

Old Friends by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/old-friends/>

Story Notes:

Jed/Leo slash. Childhood physical abuse. This is a long, psychologically complex story based on actual events from the show.

This story is set in my June 17th universe. It isn't necessary to have read that in order to read this although some events from that fic are alluded to in this one. I was a bit disappointed that the subject of Jed being beaten by his father and his subsequent sleepless nights and therapy sessions with Stanley weren't gone into in the same psychological depth as Josh's PTSD troubles were in the episode Noel, which I loved. Soooo, I thought I'd redress the balance. Mind you, I had no idea when I started that this would turn into such a long, twisty-turny thing with so many balls juggled in mid-air that I almost lost track. I hope I managed to pull it all together despite the complexity of Jed's brain. Half of this story takes place in flashback form and the other half deals with the present day.

Winner in **The Jeds**, West Wing Fanfic Awards, 2003, in the following categories:

Outstanding Jed/Leo story - 1st place
Outstanding Characterisation of Leo - 3rd place
Outstanding NC17 Romance - 3rd place

"Hear this, Leo?" Jed asked, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "This takes me back. *Old friends...*" He sang along. "*Can you imagine us years from today, sharing a park bench quietly? How terribly strange to be seventy...Old friends, Memory brushes the same years. Silently sharing the same fear...*" That's us, Leo – old friends," he commented.

"Old friends who aren't being honest with each other," Leo said softly.

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Chapter 1 by Xanthe

2002

Something was wrong. Leo hadn't worked as the White House Chief of Staff for nearly 4 years without having an almost instinctive feel for the running of the place and the people who worked here; and, most of all, he hadn't been the lover and best friend of this man sitting beside him for 40 years without knowing when something was bothering Jed Bartlet. Leo glanced at the man sitting beside him, trying to figure out what was going on inside the President's mind right now. Leo was adept at multi-tasking and could concentrate quite adequately on the somewhat long-winded National Security Briefing they were both sitting through while at the same time pondering what to him was the more urgent issue at this moment in time – what was up with the President?

Jed certainly looked tired – he had shadows under his eyes but it was the expression in his eyes that concerned Leo more. Something was troubling his old friend, and while Leo knew that Jed could talk for America (and frequently did) on virtually any topic under the sun, he also knew that when Jed was troubled by anything that went very deep he held it close, and rarely confided in even those he loved and trusted most.

Leo watched his friend out of the corner of his eye, trying to figure out what might be going on. It had all started a few days ago, after the Iowa caucus, but for the life of him Leo couldn't figure out what had happened between then and now to cause Jed to withdraw into his shell like this.

He knew that Jed wasn't listening to the briefing – his mind was far away, and that was rare of and by itself; Jed never daydreamed through meetings – his mind was far too sharp, lively and enquiring for him to want to miss anything. Leo recapped the meeting in his own mind, committing the salient points to memory, and then stiffened as he glanced back at the President: Jed's eyes were closed. Admittedly the National Security Briefing had gone on a long time and was tedious – but all the same, Leo had never seen the President actually fall asleep in any of his meetings before. He nudged the President's knee surreptitiously and Jed's eyes flashed open. He glanced at Leo with a defensive expression as if to deny that he had been sleeping. Leo raised an eyebrow – it was all done very quickly, and Leo doubted that anyone had even noticed, but it just served to confirm Leo's suspicions that something was wrong; something was very wrong indeed.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, bringing the meeting to a close. "I think we'll wrap this up here."

"Leo, there are still a few..." one of the generals began.

"We'll reschedule. I think we covered all the important points," Leo said smoothly, casting a look in Jed's direction to make it clear to his friend that while the meeting with his security advisers might be over, his meeting with Leo hadn't yet begun.

The room cleared slowly, and Leo followed the last man to the door so he could close it

behind him, and then he turned back and gazed at his friend. Jed turned away, grabbing his glasses, and walked back to his desk. Leo remained where he was. Jed put his glasses on, picked up a briefing document from his desk, and settled down as if he was going to read it. Leo continued waiting. Finally, after several long seconds, Jed glanced up.

