lose a lot of good men that way...and some of the green kids coming up don't have the experience to know how to stay alive...you have to try to protect them as best you can or they don't live very long."

"So you ran some risks?" Jed commented, not remotely surprised. Leo shrugged.

"I guess I got careless. I got tagged with anti-aircraft fire and lost my plane out from underneath me."

"Were you hurt anywhere else?" Jed ran his fingers over Leo's body, searching for more wounds.

"I'm fine – just a couple of cracked ribs, a few cuts and bruises and one hell of a sore back from when I bailed out. I was just damn lucky that I was picked up by a rescue chopper. It isn't a big deal, Jed."

"It is to me." Jed's fingers found Leo's ribs and trailed over each and every one of them, as if reclaiming them. Leo rested his head against Jed's shoulder, and let him finish the caress.

"I think, deep inside, that I was even grateful that it happened," he murmured.

"Grateful?" Jed drew back, and took Leo's face between his hands. "Grateful? For being shot down, Leo?"

"No, for making me feel something again, even if it was only pain. I hadn't felt anything for such a long time you see, Jed," Leo said, his voice raw.

"Oh, Leo." Jed felt as if his own heart was breaking and he pulled his friend close and kissed him fiercely. "Leo, please, don't give up on life, on the world, on us. Please. I can't promise you that I can wave a magic wand and make all this go away; you and I both know that I can't do that. All I can do is love you, Leo. It's all I've ever been able to do. Please don't say that's not enough now. Please." His eyes were beseeching. "Please," he whispered again. "I've never known anyone like you, Leo. You're part of me – the best part of me maybe. I can have faith enough for both of us, Leo. I can believe for both of us, and love for both of us until you start feeling something again, just don't give up. Trust me until then, okay?" He took Leo's face in his hands again. "Trust me to do that for us and don't give up."

Leo gazed at him like a man slowly waking from a nightmare.

"I'll try, Jed," he whispered.

"If the drink and the sex get you through then that's fine. I'm not walking in your shoes and I'm not about to give you a hard time about it," Jed said urgently. "Just be careful, Leo - and remember that there is something good waiting for you when you come back home. There is something to live for. I promise you that."

Leo was silent, and then finally, he nodded. "Okay," he whispered hoarsely.

"Come here." Jed led him to the bed, and finished undressing him, then pushed Leo down on the mattress and sank down beside him. He took Leo in his arms and began, very slowly, to make love to him. Leo, usually such an active participant in their lovemaking, was strangely passive and compliant, as if he had finally given up responsibility for a great weight that he had been carrying alone, for far too long. Jed made love to him with every inch of affection and adoration he possessed. He covered Leo's body with his own, kissed his mouth for a long time and then moved lower, his lips trailing over the round, purple scar on his shoulder. He went lower still, sucked on Leo's nipples and was gratified when Leo arched up into him, moaning softly. Leo was already erect before he took his cock in his hand and pumped it firmly. He spread Leo's thighs, and licked his balls for a long time, arousing his friend thoroughly, before reaching for the lube.

"You ready, Leo?" He asked, kneeling between his friend's legs. Leo gave him that twisted Leo grin that Jed loved so much, and reached out to caress the side of his face.

"Sure," he said softly.

Jed inserted a lubed finger into Leo's ass and Leo kicked his legs out even wider to allow easier access. Jed smiled – Leo so rarely ever liked to bottom, but on this occasion, it just felt right – and, he thought, it was something his friend seemed to need right now.

He entered Leo slowly, looking down into his friend's eyes as he did so. Leo smiled up at him, encouraging him on, and raised his hand to caress Jed's back. Jed leaned forward to claim another kiss and Leo responded eagerly. They made love slowly, with more affection than passion. This wasn't about being horny, about getting each other off, the way it had so often been – this really was about making love, literally making love. Jed wanted to show Leo that he was loved with every single atom of his being. He wasn't sure, but he thought that at some point during that long, slow, love-making session, a hint of light returned to Leo's eyes, and the shadows receded a little. It wasn't the best sex they'd had, or the most explosive, but it was the most tender and the most intimate, and later, after they'd both come, Jed wrapped his naked body around Leo's and held his friend tightly.

"You must have been given leave after your first tour of duty," Jed whispered. "Why didn't you come home then, Leo? I could have helped. I could have been there for you."

Leo reached up and touched the hand that was wrapped around his chest. "I couldn't face you, Jed, knowing what I'd become. I spent my leave drinking in seedy bars and picking up strangers for sex – men or women, it made no difference to me. I wasn't even sure that I could face you tonight – that was why I was so late. I only turned up in the end because I know what a goddamn fuss you like to make about this particular anniversary." Jed gave a snort of amusement – he knew Leo thought he was hopelessly romantic – it was a source of much bantering between them and always had been but somehow Leo needed his brand of naïve romanticism to balance out his own much darker world view, just as Jed needed Leo's level headed pragmatism to puncture his own occasionally over-sentimental and folksy view of the world. "I had to move heaven and earth to get leave as it was and I knew you'd be

devastated if I didn't show. I couldn't do that to you," Leo continued. "I wasn't so numb that I could do that to you, Jed."

"Leo, I hate to see you like this. Will you at least promise me that you'll reply to my letters," Jed said.

"You think I need an anchor? I can take care of myself, Jed," Leo murmured, but he sounded so very tired.

"I think we all need an anchor occasionally, a rock, someone to lean on. There's no shame in that," Jed said softly, kissing the sweat-dampened hair on the back of Leo's neck. "One day you can do it for me, but right now it's something I can do for you. Do we have a deal?"

Leo was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. "Okay," he whispered.

They didn't leave the hotel room all the next day or night – they just stayed in bed, talking and making love. Jed thought that maybe it did some good. The Leo he said goodbye to the following morning was a little brighter, a little more like the sparkling-eyed, 17-year-old boy with the impish grin who he'd first fallen in love with. Jed didn't kid himself that their problems were over though – Leo was still damaged, still doubted himself, still had a wound in his soul that Jed wasn't sure could ever be healed.

The following morning they took a shower together, and then kissed each other goodbye before leaving the room. Leo's kiss was as full of electricity as ever and he clung onto Jed as if he never wanted them to part. Finally, they tore away from each other and gazed at each other for a long time before Leo reached for his bag.

"You go, Jed. I'll get the check," Leo said.

"No, that's not fair. I'll give you half." Jed opened his own wallet, and sighed at the meagre contents. Cheap though the room was, money was so tight that it was an extravagance he really couldn't afford right now. His father was adamant that his son stand on his own two feet and refused to give him any financial help at all, and although Jed respected that, it was hard making ends meet.

"I mean it." Leo took Jed's wallet out of his hand, closed it, and put it back in Jed's pocket. "Jed, we each do what we can for each other, right? You did what you could for me in this room and I can do this – I have the money. I might not have a whole lot else but I have that. One day our situations might be different, then you can pay – hell, I'll insist." Leo gave a faint ghost of that twisted grin that Jed loved so much.

"Okay." Jed gave in gracefully. His last sight of Leo was of a handsome Air Force officer, no longer a stranger, striding out of that room in his uniform, his back straight and his head held high, even if his eyes were still full of shadows.

Chapter 3 by Xanthe

June 17th, 2002

"I thought we'd eat in the Lincoln bedroom," Jed said, steering Leo along the corridor. "As it's a special occasion."

He opened the door to the bedroom, and guided Leo inside. Leo stopped on the threshold, took one look, and then tried to turn around and walk back out again.

"Uh-uh," Jed said, shoving him into the room, grinning broadly. The entire room was literally filled with red candles, all flickering away merrily, and there was a cosy table set for two.

"Jed, you shouldn't have," Leo commented. Jed laughed. He had lit an entire truckload of candles not because he particularly liked candles himself but because he knew it would exasperate Leo and he enjoyed teasing his unromantic lover with excesses of this kind. They had a familiar, comfortable, ongoing bickering contest about Leo's lack of romance compared to Jed's excess, and both played up those particular characteristics far more than Jed suspected they actually felt them in order to enjoy the ensuing fallout from the other.

"I told you it was a big one, Leo," he grinned. "40 years. You really weren't expecting me to let it pass without a grand gesture or two were you?"

"I could only hope," Leo grimaced, gazing around the gently glowing room. "I guess it beats some of the dives we've spent this anniversary in over the years though," he commented, sitting down at the table.

Jed served the chilli onto plates from a side table he'd set up earlier, and then sat down and watched while Leo took a tentative bite out of his dinner.

"So, do we have a verdict?" Jed leaned back and surveyed his friend. Jed rarely cooked for Leo – he had frequently cooked for Abbey and the girls over the years but he and Leo rarely had a chance to spend an evening alone together in any place that had a kitchen. Leo savoured his mouthful, a thoughtful expression on his face. "It's good isn't it?" Jed grinned, piling up his own fork. "You know it's good but it kills you to say it."

"Are you going to give me a chance to reply or have you already decided?" Leo asked.

"Go right ahead," Jed invited, making a face and waiting for what he expected would be some kind of put down.

"It's delicious, Jed," Leo told him sincerely.

"Hah!" Jed grinned delightedly. "Hah!" He said again, lost for words. Leo rolled his eyes.

"Is this going to be the level of the conversation all evening?" He asked.

Jed took a bite out of his own meal and sighed happily. Leo was right – it was delicious. He was pleased, even though it really wouldn't have mattered if it wasn't, but this anniversary was a big deal to Jed. 40 years was a long time to have sustained such an intense and occasionally volatile relationship as the one he had with Leo. In recent years it had slipped into something very comfortable but there had been times over the past four decades when it hadn't always been so easy. What had sustained them throughout their long association was the fundamental knowledge that they loved each other and had a connection with each other that was as inexplicable as it was intoxicating. Their relationship was as necessary to their lives as the air they breathed and the food they ate.

"Forty years. God that makes me feel old," Leo commented, his eyes crinkling up at the edges as he smiled at his lover.

"You are old, Leo. You're lucky I don't ditch you for one of those bright young things we employ," Jed commented.

"Ah, so which one would you pick if you had a choice?" Leo bantered, grinning widely. "Let me guess – how about Sam?"

"Why Sam?"

"He's a good looking kid, and you seem to have a thing with him."

"I do not have a thing with Sam!" Jed protested.

"Sure you do. You're always dropping by to give him little pep talks. You so have a thing with Sam."

"If I have a thing with Sam it's an entirely proper and above-board paternal thing," Jed countered. "Unlike the thing you have with Josh."

"I do not have a thing with Josh!" Leo complained, sounding outraged. "My god, he's just a kid!"

"So is Sam. Perhaps we can both agree that we have entirely respectful mentoring-type feelings towards both Josh and Sam and leave it at that," Jed grinned, knowing neither of them was being remotely serious.

"Hmmm, maybe Josh and Sam have a thing with each other," Leo commented with a sly grin.

"Well, that'd be nice for them but I doubt it," Jed shrugged.

"Why not?"

"Because not everybody is as lucky as we are, Leo," Jed said softly. "I don't think relationships like this come along that often. I don't think broad-minded wives, and a

strength of companionship and depth of emotion this powerful, lasting for this long, are the norm. I think we're lucky – very lucky. I know you always laugh at me for insisting that we celebrate this particular anniversary every year but we have a rare thing, Leo, and I don't ever want to take that for granted."