"I was just resting my eyes, Leo," he growled, the warning tone in his voice making it clear that this wasn't something he wanted Leo to pursue.

"Sure you were." Leo shrugged.

"It's been a busy few days," Jed continued.

"No busier than usual." Leo spread out his arms. "What's going on, sir?" He asked gently.

"Nothing!" Jed replied, too heatedly and too quickly. Leo sighed – they weren't going to get anywhere with Jed in this kind of mood. He knew that all too well from long experience.

"Don't make a big deal out of this, Leo."

"Okay." Leo smiled pleasantly, and walked over to the desk. "So..." He paused and glanced at his friend, with a different look in his eye – one which he knew, from equally long experience, that Jed invariably responded to. "Abbey's away," he commented neutrally. They never spoke about their personal relationship in the office, but they had developed a kind of code that they both understood well enough.

"Yeah. She's at the house in Manchester for a couple of weeks seeing the grandchildren and doing that charity thing she's been talking about non-stop lately," Jed said. He met Leo's gaze for a split second and then looked back down at the briefing document he was clearly only pretending to study. Now Leo knew something was up. He had never known Jed fail to respond to the way he was looking at him right now.

"So, I'm just saying...usually when Abbey's away..." Leo shrugged. He knew that while Jed adored his wife's company, he also cherished whatever time he could spend alone with his old friend, and whenever Abbey was away he invariably made a beeline for Leo's hotel room or invited him over to the Residence for intimate tete-a-tetes. Abbey understood about their relationship and although she led an extremely busy life in any case, Leo knew that she often left town so that Jed would be able to spend some time with his old friend. They had operated this arrangement for 40 years, and it always seemed to work pretty well. Yes, Abbey had had the lion's share of Jed over those 40 years, but Leo wasn't complaining; they'd both had wives and families that they loved and wanted to spend time with and while their relationship was intensely important to both men, it was one that had, by necessity, had to incorporate a lot of give and take.

"Yeah. Well...like I said...I've been busy," Jed said curtly. Leo gazed at him impassively, knowing when he was being lied to. Abbey had been gone for three days and as yet Jed hadn't made a move on him, so what with that and everything else, all Leo's alarm bells were ringing very loudly right now.

"Sure." He shrugged. "I've been pretty busy too – but I've got a free night tonight. I'm looking forward to it. Thought I'd order something nice, eat in my suite, put on some music, have an early night..."

"Sounds good," Jed said tersely, as if he wasn't really listening. "Enjoy it. I'm going to work late – I have a stack of papers to read through tonight. " He pointed to a pile of reports, head down, still not meeting Leo's eye. Leo nodded and then walked quietly back to his own office. He didn't need to say anything more; he had issued the invitation and Jed had rejected it. Jed never rejected an invitation to spend some private time with his lover when Abbey was out of town, so something was clearly troubling the President - and Leo intended to get to the root of it.

Leo left the office early, and he made a point of sticking his head around the door to the Oval Office to say goodbye before going. Jed glanced at him, a curious expression on his face – one part hunger the other part annoyance. Leo wasn't sure what that was about; he had seen the hunger before – Jed had a habit of devouring him with his eyes when he was in the mood for sex - but the annoyance was harder to place. He wasn't sure whether Jed was annoyed with Leo or with himself – or with someone else entirely.

"I'm just leaving," Leo said softly.

"Yeah. Okay. See you tomorrow, Leo," Jed said, waving his hand dismissively.

"You're sure everything's okay, sir?" Leo asked, testing the waters to see if the President's mood had improved in the past few hours.

"Oh for god's sake, Leo – I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds! Everything's fine!" Jed exploded at him.