Leo gazed at him silently, his blue eyes full of emotion, but he said nothing. Instead he grunted, and then pulled his gaze away and glanced around the room.

"The candles aren't so bad," he commented.

Jed smiled to himself.

June 17th, 1993

Jed sat at his desk in his study reading through some papers. He glanced at the clock with a scowl of annoyance. It was nearly 8pm and Leo was long overdue. His lover had been scheduled to arrive earlier in the afternoon to spend a few days with Jed at the New Hampshire residence – Abbey had taken the girls on an educational trip to Washington to tour all the museums on purpose in order to facilitate Jed and Leo having a few days together. Jed wasn't unduly worried – he knew Leo worked hard and might have been delayed getting away but all the same it had been 21 years since Leo had last showed up late for their anniversary and he felt a slight knot of foreboding in his gut. Last time this had happened, something bad had been going on with Leo – did his lateness this evening presage something similar?

Jed glanced at the faded photo he kept on his desk of two boys talking animatedly at the Boy's Nation summer camp nearly 30 years previously and smiled. They'd had their ups and downs over the years but their relationship was still as strong as ever.

When Leo had finally been discharged from the Air Force he'd stayed with Jed and Abbey for awhile. That hadn't been easy but Abbey had been 100% behind Jed on the need to support Leo during a difficult time. Slowly but surely Jed had been able to work some kind of magic with Leo. He drew his friend out of the shell he had withdrawn into, got Leo involved in the local political scene, and introduced him to some influential people in the area. Leo's beliefs had returned, but Jed was never entirely sure that his confidence had. Leo had always been so sure of everything, but now there seemed to be a bitter, nagging, nugget of self-doubt at the back of his still sharp and inquiring mind. Finally he'd grown tired of trespassing on Jed's territory and had taken himself off to Washington DC to make full use of his law degree and get involved in the politics there. He had made a lot of money in law but his real passion had always been politics and after many years his career had culminated in him being appointed Secretary of Labor – a job that Jed had heard he was exceptionally good at. Their paths crossed politically a few times, and they still met regularly to talk, to make love, and to renew their friendship. However long it was between their meetings, Jed always felt the same way whenever he saw Leo; his skin always tingled, and the knowing, sparkling light in Leo's blue eyes always made him want to tear his friend's clothes from his body and make wild, abandoned love to him. Later they would always talk, talk, talk - arguing passionately, disagreeing, agreeing, but always in the spirit of intense intellectual debate. Even when they

disagreed profoundly it never affected their friendship – they were too close and appreciated each other's intellect too much for that.

Jed had been delighted when Leo had phoned him soon after leaving New Hampshire and told him that he wanted him to meet someone.

"Her name's Jenny and I asked her to marry me," he said, sounding both bashful and happy at the same time. "The poor girl must be crazy because she said yes."

"Leo, that's fantastic news!" Jed said, and he'd meant it despite the little knife of jealousy that had twisted in his gut. He had always been the jealous type – more jealous than Leo, whose pragmatic approach to politics also extended to his love life. "We must meet her! Bring her to dinner soon."

Leo had practically brought her straight over and Jed had found Jenny shy but eager to please. She didn't possess anything like Abbey's intellect, but she did have a warm, homely quality to her that Jed could understand Leo being attracted to. She didn't want a career – she wanted to stay home and take care of Leo, and Jed could understand that too. He knew all too well what she saw in Leo McGarry – the deep core of vulnerability hidden beneath the brusque, sharp-eyed, pragmatic exterior. Oh yes, he knew exactly what attracted Jenny to Leo McGarry, from the way Leo could make you feel as if you were the only person in the room worth listening to by the intensity of his stare, to the way his hands and tongue made love to every inch of your body, claiming it for his own. There had been a slight wariness in Jenny's eyes when she'd been introduced to Jed, and though he did his best to put her at her ease, he sensed that there was something about him that she disliked, or distrusted.

"So," he'd asked Leo after they'd eaten, when they were alone together, both women having retired to bed. "You've told her about us?"

"Yes." Leo nodded. "I told her as soon as we started getting serious. I said our relationship was non-negotiable and if that bothered her then we'd best split up before one of us got hurt. She had some problems with it at first but...I think she got over those." Leo shrugged. Jed shook his head – he knew that Leo didn't feel jealousy in the same way he did, and, he suspected, the way Jenny did. Leo hadn't seen the look in Jenny's eyes when they'd first been introduced but Jed had, and he understood it all too well. Back off, it had told him, making it clear she saw him as a rival for Leo's affections. Jenny would share Leo if this was the only way to have him, but only so long as his relationship with Jed never threatened her place as Queen Bee in his life.

The marriage had been fine for awhile – Jed had been the first person a deliriously happy and excited Leo phoned when his daughter, Mallory was born barely 9 months after the wedding - but afterwards Jed got the feeling that things weren't going so well between Jenny and Leo. Leo never said anything but Jed knew he worked himself too hard and also that he was drinking again – never a good sign with Leo. The last few times Jed had seen his friend Leo's drinking had bothered him enough to chide Leo gently about it – but Leo had downplayed Jed's concerns and Jed wasn't sure how much he should interfere. Leo's drinking certainly didn't seem to affect his career, which went from strength to strength, but

that hollow, shadowed look was still there in his eyes; if Jed was honest he knew it had never entirely gone away after Vietnam. He knew Leo still occasionally suffered from back pain from the injuries he'd sustained in 'Nam, and he wondered if he drank partly in order to deal with that.

They'd both done well – Leo's sharp mind and ability with money had meant that he'd built up a tidy fortune, and Jed sometimes, in his more distrustful moments, suspected that was why Jenny stayed, although he was aware that might just be his jealous mind doing her a disservice. Jed's money worries had eased after his father died, bequeathing a fair amount of money to his son – certainly enough for Jed to capitalise on, particularly as Abbey's career had taken off, and they were both earning good money. Later he had achieved his own career success, with a Nobel prize for Economics under his belt, a tenure at Dartmouth and, finally, the governorship of New Hampshire which helped him feel that he had gone some way at least to realising his earlier political ambitions, even if it wasn't anywhere near the lofty heights he and Leo had dreamed about all those years ago at the Boy's Nation Camp.

Through it all, his relationship with Leo had remained a constant in his life – Jed still got excited every June knowing that they'd have at least a night together, and hopefully a couple of days; in this busy time when they both had families and high powered jobs that took up all their energy, it was a relief to touch base and just relax with each other, especially when their meetings had become so few and far between...which made Jed all the more annoyed that Leo was late. He glanced at the clock again, torn between anxiety and annoyance. Supposing Leo had had an accident? Supposing...Jed didn't even like to think about it, but supposing his friend had been drinking and then had driven on down here? He didn't think Leo would drive if he was drunk, but Leo's drinking was spiralling out of control and Jed often worried that he would make a mistake one day, and slip up as a result of his alcoholism...because that's what it was. He had flinched away from saying so directly to Leo's face, but it was getting to the stage where he knew he'd have to say something. At that moment the phone rang, breaking into his reverie.

"Bartlet," Jed answered, hoping it was Leo.

"Jed?" The voice on the other end of the line sounded strangely fragile and Jed's mood changed immediately to one of concern.

"Leo – where are you?"

"I...I'm not sure. Jed...I've...my wallet has been stolen. Someone jumped me from behind," Leo said.

"Christ – Leo, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I have a bump on my head from where I fell but it's nothing serious."

"Leo, you must know where you are!"

"I'm close. I stopped for a drink on the way," Leo told him. "Then...I was going to get a taxi

the rest of the way, Jed, I wasn't going to drive."

"Oh hell, Leo, are you drunk?" Jed demanded. "Why the hell did you need to stop for a drink on the way when you knew you'd be here soon? Damn it, Leo!" It suddenly occurred to Jed how very close to the edge Leo must be if he couldn't even make their anniversary without needing a drink.

"There's a bar called...Raymonds? And a restaurant with a big red, plastic chicken outside," Leo said. "There's a motel too – I'm in the motel parking lot."

"Okay - I know where you are," Jed said. "Hold on there, Leo. I'll be about 20 minutes."

It was pouring with rain as he got into the car and drove to his rescue mission, torn between anxiety and anger towards his old friend. He found Leo sitting in the motel parking lot, the purple bruise on his forehead dissected down the middle by a small red cut oozing blood, the rain plastering his greying hair to the side of his face. Jed got out of the car and checked Leo over anxiously – and it was only when he was sure that his friend was fine that his anxiety spilled over into anger for what seemed to him to have been an entirely unnecessary incident.

"Get in the car," he said brusquely. Rightly judging the level of Jed's anger, Leo didn't so much as attempt an apology. He just gave a faintly sheepish smile and climbed into the car, reeking of alcohol and cigarette smoke and the musty smell of damp coat.

"We will talk about this, Leo," Jed promised. "If you think I'm going to stand by and watch you screw up your life then you've got another think coming."

"Yes, Jed," Leo sighed wearily, resting his head on the window, and staring out at the rain-swept landscape outside, looking like a half-drowned puppy waiting to be kicked.

"And don't think you can do that cute, vulnerable thing either," Jed admonished. "You always do this, Leo, always make us feel that we have to protect you from the consequences of your drinking or that we're not allowed to say anything about it. Well I'm not doing it any more. This time you face up to it."

"Yes, Jed," Leo agreed, way too easily.

"I mean it, Leo. I'm not just talking – this time I'm really going to make you face yourself. Christ, I can't believe you did this on our anniversary. Why the hell did you stop for a drink when you knew you were coming to me?"

"I don't know. I just felt like one."

"So this means we have to spend the entire evening arguing instead of having sex and that makes me doubly pissed off, Leo," Jed snapped.

"We don't have to spend the evening arguing – we could skip straight to the sex," Leo

commented hopefully.

"In your condition I doubt you're even capable," Jed replied scathingly.

"I've been capable when I've been in a hell of a lot worse condition than this," Leo riposted.

"Well more fool whoever you were with at the time then because frankly the thought of kissing you when you stink of alcohol and you can't even stand up straight is not all that alluring, Leo."

"Oh, fine. I really don't care," Leo grouched, banging his head against the window again. Outside the rainfall had turned into a full-blown thunderstorm, the skies as dark and glowering as Jed's mood. They drove the rest of the way in silence. Leo got out when they reached the governor's mansion and walked very slowly, and very deliberately up the steps, clearly wanting to prove that he wasn't as drunk as Jed was making out. Jed watched him with a bitter expression on his face. He knew exactly how drunk Leo was – there wasn't anything he didn't know about Leo McGarry. He followed Leo into the house, put a hand on his friend's shoulder, and propelled him angrily into the kitchen.

"Sit down," he ordered curtly, shoving Leo into a chair. Leo sat, and then rose again.

"I need to go to the bathroom," he muttered.

"I said, SIT DOWN!" Jed roared. Leo glared at him mutely for a moment, rebellion radiating from his hard blue eyes, and then sat. Jed turned on the faucet, poured Leo a large glass of water and thumped it down on the table. "Drink it," he ordered. Leo glared at him again but lifted the glass reluctantly to his lips all the same. Jed looked in the kitchen cupboards for the medicine box that he knew Abbey kept somewhere in the general environs. All the family's medical ailments were dealt with by his wife and for some inexplicable reason she chose to store the box in the cupboard in which Jed felt it least belonged. He located it with much cursing and then slammed the cupboard door shut. Leo winced. Jed ignored him and began running some water in a basin. He grabbed a cotton ball out of the box, soaked it in the water, and then returned to the table.

"Hold still," he said curtly, grabbing Leo's head in his hands and applying the cotton ball none too gently to his friend's wounded head.

"Ow! Fuck, Jed," Leo complained, pulling away.

"I said, hold still. I have virtually zero patience with you right now, Leo McGarry so do as you're damn well told," Jed told him sharply. Leo submitted to Jed pulling his head back and bathing the cut thoroughly, before covering it with a band-aid.

"It's just a small cut – but you're lucky that you don't need stitches," Jed growled. "Did you get a look at whoever robbed you?"

"No." Leo shrugged. "I told you they jumped me from behind."

"I expect they saw you drinking yourself stupid and thought you'd make an easy target once you left the bar," Jed told him. "Stay here and don't move. I'm going to call the police."

"Oh don't fucking bother. They're not going to find this guy now," Leo snapped.

"I don't care – a crime has been committed and I happen to believe that's a bad thing that should be reported to the authorities whether or not the victim was damn well asking for it or not," Jed rapped back.

"Well I don't want to talk to the police," Leo retorted.

"Right now I don't give a flying fuck what you want, Leo," Jed told him. "But somehow I doubt they're going to drag all the way out here in a thunderstorm to take the statement of a deadbeat alcoholic so you'll probably get your own way on that." His tone made it clear that that was the only thing he intended Leo to get his own way on this evening.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You just keep talking, Jed. That's what you're good at," Leo growled at him, clearly stung by the alcoholic comment. "I've never known anyone have so much to say and so little worth listening to."

"And I've never known anyone have so much trouble hearing one simple truth!" Jed shot back.

"And what fucking truth is that, Jed?" Leo sneered.

"That you're an alcoholic," Jed said quietly. "That you need help. That if you continue drinking like this you'll kill yourself. That you can't stay in denial any more because I won't damn well let you!"

"That's four things, Jed. Can't even keep that simple can you?" Leo growled. "I want to leave." He got up, and then hung onto the table, unsteadily, as he swayed.

"Yeah, right." Jed gave a bitter laugh. "You can't drive – you can't even walk right now, Leo and I'm not getting you a goddamn taxi. You are going to stay here and we are going to work this out whether it takes all tonight and all tomorrow to do it."

"There you go being dramatic again," Leo replied with a laugh of his own. "Don't be ridiculous, Jed. You can't keep me here. This is the Governor's mansion for god's sake."

"I wouldn't care if it was the White House," Jed shot back, "you're not moving until I say we're done, Leo."

"No, I'm going to say it. We're done, Jed!" Leo shouted. "We're done. We're through. We're over. I'm going." He began walking towards the door. Jed stepped in front of him.

"You'd rather walk out on thirty years of friendship than admit you're an alcoholic?" Jed

asked. "You love liquor more than you love me, or Jenny, or Mallory?" Jed leaned in close, incandescent with anger.

"Get out of my way, Jed," Leo snarled.

To be fair, Jed always remembered that it was he who made the first move in this fight. He put his hands out and shoved Leo back. Leo reacted angrily, flailing out with his fists and pushing Jed off balance. Seriously furious now, Jed grabbed Leo around the waist and tried to physically force him back onto the chair. Leo grabbed Jed around the back of the neck and tried to pull him forward to throw him off balance. Jed gave a howl of pain and Leo elbowed Jed aside, and reached for the handle of the door.

"You don't damn well walk out on me, Leo!" Jed yelled, grabbing Leo's shoulder and swinging him around...and a few seconds later something very hard made contact with the side of his face, and he felt himself going down. He landed on the floor in a heap, aware of a dull, throbbing pain in his jaw. The room swam for a moment and when it finally came to a halt he found himself looking into Leo's shocked and horrified eyes.

"Oh shit. Jed...I'm sorry. Are you okay?" Leo slumped down on the floor beside him and took his face in his hands. "Jed? Jed?!" He said frantically.

"I'm fine...just a bit dazed..." Jed replied, shaking his head to try and clear it, pushing Leo's hands away. "That's one hell of a right hook you've got there, Leo."

"You're bleeding. Oh Christ." Leo looked around helplessly. Jed put his hand gingerly up to his face and found the blood dripping down the side of his chin. His mouth felt strange and he worked the jaw a couple of times to make sure it wasn't broken and then ran his tongue gingerly around his teeth – and found one of them wobbling precariously.

"Damnit, Leo. You broke one of my teeth," he complained, reaching inside his mouth to find the loose tooth beyond repair. It came out in his hands and he held the bloodied stalk up for Leo to see. Leo just sat there, looking utterly stunned and then he buried his face in his hands. Jed gazed at him for a long time, and then rested his head back against the kitchen cupboard that he was propped up against.

"Oh shit," he said.

Finally, after several long minutes, he reached out with a sigh, clapped his hand roughly around Leo's neck, and drew him close.

Jed wasn't sure how long they sat there, sprawled in a messy heap of tangled limbs and bloodied shirts, Leo's shaking body clasped against his own chest. Outside the storm raged unabated but inside he thought that maybe things had calmed down a bit. There was still a long way to go though. After what had to be at least an hour of total silence, Leo took a long, shuddering sigh, and sat up. He winced as he looked at Jed's blood stained face, but to his credit he didn't look away. He just stared, glumly, at Jed for what seemed like another hour. Still neither man spoke. Then, eventually, Leo ducked his head slightly.

"If you want me to leave then I'll go," he whispered.

"If I want you to leave?!" Jed snapped, still managing to sound furious despite the fact that his jaw ached and his mouth felt weird. "Leo, we just had this fight because I don't damn well want you to leave! So no! Do not, under any circumstances, leave, because I promise you that if you go now then I'll never forgive you."

"Okay." Leo whispered with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "D'you think that maybe we should get up now?"

"I don't think I can move right at this precise moment," Jed replied. His entire body felt like a sack of potatoes and he ached in places he didn't even know existed.

"Hah." Leo gave a short, bitter mirthless laugh.

"What?" Jed raised an eyebrow. "You're finding this funny, Leo?"

"No – just thinking that somehow, and I don't know how, you always manage to manoeuvre yourself onto the moral high ground. Bastard." Leo made a face.

"You obviously have something to say – why don't you get it all off your chest?" Jed suggested, in a slightly dangerous tone.

"Why not? You want to talk about my drinking and that's fine, but let's also talk about your insufferable smugness, Jed. Is there anything in your life that doesn't come up smelling of fucking roses?" Leo growled.

"I don't know why you're complaining. What have I got that you don't have?" Jed replied. "You have a powerful job – you're Secretary of Labor for god's sake! You're an extremely wealthy man, you have a beautiful wife and a lovely daughter. So what exactly are you so angry about?"

"I'm angry about us – no, I'm angry about you, Jed," Leo told him furiously. "You have this fantastic relationship with Abbey, you have this great fucking life. I always feel like I'm some kind of footnote to your happiness while you...you're central to mine."

Leo's eyes were almost belligerent as he said that. Jed licked some blood from his split lip.

"You have Jenny," he said.

"It's not the same as what you have with Abbey and you know it. I never found that, Jed," Leo sighed. "God knows I looked – I'm so sick of always being the poor relation in this friendship. The person you pick up and dust down and feel sorry for."

"I don't feel sorry for you right now. I feel seriously pissed at you but I don't feel sorry for you," Jed snapped.

"If you and I didn't see each other you'd survive," Leo said morosely, continuing with his theme. "You'd still have Abbey and god knows one great relationship is all a man needs in his life. I'm just some kind of optional extra. I love Jenny, but let's not kid ourselves that we have the same kind of relationship you and Abbey have. I can't talk to her, Jed, not really, not the way I talk to you. You're the only person I've ever met that I can really talk to...and you have Abbey. You can talk to her. You don't really need me."

"I have spent the past month looking forward to this anniversary, Leo, so don't tell me who I do and do not need," Jed replied angrily.

"Yeah, you look forward to your dabble in rough trade," Leo grinned, but it was an ugly grin. Jed knew it was the liquor talking but that didn't make it any easier to hear. "You like it when I get rough with you, Jed. You like it when I take charge, when we get really physical, when I fuck you so hard into the sheets that you scream. I guess that's the only thing you can get from me that you can't get from Abbey."

"Leo, I swear to god that if you keep talking like this I won't be the only one with a bloody jaw," Jed replied.

"Oh please. I may be drunk on my ass but I could still take you in a fight any day," Leo said dismissively.

"That may well be so," Jed replied. "But I have righteous anger on my side and I think you'll find that lends a man a certain degree of strength in a situation like this."

"Righteous anger. Yeah. Is there anything you don't feel righteous about, Jed?"

"I don't feel righteous about you," Jed said softly. "I don't feel smug or superior, Leo, although I can see that I might look that way to you occasionally. I love you, Leo and I want you to be happy. I've always wanted that. I can't stand to see you throw your life away like this. What happened? What the hell happened to us, Leo?"

"We got old," Leo sighed, "and we never did all the things we said we were going to do."

"We're not that old. Isn't there still time?"

"Time? Yes." Leo shrugged. "But maybe not the ambition." He shrugged again.

"We both did okay, Leo," Jed commented. "I'm Governor of New Hampshire and you're Secretary of Labor. I think we're both ambitious enough."

"But are we ambitious enough to go all the way to the top, Jed?" Leo asked. "Because I don't think I believe in that fantasy any more."

"What happened to that 17 year old kid who believed in that dream?" Jed asked softly.

"Oh hell, Jed, we were so fucking innocent and stupid back then that it's painful to even think about it," Leo snapped. Jed felt as if his friend had punched him all over again – he still thought fondly of those young boys they'd once been, and it pained him to hear Leo be so dismissive.

"Well I still believe," Jed replied fiercely. "Leo, is this still about 'Nam? Because you know I think it is – at least partly. That's when you started drinking like this. That's when you gave up on your dreams. It seems to me that everything you've done since then has just been going through the motions."

"I don't know." Leo shrugged. "I feel like I'm only half alive some of the time, Jed. If I was with you all the time, maybe I'd find a way back to believing again but you and I both know that's unrealistic. Drinking...drinking numbs all these feelings – it helps me to function, Jed."

"You're not functioning, Leo. You're barely existing," Jed told him softly. "This isn't a life – it's a charade. You have to face up to what happened in 'Nam. You have to come to terms with it."

"You want me to go to rehab," Leo said, looking at his old friend steadily.

"Yes I do."

"You want me to see some fucking shrink to whom I'll pay a fortune just to hear that the war fucked me up, or my childhood fucked me up, or my relationship with you or Jenny fucked me up and that's why I feel this way." Leo shook his head.

"You won't know unless you go," Jed told him. "Leo, I've never felt more alive than when I'm with you, not even when I'm with Abbey and that's the honest truth. You have a way of making everything vibrant and more colourful somehow. When I'm with you I see all the possibilities and it excites me. I still feel the same way about you that I felt when I was 17, Leo. I still feel like you're the smarter one, the quiet one who has it all figured out, the one all the other guys look up to, the one person more than any other in this world who I want to impress. I always thought you'd run for President one day. I really believed that, Leo – and watching your career up on the Hill, I've never been more convinced of it."