Leo gazed at him steadily. "Okay," he said calmly, deciding that Jed still wasn't in the right mood to share whatever was going on inside that convoluted brain of his. He'd give his friend another day and then he'd start insisting. Jed didn't always like being pushed but he needed it sometimes and Leo was one of the few people he would allow to push him.

Leo went back to his hotel suite and did exactly what he'd said he would do. He took a nice long bath, put on the dark burgundy silk bathrobe that had been a gift from Jed on his birthday the previous year, and then sat down to a leisurely dinner by himself, with Simon and Garfunkel crooning melodiously from the stereo, and a well-thumbed copy of Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* propped up in front of him. Leo had never lost his affection for the great science fiction authors of his youth, and frequently returned to them when he had a spare moment. He rarely had the time to give his full attention to getting into a book by a new author – it was more his habit to dip in and out of old favourites, re-reading passages that he particularly enjoyed. He finished his dinner, read some more, then glanced at his watch; 11.30 pm. He had hoped that Jed would change his mind and join him, but it was too late for that now. Leo wandered into the bedroom, book in one hand, glass of water in the other, and got into bed. He leaned back, relaxing, allowing the music to wash over him.

Time it was and what a time it was, it was
A time of innocence, a time of confidences

Leo sighed – it was at times like this that he wished he could have a drink. A nice, long, slow draught of cool beer, or a short, sharp shock of warm, rich whisky with a slight after-burn. Or maybe just a nice bottle of red wine, full and fruity...

Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph
Preserve your memories; they're all that's left you

Leo gave a wry grunt, and took a sip of his water instead. Memories. Yeah – he had plenty of those. He frowned – was that what was going on with Jed? Something from the past? Leo closed his eyes, recalling the pained look in Jed's eyes when he'd spoken to him earlier; defensive, guarded, lost in a memory of a different time and place...

Leo knew he must have fallen asleep because he woke with a start at the sound of a loud knock on the door. He glanced at his watch – 1am? Who the hell had come calling at this time of night? He got up and went to the door – only to have it knocked out of his hand the moment he opened it by the full force of a minor presidential whirlwind.

"Leo – something urgent has come up that we'll need to spend the next several hours talking about!" Jed proclaimed loudly, entirely for the benefit of his secret service agents who had positioned themselves outside Leo's hotel room.

"Uh, okay," Leo said, closing the door and putting the chain on it just to be sure. The minute he was done, he found his robe being grabbed and then he was pulled forward and into a deep, long, and extremely hungry kiss. He recovered enough to put his hands on the President's sweat-pant clad ass, and pull the other man close, but this kiss was Jed's all the way. Leo had long since learned how to roll with the punches as far as his mercurial lover was concerned, and he was happy to submit to having his mouth thoroughly explored by Jed's tongue and his entire body groped through his robe before he was, finally, released. "So, you wanted to talk?" Leo said, when he had gotten enough air into his lungs to speak.

"No, I don't want to talk, Leo. Did you think I came all the way over here at this time of the night to talk?" Jed protested. "I just said that for their benefit." He nodded with his head in the direction of the door.

Leo rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I figured that – but I thought you might actually want to talk, Jed, seeing as how it is 1 O' clock in the morning and I did invite you over here this evening for a nice dinner, an invitation that you declined. So I thought maybe you wanted to talk about why you think it's okay to wake me up in the middle of the night to service the Presidential needs without so much as giving me the benefit of your company for a civilised evening meal first," Leo snapped, a bit more grumpily than he really felt. "I'm not some kind of battery operated sex toy, Jed. You can't just storm in here like this and expect me to perform for you on cue."

Jed gazed at him for a moment, and then, clearly deciding that Leo didn't mean it, he grinned.

"Sure I can, Leo," he said.

"Yeah?" Leo raised an eyebrow, his tone of voice extremely dangerous.

"Yeah." Jed laughed, but there was an edgy, restless quality to him that Leo didn't like.

"What makes you think so?" He asked quietly.