"No." Leo shook his head. "I stopped wanting that a long time ago, Jed. I'm not the right man for the job."

"Why not?" Jed asked.

"Well, apart from anything else," Leo said, very, very slowly, "I'm an alcoholic."

Jed felt a tingle creep up his spine at those words and recognised how incredibly important this moment was. Leo had been in denial about this for so long that he had despaired of ever getting his friend to admit the truth.

"Yeah," he replied. "Yeah, you are. Question is – what are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" Leo said, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. "I just hit my best friend, the person I love most in the world. In the circumstances I'll do whatever it takes to make sure that never happens again. I'll go to rehab. I'll commit to honestly and truly getting well. I'll own up to what I am and try my damndest to beat this thing. I'm sorry, Jed." He reached out and plucked the bloodied tooth from the floor. "I'm really sorry," he whispered.

"Hell, I won't miss that old tooth," Jed said grimly. "And if that's all it cost to get you to this point then I'm happy to donate it to such a good cause."

"In the interests of full disclosure...there's something else I should tell you," Leo muttered.

"I can't believe there can possibly be anything else," Jed declared.

"Yeah. There is." Leo shrugged. He reached into his pocket and took out a small bottle of pills.

"What are they?" Jed frowned.

"Valium." Leo shrugged. "When I said I wanted to go to the bathroom earlier it was because I wanted to take these and I didn't want you to see."

"What the hell are you taking valium for?" Jed demanded.

"For the same reason I drink," Leo replied. "I'm addicted to them, Jed. They help me get through, you know?"

"Oh shit." Jed sighed. "When did all this happen, Leo? Was I not paying attention? Was I not a good friend? Did I not call you often enough or take enough interest in your welfare?"

"You did fine, Jed. I screwed up my life all by myself," Leo replied gruffly. "I didn't need any help from you."

"But will you accept my help in getting better?" Jed asked softly. "Because I'll do whatever it takes, Leo. You're the only one who can do this but I'll be right beside you all the way."

"Okay." Leo managed a faded smile. "Now, d'you think the big argument is over because I ache and this floor is hard and I'd really like to go to bed. With or without you – and although I know you have every right to never want me to touch you again I'd prefer it to be with you. I figure we're both too beat to do anything very much but I would like to sleep beside you all the same." Leo gave an embarrassed smile. "It is our anniversary after all."

"Now he remembers," Jed sighed. "Leo, I've never spent our anniversary night apart from you and I don't intend to start now."

Leo nodded, only the relieved expression in his blue eyes showing how much it meant to him that Jed hadn't rejected him. Leo got to his feet, held out his hands, and hauled Jed to

his feet. They walked none too steadily out of the kitchen and up the stairs to the guest bedroom, arms wrapped around each other partly to keep themselves from toppling over and partly because they needed to be close right now. They were too tired to even undress, and instead fell into the big double bed fully clothed. Leo pulled the blankets over them, and they reached for each other, finding comfort just in being close, and were asleep within seconds.

Jed woke the next morning to the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Leo was sitting on the bed next to him in his bathrobe, smelling of soap, freshly cleaned teeth and aftershave.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" He asked, handing Jed a cup of coffee.

"Like the Labor Secretary gave me a good right hook last night," Jed replied, reaching up to pat his sore jaw.

"Sorry." Leo winced.

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt much – just aches." Jed shrugged. "I see no reason to go easy on you about it though."

"Fair enough. I thought you might like to know that I've been making a few phone calls," Leo said. "I called the police and reported last night's robbery – I'll drop by and give them a statement later today." He paused, took a deep breath, and then continued. "And I'm booked into the Sierra Tucson Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Facility for the day after tomorrow. I figured it'd be nice to have at least a day with you before I throw myself into the lion's den."

"Leo, I'm very proud of you," Jed said softly, putting a hand on his friend's arm.

Leo nodded, and then cleared his throat, gazing at Jed thoughtfully.

"You know...I already took a shower but you look as if you could do with one. How about you do that and then I fuck your brains out?"

"Romantically put, Leo, as always," Jed said with a little chuckle. "However, can I just say at this point, before we go any further, that in reference to what you said to me last night, you are not my 'dabble in rough trade'. I like our love making any which way it comes – hard and fast or slow and gentle. Just as long as it's you; that's the important ingredient."

"Okay. I don't know why I said that. I was just mad at you last night because you were calling me on my drinking problem." Leo shrugged. "So, if that's out of the way, can I fuck your brains out now?"

"Sure," Jed replied wincing as he tried to get up off the bed. "Although I don't think I'm exactly going to be all that agile in the sack."

"When were you ever?" Leo questioned incredulously. Jed opened his mouth to protest hotly and Leo grinned slyly. "Had you then," he said.

"You did not!"

"I so did."

Jed was relieved to dispense with his bloodied, slept-in clothes and then step under the steaming hot shower. He was surprised when Leo took off his bathrobe and joined him in there but gave a sigh of contentment as Leo's strong hands came to rest on his shoulders and started giving him a firm, tender massage. "Oh god that feels good," he murmured, leaning into the caress.

"Well, it's the least I can do in penance for robbing you of one of your teeth," Leo said, his fingers finding all the knotted tension in Jed's muscles and easing it out. "Here, turn around. Let me check out that cut." He pulled Jed around, gently examined his split lip and then slipped a finger inside Jed's mouth to check there too. "It's okay...doesn't look so bad now the water's washed the blood away."

"Just go easy on the kissing," Jed told him with a grimace.

"I will." Leo leaned in and deposited the softest, most gentle of kisses on Jed's lips. Jed sighed, and wrapped his arms around Leo's body, loving the hard planes of it. Even though Leo had been doing some hard living in recent years, he still had a washboard stomach and tightly toned pecs – that just seemed to be the way he was built. Jed knew he was verging on flabby by comparison, especially around the midriff, but Leo never complained or even seemed to notice. Leo picked up the soap and lathered Jed's body with it, pausing to drop a kiss here or there on his friend's skin and Jed felt himself starting to relax under the familiar ministrations.

"Where are the lube and condoms?" Leo asked, his hands moving slowly, languorously, caressingly over Jed's body.

"You're going to fuck me in the shower?" Jed questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Why not?" Leo grinned.

"Okay." Jed grinned back. They're in the cabinet."

Leo left the shower for a couple of seconds and returned with the lubricant and condoms. They had started using condoms in the 80's. Leo had told Jed that he hadn't had sex with another man after their June 17th, 1970 anniversary and Jed believed him, and he knew Leo had only had a couple of liaisons with other women before meeting Jenny. Jed had always remained faithful to Leo and Abbey – he'd never even been tempted by anyone else. Even so, they'd decided to use condoms, not because they really thought they were in danger of

contracting any kind of sexually transmitted disease, but out of respect for their wives.

"Hands against the wall, big boy," Leo said, guiding Jed forward.

"Big boy? Have you been watching porno movies, Leo?" Jed chided.

"Nah, I just thought it might turn you on if I talked dirty," Leo grinned.

"Well it doesn't – it just makes me want to laugh and in case you haven't noticed I'm already plenty turned on!"

Jed put his hands on the wall, spread his legs wide apart and thrust his ass out hopefully.

"Hmmm...I've missed this." Leo ran his hand over Jed's ass, fondling it, and Jed sighed and put his head back so that the water ran down his face, soothing and caressing him just as Leo was doing. He felt his butt cheeks being firmly parted and then, instead of feeling Leo's cold, lubed finger, he was startled to feel his lover's warm, wet tongue instead.

"Oh shit!" He whispered. Leo gripped his buttocks in both his hands and continued rimming Jed for a long time until Jed thought he was going to melt into the water and disappear down the plughole. "Oh god that's so good, Leo," he murmured as Leo's talented tongue plunged inside him. Leo took him to the very edge of ecstasy before finally releasing him, and a few seconds later Jed felt his lover's lubed finger being inserted inside him.

"Oh for god's sake cut the whole stretching routine and get your cock inside me," he demanded, unsure whether he could wait a single second longer to feel Leo's hard length pushing into him.

"Uh-uh. I've hurt you enough for one anniversary," Leo told him.

"Okay...but hurry!" Jed said, resting his arms on the wall and laying his head on them.

A few seconds later he felt the tip of Leo's cock nudge into his body, and then his hips were grasped firmly in Leo's hands and he pushed back, needing to feel that familiar length inside him. He loved that moment when Leo was fully inserted, and he paused, and the two of them just enjoyed the sensation of closeness. He could feel Leo's chest against his back, his entire body covering Jed from behind and it felt so good. Then Leo began to move; his hands gently caressed Jed's body, playing with his cock, rubbing his nipples, and fondling his balls. He kissed Jed's neck and nibbled on his earlobes from behind, and then, slowly, he began to thrust. This felt exquisite, the hot water pounding down on him from above and Leo pounding into him from behind. Leo took his time, making sure that Jed was utterly aroused and totally lost in the sensation of their love-making. Leo was a good lover in whatever mood he was in, but Jed had never known his friend to take quite so much time, trouble and care as this. Three times Leo brought him to the edge of climax and three times made him step back from the edge so they could continue making love. The days when they could expect to come 5 or 6 times in one night were long gone and now they liked to savour the experience for as long as possible.

Then, finally, just when Jed thought he could take no more, Leo gave him an orgasm that made everything flash a blinding white colour and his entire body felt as if it had died and been transported to heaven. He was dimly aware that Leo was holding him up, and then he felt himself being walked out of the shower, and wrapped in a towel. They staggered over to the bed and threw themselves down on it, their arms still entwined, their faces pressed together.

"That wasn't bad," Jed murmured.

"Not bad?" Leo protested. "It was fantastic!"

Jed grinned lazily. "Had you then," he said.

Chapter 4 by Xanthe

June 17th, 2002

"That was a very nice meal. Thank you, Jed," Leo said sincerely, stirring his coffee. The remains of their meal were spread out around them, the clean plates testifying to how good it had been.

"Thank you, Leo." Jed smiled at him.

"For what? Showing up?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"No, for 40 years of the best friendship a man could ever hope to have...and, uh, for putting up with my infuriating ways. I know I drive you nuts at times – talking too much, and then there's my – what do you call it? Tendency to over-dramatise?" Jed gave an apologetic smile.

"The whole Latin quote thing can get kind of tiring at times too," Leo commented, his blue eyes shimmering mischievously.

"Yeah," Jed gave a self-deprecating laugh. "You on the other hand are a paragon of saintly virtue and the easiest man in the world to get along with."

"Hardly," Leo winced. "I know I've given you quite a few headaches over the past 40 years."

"Yes, you have," Jed replied, with a grin. "But there's something about you that calms me, Leo. All that steady good sense in the face of my more, uh, extreme episodes." He grimaced, remembering quite a few of their trysts which had been spent with him pacing the carpet worrying away at some problem or another while Leo sat calmly watching him, defusing his concerns with that pragmatism of his, those blue eyes missing nothing and understanding everything about Jed Bartlet. This relationship wasn't and never had been, a one-way street. They'd both had their fair share of problems over the years and had never failed to find, in the other, someone to share the burden and help lighten the load. Leo seemed to

understand, instinctively, all Jed's many and colourful moods – from his occasional dark despair at his inability to change the world, to his over-enthusiastic delight in finding an old map, or discussing some obscure ancient text with anyone who would listen. He also understood that when all else failed, and when Jed continued to worry away at a problem like a rat caught in a trap gnawing his own paw off, that the only thing to do was to take Jed to bed and make love to him so vigorously that he forgot everything else except what was being done so lovingly and expertly to his body.

"Don't think I don't know that sometimes you use sex to shut me up," Jed commented with a grin, swirling his coffee around in the cup. Leo raised an eyebrow.

"If I'd known that was all it took I'd keep you chained to my bed," he replied. Jed threw him an amused glare.

"If I were a shade more kinky that might be an appealing prospect," he muttered and they both laughed out loud. They were silent for awhile, gazing at each other, and then Jed stirred himself.

"I got you something," he said, getting up and retrieving from the nightstand a small box wrapped exquisitely in ruby red coloured paper and decorated by a large red bow. He didn't always get Leo a present but he had on all the big occasions – the 10th, 20th, and 30th, and occasionally on the anniversaries in between as well but only if he saw something he thought Leo would particularly like. Leo rarely reciprocated although Jed had once got home after an anniversary and found a rare edition of Homer's *Odyssey* in the original Greek in his suitcase, and on one other occasion he had woken up in a hotel bedroom to find Leo gone and an equally rare and somewhat battered second-hand video bearing the title 'A History of Women's Softball' on the pillow beside him. He knew it was rare because he'd tried to find it once only to be told by a rather snooty store assistant that he'd never heard of such a video and frankly doubted that it even existed.

Jed gave the gift to Leo, and put a hand on his friend's shoulder, waiting to see his reaction when he opened it. "You knew I'd get you something," he said, as Leo looked at him questioningly.

"I suppose." Leo shrugged. "You didn't need to, Jed. You've given me everything I've ever needed over the past 40 years."

"Doesn't hurt to get a bit romantic every now and again though does it?" Jed said with a shrug. "And as this is the one day of the year when you'll let me, I like to go the whole way."

"Sure." Leo smiled.

"The wrapping paper, you will note, is ruby red - just like the candles," Jed told him portentously. "That's because this is our ruby anniversary, Leo – ruby is 40 years."

"I think that only counts if you're actually married, Jed," Leo commented.

"Whatever." Jed shrugged. "Go on! Open it!" He ordered, privately thinking he was enjoying the excitement far too much for a man approaching 60 years of age who also happened to be President of the United States.

Leo ripped the paper apart and picked up the little box that fell out of the wrapping. It was clearly a jewellery box; Leo glanced up at Jed with a raised eyebrow. "You're proposing finally after all these years?" he commented.

Jed squeezed Leo's shoulder a tad too firmly and ducked his head forward. "Just open it," he said in a low voice into Leo's ear.

Leo nodded and opened the box – to reveal two beautiful, heavy, gold cufflinks nestled together on a bed of purple silk. They were in the shape of polished ovals, and they were engraved. Leo took one out and surveyed the engraving. It showed a 'J' and an 'L', the copperplate letters entwined together, and the other oval bore the legend 40. Just that. Leo was quiet for awhile but Jed knew that was because he was overwhelmed and not because he didn't like the gift. All the same, Jed couldn't resist filling the silence.

"On this one the 'J' is first but on the other one..." he pulled the second cuff out of the box "...the 'L' comes first and then the 'J'," Jed explained, pointing. "I know how competitive you are, Leo so I thought I'd swap the order of the initials around."

"I'm competitive?!" Leo protested. "I don't think a man gets to be President of the United States without being a pretty competitive kind of person, Jed!"

Jed chuckled and Leo sighed. "Okay, you had me there," he acknowledged before Jed even had to say it. "They're beautiful, Jed," he said sincerely, grabbing his friend's hand and kissing it appreciatively. "Thank you."

"I thought you could wear them on special occasions," Jed told him. "Nobody would notice the engraving and if they did you could just smile enigmatically and thereby increase the number of legends floating around this town about you."

"There are legends?" Leo raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Yeah. You have an aura, Leo. People are scared of you, although god knows why. Must be that crusty, irascible exterior and your ability to stop people in their tracks at 50 paces with one of those baleful glares of yours, to say nothing of the fact that you're in charge of all the hiring and firing in the West Wing, you have a long and distinguished career in politics behind you, and the fact that you are..." He paused dramatically, waggled his hands in the air, and then proceeded in a deep, dark voice, full of portent, "...the power behind the throne."

"The power behind the throne?" Leo made a face. "Please!"

"I'm just telling you about the legends," Jed said, waving a hand nonchalantly in the air as if eschewing all responsibility for said legends. "D'you want a hand putting those on?" He held

up one of the cufflinks and Leo smiled and shook his head.

"Okay – but we both know I'm going to be taking them off again real soon."

"Sure, but I want to see you wearing them first," Jed replied, crouching beside Leo's chair and removing the cufflink on the wrist closest to him. He threaded the new engraved one through and then surveyed his work with a look of satisfaction.

"These cost a lot more than a hundred bucks," Leo commented, gazing appreciatively at the solid gold cufflinks. Jed smiled.

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "You know me – I'm a born romantic. I wanted to do something big and showy." He put his hands on Leo's shoulders and kissed his old friend's head. "Even if you are a curmudgeonly old man without an ounce of romanticism in your soul."

Leo pursed his lips thoughtfully but didn't reply.

"So?" Jed murmured, stroking Leo's shoulder suggestively. "There's a big, king-sized bed in here, my security detail is a long way down the hallway, and we have the whole night together, Leo. Any suggestions as to how we spend it?" He turned Leo's head to face his, and then kissed the other man firmly and passionately on the lips, enjoying the thrill of that familiar spark of electricity that always passed between them. "Because if you don't, I have a few," he said when they parted for air. He took hold of Leo's hands and began pulling his lover to his feet, intending to drag him over to the bed and remove his clothing as quickly as possible.

"Uh-uh." Leo stopped him. "Not so fast, Jed. You haven't opened my gift yet."

Jed stopped dead in his tracks, utterly surprised.

"You have a gift for me?" He demanded.

"Yes I do," Leo nodded, a little smile playing around his lips but a curiously vulnerable look in his blue eyes.

"You never give me a gift, Leo," Jed reminded him.

"I've given you a couple," Leo protested.

"No, Leo – you never gave them to me. You left them in my suitcase or on my pillow so I'd find them when you'd gone."

"Ah." Leo gave that old, familiar, impish smile that reminded Jed so clearly of a boy he'd met 40 years before.

"Any kind of romantic impulse embarrasses the hell out of you, Leo," Jed told him sternly.

"Do you want the gift or not?" Leo growled.

"Are you kidding? I've waited 40 years for this!" Jed exclaimed. "Hand it over!"

Leo hesitated for a moment, and then, as if gathering his courage, he reached inside the pocket of his jacket, and withdrew a wrapped box, a little larger than the one Jed had given him.

"You wrapped this yourself," Jed commented, gazing at the silvery blue wrapping paper, and untidily tied purple bow. "I can tell."

"Yeah." Leo shrugged. "It wasn't something I could give Margaret to do. She asks too many questions for a start but also..." He hesitated. "This was personal," he finished softly. "I didn't want anyone touching this but you. You'll see why when you open it."

Jed looked up, surprised – it wasn't often anyone got a glimpse into Leo's heart, and he suspected he had seen into that mysterious place more than most people over the years, but even so Leo's tone of voice and expression took him by surprise.

"And you might like to note," Leo said, the note of teasing returning to his voice, "that I had this with me when I came to work this morning so I did remember the date."

"Okay." Jed fingered the paper thoughtfully for a moment. "Although you could have sent out for a gift after I reminded you and then wrapped it in the office. Or maybe you went shopping in your lunch hour."

"What lunch hour?" Leo queried incredulously. Jed put his glasses on and gazed at Leo over the top of them. Leo flushed slightly – a sight that Jed was most unfamiliar with. He glanced back at the box, holding it carefully, realising from the way Leo was behaving that this was more than just a gift – this was something special, something that meant a great deal to his friend.

"Okay. I believe you," Jed said softly, slipping his finger under the clumsily but obviously lovingly wrapped silver paper.

"Good – because when you see what's inside you'll realise that this wasn't something you could just go out and buy at a moment's notice," Leo told him softly, and his eyes were bright with some emotion that Jed couldn't read.

June 17th, 1998

Jed tip-toed along the corridor to Leo's hotel room, stopped outside, and gave the door a soft knock. "Leo, it's me," he hissed. Leo opened the door a second or two later and surveyed his friend with a slight rolling of his eyes.

"Jed. What a surprise. I'd never have guessed," he commented. "Seeing as how you've been sending me meaningful stares all day and notes with June 17th written on them in big

letters. Are you wearing pyjamas?"

"Yeah." Jed shrugged. "I was waiting until everyone had gone to bed before creeping back here. Are you going to let me in, Leo or are we going to celebrate this anniversary in the hallway?"

"That would give the campaign staff something to talk about," Leo said with a grin, standing aside and opening the door so that Jed could enter the room. Jed stepped inside and looked around the dimly lamp-lit hotel room with a sigh.

"Why are hotel rooms during presidential campaigns always such a mess?" He complained, surveying the proliferation of empty pizza boxes, and huge boxes of campaign detritus. Several dozen buttons bearing the legend Bartlet for America were scattered untidily on the table, and there was a campaign banner propped against one wall. "It smells in here as well," he said, wrinkling up his nose. "Why does it smell in here, Leo? Anyone would think a dozen people had been..." He got no further because at that moment he was suddenly assaulted from behind, pushed up against the closed door and kissed extremely vigorously on the mouth. He melted happily against Leo, returning the kiss with some passion but the moment Leo let him come up for air he continued without pausing "...crammed in here going through campaign strategy...no, wait, they have...but did they all take their shoes off or something because..." Leo grabbed his face and went back in for another kiss. It was hard for Jed to keep his train of thought going while Leo's tongue was exploring his mouth so thoroughly, and when Leo released him he blinked, thoughtfully, before opening his mouth to continue. Leo's hands, which were still clasping Jed's face, closed on his chin, preventing him from saying another word.

"What does it take?" Leo groaned. "Were these not good kisses? Should they not have distracted you for a moment from talking about the campaign?"

Jed grinned, and moved his face away from Leo's hands. "Okay. I get the message...but, you don't want to talk about the campaign, Leo?"

Leo shook his head. "Jed, we have done nothing but talk about the campaign for the past 6 months. Tonight is our first night alone together in ages and, no, I don't want to talk about the campaign."

"Because you do realise that it's usually me giving that speech don't you?" Jed pointed out. "You're usually the one who wants to talk about politics while I'm the one who bleats on about this being our anniversary and not talking shop."

"I wouldn't describe it as bleating exactly," Leo grinned. "Whining maybe."

"I don't whine!" Jed retorted hotly. "Oh don't even say it!" He waved his hand in the air in disgust, realising he'd been had. Jed pushed a pizza box still containing one congealed slice onto the floor and sat on the bed – then got up again fast as something pricked into his ass. He recovered a button with the pin open and sticking dangerously into the air. "Damnit, these things are dangerous - that could have been serious," he commented, gazing at the

button which, like all the other campaign paraphernalia in the room, also bore the legend Bartlet for America. Jed sat back down again with a sigh, still holding the button.