"That robe isn't very concealing, Leo," Jed told him smugly. Leo glanced down and sighed at the visible sign of his erection. "So, you may not be battery operated but it looks to me as if this particular sex toy is ready to go all the same," Jed purred, grabbing hold of Leo again and kissing him once more.

Jed, in this mood, was like a force of nature and there wasn't much that Leo could do except submit again to those questing hands and that exploring tongue, aware all the time that Jed was manoeuvring him into the bedroom. They came to a halt by the bed, and Jed stopped kissing Leo for just long enough to shove him backwards onto the bed and then he climbed on top of him, undid his robe, and, straddling Leo and holding his arms above his head so he couldn't escape, went back in for another kiss. Leo gave up – clearly they weren't going to talk about anything until Jed had got what he had come here for, and he had to admit that he was enjoying the sensation of Jed holding him down and kissing him so passionately. Their love making was usually a lot less urgent these days and it was nice to be reminded of a time when they hadn't seen each other in months and couldn't wait to get their hands on each other. Jed drew back again and Leo took advantage of his lover being out of breath to push up and roll Jed down underneath him, then went back in and kissed Jed this time, impressing on his lover that he wasn't going to get things all his own way this evening. Jed responded vigorously, his hands reaching under Leo's open robe and finding his ass, which he proceeded to stroke firmly. Leo grunted, and Jed pushed up, surprising him, and now Leo found himself on the bottom again, with all of Jed's solid body weight planted on top of him.

"Oh shit," he groaned. "We're getting too old for this kind of thing, Jed."

"Brings back memories huh?" Jed grinned down at him, holding Leo's arms above his head again. Leo smiled – as young men they'd frequently wrestled and tussled during their love-making sessions, each of them vying for supremacy in a battle neither of them ever won.

"Yeah," he commented, gazing at his lover, wondering if Jed was ready to talk, but Jed's eyes were full of that fiery distraction that told him he'd get nothing sensible from his old friend just yet. "Why don't you get undressed?" Leo suggested pragmatically, and Jed's grin broadened.

"I'm only letting you up so I can get my pants off," he explained to Leo as he took off his navy blue sweater and threw it on the floor. "It's not because you won or anything because I won that round."

"I didn't even know it was a contest," Leo grumbled amiably, propping his head up on his hand as he watched Jed get undressed.

"I'm just saying, that's all," Jed told him with that same edgy look. "I'm not a pushover, Leo. I can hold my own."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but yeah," Leo scowled. "Whatever."

"I'm just saying...because I think you always assume I'm some soft liberal from New England who never had to use his fists to fight for anything."

"We're advocating street brawls now?" Leo asked, surprised. "We're extolling the virtues of solving disputes by recourse to fisticuffs? These are our values now?"

"No, I'm just saying that you've always had this kind of superior thing going on, that you've been out there, you've fought in a war, and you've got into the occasional fist fight in your time and you think I'd crumple into a shivering ball of cowardice if anyone came at me with an iron bar or anything."

"An iron bar?" Leo frowned. "Who is going to come at you with an iron bar?"

"Or anything." Jed waved his hand impatiently. "It doesn't have to be an iron bar. It could be anything."

"A sock?" Leo suggested, as Jed threw his socks onto a nearby chair.

"Leo, I don't think you're taking this seriously," Jed griped, climbing back onto the bed.

"I would if I knew what the hell we were talking about."

"I'm talking about you always assuming that you're the tough one, the street fighter, you know," Jed told him, lying down beside his friend and reaching out a proprietary hand, which he placed on Leo's hip. Jed's hand was large and meaty and Leo liked the feel of it lying heavily on his skin.

"I don't think I do know," Leo mused. "I mean, I don't think I've been in a fight since, well..." He coloured and shrugged.

"Yeah, since you slugged me in 1993 – don't think I've forgotten about that, Leo because I haven't," Jed said, fingering his jaw where Leo had hit him in fit of a drunken anger when Jed had called him on his drinking problem several years previously.