"Sometimes I can't believe we're actually doing this, Leo," he murmured. Leo crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, surveying his friend thoughtfully.

"Having cold feet?" He commented.

"No, just...it seems so unreal. In five months time I could be sitting in the White House as President of this country for god's sake, Leo."

"No 'could be' about it," Leo said confidently. "You're going to win, Jed. You saw the reaction here today. This is going to happen."

"That isn't what the polls say," Jed commented.

"No, but it's what I say," Leo said with an infectious degree of certainty in his voice. "Who cares about a few lousy polls? I know that you're going to win. You are going to be the next President of the United States, Jed."

"Because of you," Jed murmured. "If I get there it'll be because of you, Leo. You made all this happen. You came to me with that damn napkin and encouraged me to stand, you thought up this slogan, you made sure all the right doors were open to me."

"You just needed nudging in the right direction." Leo shrugged. "You're more than capable of making this happen all by yourself."

"I always thought it would be you," Jed said softly, still fingering the button. "You were always the one who was going to be President, Leo, remember? I was going to be your Chief of Staff."

"So it's the other way around. Who cares?" Leo shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

"I think you'd make a better president, Leo," Jed commented, gazing at his old friend.

"No. I wouldn't." Leo shook his head.

"You're smarter than I am and you've worked the political field on the Hill better and longer than I have," Jed said.

"I'm not sure I'd agree on the smarter thing but none of that matters anyway because you have something I don't, Jed."

"What's that?" Jed looked up sharply.

"People like you," Leo said simply. "I don't just mean people in politics – I mean the people and they're the ones who count. You're a great communicator, you have that whole folksy charm thing going..."

"You hate the folksy charm thing," Jed interrupted.

"I don't hate it – it's part of what makes you you," Leo shook his head. "It infuriates me sometimes but mainly I just enjoy teasing you about it." He grinned. "Jed – you'll make a good president – one of the greats - and I'll be proud to help you get there and work alongside you."

Jed gazed at his old friend and they were both silent for a long time. There was something that Jed wanted to say but he didn't want to break this spell, didn't want to see the look in Leo's eyes when he found out that his oldest and best friend had deceived him. A few years previously Jed had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He hadn't told anyone at first, praying that perhaps the diagnosis had been erroneous, or that it wouldn't affect his life in any significant way. When he had finally come to terms with his illness he had wanted to tell Leo, but something had always stopped him. Leo had struggled with his addiction, especially in the early days after going to rehab, and while he hadn't been totally dry since their anniversary in 1993, he was now and had been for quite some time. Jed was enormously proud of his friend, but he knew how hard-won Leo's recovery had been; the shadows had lifted from Leo's eyes, and Jed didn't want to be the one to put them back there. He didn't want to do anything that might jeopardise Leo's recovery. He had planned to tell him eventually, when he was sure Leo could handle the news, but then Leo had come to him and asked him to run for President, and Jed had got caught up in the idea...and then he hadn't liked to tell Leo in case all their dreams came crashing down around them. He couldn't tell Leo now – couldn't face his friend turning around and informing him that he wouldn't help him to the White House now that he knew about his illness. He had no way of knowing how Leo would react but he knew him to be a man of strong conviction and he doubted that his friend would take kindly to having been deceived these past three years. So no, Jed wouldn't tell him. Not now, certainly, not on their anniversary – he didn't know when; maybe after the election, or maybe after he'd completed his first term – just not now. For now he'd keep his silence and his secret and bear the guilt that came with it.

"Jed?" Leo's blue eyes were glowing in the lamplight. "This isn't like you. Is this a serious crisis of confidence?"

Jed shook his head. "No. I don't think so, Leo. I still want this – I want it badly. I just...I just don't want to let anyone down," he murmured.

"You won't," Leo said confidently and his friend's faith in him just made Jed hurt even more inside. Leo pushed himself away from the wall and came to sit on the bed beside his lover. He put an arm around Jed's shoulder and pushed his hair back with his hand, an old, familiar gesture that Jed loved; he leaned into the caress and they were silent for awhile. "What's going on in there, Jed?" Leo said finally, tapping Jed's skull with his fingertip. "Look, the campaign staff are all in their own rooms, it's just you and me, and it's our anniversary. You don't have to put on the big, self-assured, 'Josiah Bartlet - Presidential Candidate' act for me. Here, now, you can just be Jed, and you can tell me what's going on. I might be able to help."

Jed shook his head. "I don't know, Leo," he muttered. "I just keep feeling that the higher I soar, the closer to the sun I fly, the more chance there is that I'll find out my wings are made of wax and they'll melt and I'll come crashing down to earth."

"Only you could make that a metaphor about some ancient Greek myth," Leo commented, pushing Jed's head gently with his hand, teasing him. "It's Icarus isn't it?"

"Yeah. Thought he could fly but forgot his wings were made of wax and went too close to the sun," Jed grimaced. "His father Daedalus warned him but he didn't listen."

"Ah. His father," Leo commented, his blue eyes sharp. "I think that explains what this is about, Jed."

Jed frowned. "What are you getting at, Leo?"

"I'm talking about that little voice in the back of your mind that scolds you every time you stand up and shine. Why shouldn't you shine, Jed? You're smart, you're compassionate, and you have good ideas. Why shouldn't you stand up and show people what you can do? You don't need to keep listening to that voice in the back of your mind, Jed. It isn't even your voice; it's your father's. We both know that."

"I like to think he'd be proud of me doing this," Jed sighed, knowing his friend understood him all too well, as always, and had nailed this particular aspect of his personality. "And maybe a part of him would be proud but another part of him would be itching to tell me to shut up, sit down, and stop showing off. Bartlet for America..." He shook his head, and tossed the button onto the floor beside the pizza box. "Just one more example of my need to stand up and shout 'hey, everyone, look at me!'"

Leo gave a wry chuckle. "I sure as hell hope that's what you're saying. Nobody's going to vote for you unless they know who you are."

Bartlet grinned. "Yeah. I guess. The thing is I enjoy it, Leo. I like being noticed, and I like communicating and I like politics. Hell, I love politics and I don't want to feel I have to justify why I want to be President of this country. I think I could do a good job – I think I could really make a difference. I want to be President, Leo. I want it so much." He shook his head.

"That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that." Leo tousled the back of his friend's hair and then drew him in for another kiss, this one full of reassurance and affection. "Look, Jed," he said softly when they drew back, "Your father's dead – it's too late to make him proud of you and you can't know what he'd say about you running for President or how he'd feel about it, but I know how I feel. I'm proud of you, Jed. I don't think you should hold back – I think you should soar into the air and fly as close to the sun as you can. Will you stop listening to your father's voice and listen to mine instead? I promise you I'll always tell you it how I see it, whether I think you've done good or bad. You won't get any bullshit from me even when I'm calling you 'sir'."

"Leo, I've never known you bullshit me in your life and I'm very glad you aren't going to

start," Jed commented, feeling somehow relieved in a way that took him by surprise. "As for being proud of me..." He faltered, swallowing down the lump in his throat, hoping that his emotions weren't as visible as he suspected they were. "Leo...I think it means more to me that you're proud of me than if my father was standing right here saying the same thing. God knows you've always been a lot kinder to me than he ever was. So, I'll try and listen to your voice instead of his nagging doubts."

"Good." Leo smiled.

"And did I hear you say that you're going to call me 'sir'?" Jed raised an eyebrow.

"In five months time, when you're the President, I'll address you as 'sir' or 'Mr. President' just like everyone else, yes," Leo said with a nod.

"Well that's going to be weird," Jed commented. "I wish you'd told me that before we started all this, Leo," he grouched, kicking out with his foot at the pizza box and button on the floor beneath him.

"Well what did you think was going to happen?" Leo rolled his eyes. "I'd call you 'honey' in the Oval Office?"

"You've never called me 'honey', Leo," Jed pointed out. "I thought you'd call me Jed."

"Well I won't. You'll be President, Jed – and I'll be respecting the office and the man currently holding the title, by calling you 'sir'."

"Okay." Jed sighed. "Just promise me that you won't call me 'sir' when we're in bed because that's going to do nothing for our sex life I can assure you."

Leo grinned. "Okay, I promise," he said softly. "Talking of which..." He leaned back and patted the bed invitingly.

"We are still going to have sex even when I'm President aren't we, Leo?" Jed asked, gazing at his friend suspiciously. "This respect you have for the office and the man holding the title doesn't extend to not sleeping with him regularly, does it?"

"Well...I expect we'll both be pretty busy, and the First Lady might have some objections, and then there's your security detail to worry about, so..." Leo shook his head.

"Leo!" Jed bellowed, in a tone of outrage.

"Had you," Leo grinned. "Jed, I'm looking forward to us being in the same town for more than an overnight quickie, so yes, I'm hoping there will be sex – lots of it. I don't want to rock the boat with Abbey though, and we'll have to be discreet."

"Abbey and I have already talked about all the many changes that will result from us winning this election," Jed told his friend, trying to ignore the insistent hand that Leo was

sliding down the front of his pyjamas. "Abbey is looking forward to being First Lady – I think she has an agenda all of her own, Leo, and judging by the schedule she outlined to me she's intending to be pretty busy. She did mention that I'd be spending a lot more time with you by necessity but she said she felt she'd had me pretty much to herself for many of the years of our marriage and that you were due."

Leo smiled and shook his head. "She's a good woman, Jed. The best."

"Amen to that." Jed gave a heartfelt sigh. "What about Jenny, Leo?"

Leo stiffened slightly, and the hand that was snaking down Jed's pajamas stopped in its tracks. "Jenny...I don't think she's too happy about it, Jed. She always suffered our relationship in the past more than accepted it, and now that you and I are going to be working in the same town...in adjoining offices...well, I don't think she's too happy about it."

"Have you talked to her?" Jed asked, studying his friend closely.

Leo shook his head. "Jenny and I don't find talking easy these days," he admitted. "She resents the amount of time I've been putting into this campaign but I don't think she realises I'll have even less spare time when you become President."

"Talk to her, Leo," Jed instructed his friend. "Our wives have been very kind to us over the years. Our relationship is a lot for any woman to accept – we're lucky that they've been so understanding and they deserve for us to take their feelings into account."

"I know, and I do." Leo sighed and leaned back on the bed. "But she's not like Abbey, Jed."

"Nobody's like Abbey, Leo. If they were then this world would be a scarier place," Jed commented. There was silence for awhile during which Leo put out a questing hand and began to slowly unbutton Jed's pyjamas. Jed gazed at the button on the floor, scowling. "You do think I'm ready for this, don't you, Leo?" He asked. He never usually let anyone except Abbey and Leo see him in his more anxious moods. He wasn't a man who lacked self-confidence but he knew he had a tendency to get mired in his anxieties and could be down for days as a result. His brain refused to switch off, and kept churning over his worries endlessly.

"Yes, Jed. I think you're ready for this," Leo said, in the tone of a man appeasing an idiot. He finished unbuttoning Jed's pyjama top and smoothed the fabric away from his friend's shoulders, pausing to kiss the back of his friend's neck.

"There's such a lot to be done," Jed murmured. "I have so many plans, Leo. This is the culmination of everything we ever dreamed about as 17 year old boys back at summer camp. This is it, Leo. I don't want to screw it up. I don't want to get it wrong. I don't want that 17 year old boy I once was to be ashamed of me or feel I let him and his ideals down."

"Uh-huh," Leo said, pulling Jed's pyjama top off and trailing some wet kisses down Jed's spine.

"I know how Washington works, Leo. I know there will have to be compromises. I know deals will have to be struck...but I want to do good, Leo. I don't want to disappear down the well of moral uncertainty that exists in politics. Better people than I have become trapped down there."

"Mmmm," Leo said, pushing Jed back onto the bed and bending over him to take a nipple lovingly in his mouth.

"I just...oh shit, Leo," Jed hissed, arching his back. "That feels so good,"

"Yeah," Leo's tongue wrapped itself around Jed's nipple and teased it tantalisingly for several long minutes, while Jed tried desperately to hang onto his train of thought.

"I just...want...to...oh, Leo," Jed gave a contented sigh and wrapped his fingers around the back of Leo's head. Leo moved onto his other nipple. "There are so many reforms I want to make, Leo. I want to be a reforming president. I don't want you to...oooh...let me give up on that...aaahh...agenda..."

"Jed." Leo's face came into his line of vision, the blue eyes firm but amused.

"Mmm?" Jed asked, his hands coming to rest on Leo's still fully clothed backside.

"It's time for you to shut up now," Leo told him gravely. Jed gazed at him for a moment, and then nodded.

"Okay," he agreed.

Leo nodded in reply, and bent his head to capture Jed's lips with his own. He kissed Jed for a long time, and then moved his head sideways and nibbled on his lover's earlobes.

"I just...you know...need to talk my worries through," Jed whispered, as Leo went lower still, his hands tugging at Jed's pyjama pants.

"I know, and I just need to get you out of these," Leo told him, undoing the pyjama pants and stripping them away efficiently before throwing them onto the floor, leaving Jed completely naked. He removed his own clothing just as efficiently and moved back to straddle Jed's body.

"Because we might not have time to talk about this stuff later," Jed said. "We need to set an agenda now, Leo, so we can hit the ground running when I get el...AGH!"

Jed felt all his breath leave his body as Leo took his eager cock in his mouth, sucking on it hard with his warm tongue. Jed was beyond any coherent thought for the next few minutes as Leo teased his cock into ever greater heights of ecstasy. Leo's hands gripped Jed's thighs firmly and his tongue was as skilled as ever. Jed thrust up into that caressing mouth and was on the verge of orgasm when Leo suddenly pulled back, paying no attention to Jed's howl of

disappointment.

"That was just mean, Leo," Jed said reproachfully. "I was on the verge..."

"You don't like to come before I've fucked you," Leo told him firmly reaching for the lube and condoms in the nightstand drawer. "You'll thank me later."

"I could have thanked you 5 seconds ago but now I'm not sure I'm going to be thanking you at all," Jed grouched as Leo parted his legs and slid a lubed finger inside him. "And you haven't answered my question about the agenda..."

"We've been over this plenty of times. You have an agenda. Now shut up," Leo said, withdrawing his fingers. He rolled a condom expertly onto his eager cock, and positioned himself between Jed's thighs.

"Don't think you can make me shut up just by...ohhhh," Jed sighed as Leo slipped his hard length inside him, dipping his entire body forward in the process so he ended up nose to nose with his lover. Leo leaned down and kissed Jed firmly on the lips, and then began making tiny thrusting movements with his hips. Jed gave a strangled sigh as little starbursts of pleasure fizzled and sang in all his nerve fibres.

"What was that you were saying?" Leo said, with a cunning smile, but Jed was beyond coherent speech by this point and just clung onto Leo as his lover began moving more swiftly inside him, stopping to kiss Jed's mouth or lick his body or caress Jed's cock every few thrusts until Jed thought he would explode with pleasure.

"Oh gahh...Leooo!" Jed moaned as Leo's thrusting reached a crescendo, and another few seconds later he felt himself coming. A few seconds after that he watched as Leo reached his climax, felt Leo come inside him, and then Leo lowered himself on top of him, with a gentle sigh of pleasure. Jed felt happy and sated. He gazed at his lover in a dreamy haze, stroking Leo's head where it was lying on his chest. "God that was good," he murmured. "I should creep out of my room more often when we're in the same hotel on the campaign trail like this."

"It was good for me too," Leo replied, gazing up into Jed's eyes, his now softening cock still buried deep inside his lover's body. Jed loved this moment, after they had both come, loved that Leo didn't pull straight out, loved the closeness, warmth and affection, loved the scent of sex and sweat and the sensation of skin pressed against skin. It reminded him of being 17 again, and discovering this pleasure for the first time. "So, what were you saying?" Leo asked, propping himself up on one elbow and kissing Jed's collar bone affectionately.

"You know, I really have no idea," Jed replied truthfully. "Nothing very important."

Leo gave a twisted grin and rested his head back down on Jed's chest. "That's what I thought," he murmured.

They must have fallen asleep like that because Jed woke several hours later to find that Leo was still lying on top of him, his cock still buried inside his body. He stretched, lazily, as best he could without dislodging his lover, and then reached out and stroked Leo's back. Leo stirred, and gazed at him blearily.

"Hey. I should be going soon in case Josh or Sam or that guy with the beard comes charging in here to discuss the day's campaigning," Jed whispered.

"Toby," Leo told him. "The guy with the beard – he's called Toby."

"Oh. Right. Yeah." Jed nodded. "Leo – thanks for last night. For listening to me. I was just having one of my..."

"I know." Leo shrugged.

"I don't really have any doubts."

"I know that too."

"Leo...what changed for you?" Jed asked, moving his hand to stroke Leo's wispy hair affectionately. "A few years ago you said you didn't believe any more. You seemed to have given up on this particular dream, and yet now you're so inspired, so driven. You have it all planned out, and you've played this whole campaign game brilliantly. You could be a different person...and those shadows in your eyes..." Jed brushed his hand down the side of Leo's face. "They've gone. You remind me..." He hesitated.

"Go on," Leo prompted.

"You remind me of that 17 year old boy again – the one who was so passionate about everything. The one who believed he could change the world. What happened, Leo?"

Leo gave a little smile. "I found something new to believe in – or rediscovered something I've always believed in maybe," he murmured.

"What's that?" Jed asked.

"You," Leo told him simply. "I believe in you, Jed Bartlet. I believe in you as President of this country. I believe in you as my friend, and lover. I believe that together we can do all those things we dreamed about when we were 17. I really do think that as long as we work together we can change the world, Jed. I don't want you to ever think that I'm envious or that I wish it could have been me because I don't. This feels right. This feels good - and I want you to know that I will always support you and I will always stand by your side. Always."

"Thank you," Jed whispered. "Because I believe in all those things too, Leo."

Leo moved, slowly, and withdrew, and while Jed missed the presence of Leo's cock inside his body, that loss was soon amended by the presence of Leo's tongue in his mouth. They kissed for a long time, and then rolled apart with matching satisfied sighs.

"I really do have to get back to my own room," Jed commented, glancing at the clock on the nightstand.

"Yeah," Leo said regretfully.

Jed sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed, put his feet on the floor, and then gave a howl of pain and lifted one of them up again.

"SHIT!" He cursed, pulling the button pin from his foot and glaring at the offending item. "I said these things were dangerous, Leo," he told his friend, who looked as if he was trying hard not to laugh. Jed glanced at Leo and then back at the button, an idea occurring to him. He picked up a pen from the nightstand, and, pressing hard to make the ink come through on the plastic surface, he inserted two more words on the button. "You know," he said, admiring his handiwork with a slight squint as he didn't have his glasses, "This won't just be my presidency, Leo. It belongs to both of us. Don't think I don't know that." He handed Leo the button and watched as his lover read the new message.

"Bartlet and McGarry for America." Leo read the words, and then looked up at Jed, a slow, heartfelt smile spreading across his craggy features. "Thank you, Jed," he said softly. "Thank you."

Chapter 5 by Xanthe

June 17th, 2002

Jed opened the silver wrapping paper carefully, taking his time, not wanting to damage whatever might be inside. He smoothed away the paper to reveal a sturdy brown wooden box. He gazed at it, and then glanced up at Leo with a question in his gaze.

"Open it," Leo said with a shrug, sitting back down at the table. He looked nonchalant but Jed knew him well enough to know that was just a mask. Leo McGarry was nervous – and that of and by itself was a rare event.

"Okay," Jed said lightly, pushing his glasses more firmly on his nose. He gingerly opened the box and gazed at the contents inside. There were four small parcels within, each of different size and shape, and each wrapped in white tissue paper. Jed frowned, still none the wiser.

"You have to open this one first," Leo said, pointing to a long, thin item.

"Okaaay." Jed picked up the object, felt the shape and size of it through the tissue paper wrapping, and then grinned. "It's a pen," he said. "You bought me a pen, Leo?"

"Why would I do that? You have dozens of pens," Leo replied in a slightly grumpy voice. "Yes it's a pen, but this one's a special pen. Open it."

"I'm savouring the moment," Jed chided, fingering the tissue paper thoughtfully. Leo rolled his eyes. "Hey – I've waited 40 years for this!" Jed told him. "I want to get the maximum mileage out of every single second."

"Okay. If you must." Leo crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Jed eased his fingers under the tissue paper and took out the pen. He stared at it for a long time, memories flooding back.

"Oh, Leo," he whispered, hating the fact that he was sure he had tears in his eyes. He traced the writing on the side of the faded, burgundy pen with a shaking finger: J. Bartlet. "What does the J stand for?" he whispered, remembering.

"It stands for tolerance, education and equality of opportunity for all men and women whatever their colour, religion or bank balance," Leo told him. "I believe it also stands for Jed."

"Oh god. You must have thought I was the most insufferably priggish and precocious kid you'd ever met," Jed sighed.

"Yeah. I did," Leo agreed with a laugh. "But you were kind of cute – all that floppy hair and those earnest, eager eyes. Kind of like an overgrown Labrador puppy."

"Thanks!" Jed snorted. "How the hell did you end up with this?"

"You gave it to me, remember," Leo said with a grin.

"I'm sure that was just to borrow – not to keep," Jed complained.

"So I borrowed it – and now I'm giving it back," Leo told him. Jed continued to stroke his fingers over the pen, re-living the emotions of those heady few weeks at camp so many years ago. "Mrs. Landingham gave me this," he murmured.

"I didn't know." Leo looked surprised. "I'm sorry – I'd have given it back to you before if I'd known."

"Don't be." Jed smiled. "I expect I'd have lost it a long time ago if you hadn't kept it. Now that she's gone, it feels good to see it again, and remember that it was a gift from her – and also to recall the circumstances in which I gave it to you." He looked at the pen for a long time, and then glanced up into Leo's watchful eyes. "Thank you, Leo," he whispered.

"Keep going." Leo gestured with his head to the box.

"Is this whole box full of things you've stolen from me over the years?" Jed demanded, trying to tease because if he didn't he thought the emotion of the occasion might

overwhelm them both.

"No...at least, not exactly," Leo grinned. "You need to open this one next." He pointed at a slim piece of tissue paper. Jed reached into the box and gently plucked it out – it was as light as air and he looked at Leo in surprise.