"Well it doesn't still hurt for god's sake!" Leo snapped as Jed continued milking the moment for far too long in his opinion. "That wasn't a real fight, Jed, although I'm happy to apologise again if that's what's been bothering you. I was going to say that I haven't been in a fight since I got back from Vietnam. I don't think either of us are exactly street fighters are we?"

"What do you mean it wasn't a real fight? You mean because I went down and didn't hit you back?" Jed bristled, ignoring everything else Leo had said and focussing on that one comment. "I'm saying I could have, Leo, but I chose not to because you're my friend and I didn't want to hurt you...and as I recall at the time you were very scathing about my abilities as a fighter and said you could take me any time."

"Well I could," Leo said with a shrug as if stating such an obvious fact that there was little point in discussing it further. Jed glared at him. Leo gazed back, bemused. "Jed?" He questioned. "What are we arguing about because I think I've lost track."

"Why do you assume you could take me in a fight?" Jed asked, that edgy look intensifying.

"Because..." Leo paused and shrugged, not wanting to inflame the situation which while still fairly harmless at the moment, looked as if it could escalate. "Jed, it's nothing personal. I'm not sure it's anything to boast about either but..."

"But...you think of yourself as something of a scrapper, huh, Leo? You're the one who doesn't mind getting his hands dirty, while I've sat in my gilded cage in my ivory tower all my life," Jed continued heatedly.

"I'm not sure you should put all those clichés together in one sentence," Leo observed. Jed leaned forward and pulled Leo's robe roughly from his shoulders. He grabbed Leo's face in his hands and kissed him again, biting down on his lip.

"Ow!" Leo shoved him off. "Jed – if you wanted rough sex you should have just said so. I can get plenty rough if that's what this is about."

"Yeah, it's always about you getting rough for me isn't it?" Jed snapped. "Well supposing I want to be the one getting rough, Leo?"

"That's fine – I'm sure I can handle you," Leo grinned. Jed sighed and rubbed his face wearily.

"I'm just saying...I'm just saying I'm not a pushover, okay?" Jed shrugged. "I can stand up for myself."

"Who the hell said you couldn't?" Leo frowned. "I've seen you take people apart with nothing more than a look and a few well chosen words, Jed. You can wield words like a lethal weapon."

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Jed exploded. "I know I can do that, Leo. I'm talking about the fact that you think I can't hold my own in a proper fight."

"Oh for god's sake! I'm not arguing about this. Did you really wake me up in the middle of the night to have this particular discussion, Jed? Because I'm fine if we're going to have sex but this conversation is starting to feel really old."

"Fine." Jed got up and opened the nightstand beside Leo's bed, finding the condoms and lube that were there. He flung them onto the bed, and then glared at his lover. "Fuck me," he ordered peremptorily.

"Fine," Leo slung back, no longer sure if he was even in the mood. Jed got on his hands and knees and waited there expectantly. Leo frowned – they did occasionally use this position but it wasn't his favourite as he preferred to be looking at Jed's face when he made love to him. He sighed, and ran a gentle, caressing hand over his lover's back and ass.

"Fuck the foreplay and just do it, Leo," Jed commanded in a terse tone. "I want you inside me now."

"Okay, let's back up a few pages," Leo said, "and I'll remind you of the fact that I'm not your wind-up sex toy, Jed. You don't point me in the right direction and press a switch to make me go. "

"Oh okay, do whatever you want but hurry," Jed muttered.