"You're sure there's something actually in here?" He asked.

"I'm sure." Leo nodded.

"Okay." Jed flicked the tissue paper aside to find a single, yellow, aged piece of paper inside. On it, in faded, barely legible ink, was the name of a hotel, with the word 'Receipt' printed in dark letters underneath it and the date June 19, 1970 handwritten on it, next to the scrawled legend: \$39.

"You insisted on paying," Jed said, looking up. "I didn't have much money so you wouldn't let me pay anything for that room."

"You saved my life that anniversary, Jed," Leo told him softly. "You might not have known it at the time, but you did. If I hadn't seen you for those couple of days I would have gone back to the war and done my damndest to get myself killed."

"I was so worried about you. Boy, \$39 doesn't sound like a lot now but in those days I guess it was quite a sum."

"Especially as that room was such a dive," Leo agreed, chuckling.

"I can't believe you kept this stuff, Leo," Jed commented, looking at his old friend with new eyes. "Even after all this time you can still surprise me."

"I like to keep you on your toes," Leo said, inclining his head.

"Did you collect something from every anniversary?" Jed asked, amazed.

"Yes." Leo shrugged. "But I picked the four items that meant the most to me for this gift. It's supposed to symbolise one from each decade but you'll find two from the 90's and none from the 80's – I guess we didn't have any really significant anniversaries in the 80's."

"I blame the Republicans," Jed grinned. "They were running everything back then."

"Yeah. I think it's always safe to blame the Republicans," Leo agreed.

"So, which one do I open next?" Jed asked, surveying the two remaining tissue wrapped items in the box.

"The little one." Leo pointed with a wince. "And before you do, can I just say 'sorry' again."

"Oh god...it's not..." Jed rolled the tissue paper open and laughed out loud when a tooth fell out onto the table. "Well, I told you I wouldn't miss this tooth, Leo and I guess I was right. I can't believe you kept it though!"

"It seemed appropriate...and when I was really having trouble staying off the liquor it gave me something to focus on. Didn't always work, I'll admit," Leo shrugged, grimacing slightly, "But most of the time it did."

"And, uh, as I recall," Jed said, "I had the best sex of my life that anniversary."

"It was pretty good," Leo agreed. "Maybe we should have big fights more often if the make up sex is going to be that fantastic."

"Uh, no – I want to make it into old age with at least some of my own teeth," Jed replied and they both laughed. "One more." Jed gazed at the box, not wanting the trip down memory lane to come to an end. He pulled out a small, hard, round object and disposed of the tissue paper wrapping to find himself holding a button bearing the legend 'Bartlet and McGarry for America.'

"It still has the bent pin from where you stepped on it," Leo pointed out.

Jed gazed at the little collection of mementoes with an amazed expression on his face.

"Leo, I'm speechless," he said at last.

"We'd both be very surprised if that were really the case, Jed," Leo commented.

"Yeah!" Jed chuckled. "No, Leo, I'm not speechless – I'm delighted and touched and...probably verging on the kind of sentimental babbling that makes you want to hide under a rock but I can't help it."

"I take full responsibility for my actions in giving you this particular gift, Jed," Leo told him. "I'll bear the sentimental babbling without too much complaining."

"This gift is so perfect." Jed traced his fingers over the four items on the table in front of him and then looked at his old friend sharply. "Why, Leo," he said, "I do believe you're a romantic at heart."

"I was afraid you'd realise that," Leo sighed. "I guess my cover is blown, huh?"

"Every year, Leo? You collected something from every anniversary?" Jed asked, still trying to get his mind around that fact.

"Yes." Leo shrugged. "Sometimes they weren't particularly interesting but there's one from each June 17th. I was paying a lot more attention to this particular date than you ever gave me credit for, Jed."

"I stand corrected, Leo." Jed shook his head, and gave a little whistle. "So what will you take from this year's anniversary, Leo? Apart from the cufflinks that is."

"This I think." Leo pointed to the red wrapping paper. "Or maybe one of these goddamn candles." He grinned. "You said 40 years was ruby, so that has some significance. I thought..." He hesitated. "They're yours to keep. You can do what you like with them, but I thought if you wanted I could put them back in the box I keep them in with all the others and if you wanted to see them you just have to ask."

"That sounds perfect to me," Jed said, nodding. The real gift hadn't been the items on the table in front of him after all – they'd been the emotions behind them and the shared reminiscences they'd created.

"And now..." Leo said, getting to his feet and coming to stand by Jed's chair. "We dance." He held out his hand.

"We do what?" Jed asked incredulously. "We don't dance, Leo. We've never danced. We don't do dancing."

"Jed, over the years I've indulged every single one of your romantic whims," Leo told him, waving his arm around the candlelit room to illustrate this point. "And now that I've outed myself as a closet romantic it's payback time so get your ass over here and let's dance."

"Okay." Jed said, removing his glasses and accepting the proffered hand. "You do actually know how to dance right?"

"Only with a woman but we won't be doing that kind of dancing so that won't matter," Leo replied with a wicked look in his eyes. He swung Jed around, pulled him in close and put his hands on Jed's ass. Jed decided he could handle this kind of dancing and put his arms around Leo's waist and angled his head in for a kiss. They danced silently, feet barely moving, kissing as they went, and Jed realised he was being steered, none too subtly, in the direction of the bed.

"You sure your security detail is down the hallway and not outside the door?" Leo asked, nibbling Jed's earlobe.

"Mmmm. I'm sure," Jed replied, his hands squeezing Leo's ass appreciatively to encourage more earlobe nibbling.

"It always feels weird when we make love in the White House," Leo commented. "As if it's wrong or something."

"Why, Leo, who can stop us?" Jed said, with a raised eyebrow. Leo gave a low guffaw as he remembered a 17-year-old boy asking that question 40 years before.

"You're right. What with you being the President and me being 'the power behind the throne.'" He grinned. "And of course it's purely in the interest of academic study," Leo

added, and Jed laughed out loud.

"Oh yeah. Our interest in academic study is what started this – and led us all the way here," he observed, burying his face in Leo's neck and inhaling the familiar smell.

"I thought..." Leo said, massaging Jed's buttocks through his pants, "that as we have all night you might like to do the honours first...then we can change around when we've both recovered and got our energy back and probably had a nap as well - taking into account our advanced years..."

"Speak for yourself. Tonight I feel like I could go on forever," Jed replied, swaying in time to some music he was hearing only inside his own head, loving the feel of Leo's hard body pressed up close to his as they danced. "Are you sure about this though, Leo? You don't usually want to bottom."

"Well tonight I do," Leo said.

"Okay." Jed grinned. "I like having you at my mercy."

"Don't let the power go to your head, sir," Leo smirked.

"Don't call me sir, Leo. We had a deal, remember," Jed told him and then he gave a little "ooof" of surprise as Leo pushed him onto the bed and began undressing him. They undressed slowly, although Jed thought that from the look in his eyes Leo remembered the first time they'd made love, and how they had been so excited and aroused that they hadn't even been able to hold out until they had removed their clothing. He still had no idea why Leo and no other man made him feel like this but after 40 years it wasn't a question he asked himself very often these days. He pulled Leo down on the bed beside him and took his turn in undressing his friend, removing the gold cufflinks first, and putting them safely on the nightstand. They took a long time undressing each other, kissing frequently as they went, fingers moving sensuously across fabric and flesh, caressing each other lovingly as they went about their task.

After 40 years Jed thought that he and Leo fitted together like a hand in an old, worn, favourite glove. They knew what turned each other on, knew where to kiss and how hard to stroke, but, as tonight had proved, even after all this time they could still surprise each other. Jed rolled Leo onto his back and sat astride him, holding Leo's hands above his head, and then he devoured Leo's body, surprising them both with his energy and passion. Jed gave a satisfied smile as Leo arched up underneath him, and writhed into his caresses, moaning softly as Jed tormented him thoroughly with his tongue. Jed reached for the lubricant and condoms, which he'd placed in readiness in the nightstand drawer, then pushed Leo's legs open and played with his ass for a long time, alternately rimming and fingering his lover, and then, when Leo was making gurgling noises in the back of his throat, Jed judged that now would be a good time to move things on. He put a condom on his cock, pushed Leo onto his side and spooned up behind him, then put his arms around Leo's body, pulling him close so that Leo's back was resting against his chest. He parted his buttocks gently and entered inside him; Leo made another gurgling noise so Jed judged that he must

be doing something very right. He rocked into Leo's body and then paused, just as Leo always paused with him.

"Feel good?" He murmured.

"Oh yeah..." Leo replied, placing his hands over the hand Jed had on his abdomen, and caressing Jed's fingers lightly.

"For me too," Jed whispered, kissing the side of Leo's face. Leo closed his eyes and then they were rocking together, completely lost in the moment. When Jed closed his eyes he could still see Leo's face, could see Leo's face in all its manifestations, right back to when he had been a freckle-faced kid of 17, 40 years ago. He could see the bright, intelligent eyes of the scholarship student, the gaunt, haunted, features of the Air Force pilot, the twisted, shadowed smile of the jaded politician with an alcohol problem, and the sharp, driven face of his campaign manager and Chief of Staff who knew him almost as well as he knew himself. Almost. When Leo had found out about his Multiple Sclerosis he had been both shocked and hurt – to say nothing about worried for his friend's health. Jed didn't ever want to see that betrayed expression in Leo's eyes again. He thought Leo had forgiven him for that, thought he understood; they were neither of them perfect, both had behaved badly in their time, as that tooth on the table testified, but through it all their love had remained as strong as ever, that sense of connection never faltered, and the electric current running between them could still make them tingle when they first made love after spending any amount of time apart.

Jed made love to Leo gently, tenderly, carefully, like the old friends and lovers they were. They still had their moments of passion but both would admit they were slowing down, and not as energetic in the bedroom as they had been once. Still the sex was as good as always, and Jed made sure he brought Leo off first before coming himself. Then he snuggled up even closer to his friend and just held him, enjoying the thrumming sensation of Leo's heartbeat under his hands.

"Happy 40th anniversary, Leo McGarry, you old romantic," he whispered into his friend's ear.

"Happy 40th anniversary, J. Bartlet," Leo said. "Remind me what the 'J' stands for again?"

Jed snorted. "It stands for what it always stood for, and it also stands for Leo McGarry's very contented lover."

"Ah," Leo said, turning his face so that Jed could see the impish smile he knew very few people had ever seen, and which reminded him so clearly of a sunny day 40 years ago. "You know, you should have finished what you started in the Oval Office earlier today, Jed. You should have told the senior staff exactly what the significance of June 17th, 1962 is," Leo told him still grinning wickedly.

"Yeah," Jed chuckled. "I can just see their faces...but then again," he mused, "who would have guessed that this evening would be the culmination of the events of an ordinary June

day 40 years ago? I suppose, like you said to our senior staff earlier, it's worth remembering that extraordinary things can happen on the most ordinary days, Leo. The events of history can turn on a single chance meeting, and the whole course of the world can be changed by one event. Imagine a world where Abbott never met Costello, where John Adams and Thomas Jefferson..."

"Jed?" Leo turned to face him, his hand coming to rest on Jed's thigh, his blue eyes shining with both love and amusement.

"Yes, Leo?"

"It's time for you to shut up now."

The End

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.