Leo knelt forward and put his arms around Jed's stiff body, wondering what the hell this was all about. It seemed to him that Jed had deliberately engineered this argument although he had no idea why. What response had Jed wanted from him or was he just in a monumentally bad mood and wanted to take it out on someone? Was there something behind his assertion that he could hold his own in a fight or was it all just angry words about nothing? Leo pressed his lips to Jed's skin, enjoying the sensation of touching his lover as he always did. There was something about touching Jed that made his skin tingle – always had and after 40 years he assumed it always would be this way. He'd had other lovers, male and female, but Jed was special. He was the one Leo loved best; he had been his first love, and, if he was honest, his one true love. Jed had been the first boy he'd made love to, and it had never been the same with anyone else. He knew that Jed had only ever had sex with two people in his life – himself and Abbey - and he was humbled by that knowledge. There was a depth of loyalty and caring in Jed's heart that he sometimes did his best to disguise, perhaps for fear of getting hurt, but Leo had known him far too long to be fooled. Leo's deep, abiding love and affection for Jed over-rode his current disgruntled mood and he kissed his lover's skin softly, relishing the feel of it beneath his lips, so warm, golden and sensual. He heard Jed give a sigh and his lover's body relaxed underneath him. He was glad for that – if he'd just entered Jed and fucked him cold as Jed had ordered, he thought they'd both have felt bad in the morning. He trailed his lips down Jed's spine and Jed moaned and backed up against him. Leo squeezed some lube onto his finger and gently inserted it into Jed's ass and Jed backed up against him even more, panting a little and groaning in earnest now.

"And don't you dare tell me to shut up," Jed hissed. "The security agents won't come in."

"They will if they hear you shrieking like a banshee the way you sometimes do," Leo commented. "They'll probably think I'm killing you."

"I do not shriek!" Jed responded hotly. "I have never shrieked like a banshee in my entire

life, Leo."

"Had you then," Leo grinned, slapping Jed's butt affectionately. The old, familiar bantering eased the atmosphere between them and Leo felt Jed almost visibly melt back against him, letting down the barriers. The tight sphincter loosened against his fingers which was another reason why he was glad he hadn't just fucked his friend when ordered – Jed had been way too tense and tight for that to have been a pleasurable experience for him. Leo moved his free hand under Jed's body and stroked a nipple, and then went down lower and took hold of Jed's cock in his hand.

"Oh shit..." Jed sighed. "I need this, Leo. I really need you inside me..."

"Good things come to those who wait," Leo said in a way that he knew was infuriating.

Jed gave a bark of exasperated laughter. "You're just a sadist at heart, Leo McGarry," he commented.

"Sure I am," Leo grinned, moving his fingers rhythmically inside his lover's body.

"Oh god that feels good..." Jed said, putting his head back, gasping as Leo's fingers moved inside him to the same rhythm as Leo's hand was milking his cock. "Oh shit...Ohhhh!"

"Banshee," Leo teased.

"Bastard," Jed replied.

"Is that any way to talk to a man who has three fingers up your ass?" Leo said reprovingly, wiggling said fingers in a way that made Jed sigh happily.

"Leoooo!" Jed said in a tone halfway between a complaint and a scream of pleasure.

Leo decided to put his friend out of his misery, and pulled a condom onto his ready cock, slathered a large amount of lube on it, and then slowly entered his lover's body. Jed gave a strangled shout and pushed back some more. Leo grinned.

"You really *do* need this don't you," he murmured, going very slowly, teasing Jed maddeningly.

"LEO!" Jed yelled, in his best tone of presidential outrage.

"I could make you beg," Leo commented, placing his hands on Jed's hips to steady himself.

"I could make you look for a new job in the morning," Jed riposted. Leo grinned, and, taking purchase on Jed's hips, thrust himself deep inside his lover, right up to the hilt. This always had the effect of stopping Jed from saying anything coherent, and instead Leo listened to the always nice sound of his lover's heartfelt mewlings of pleasure, which were emanating from Jed's throat in an undulating frequency. Leo stopped for a moment, just enjoying the

view of Jed with his head slung back, his hair dripping with sweat, his entire body poised, and the muscles in his back rippling slightly. Then, he reached under his friend's body, took hold of his cock again, and, with firm thrusts of his hips began pounding in and out of Jed's ass in time to pumping his cock. Jed became even more vocal now, and Leo hoped the room was as sound-proof as he felt a suite this expensive should be. They were both lost in the sensations of their love making now and there were no words for several minutes as they enjoyed each other's bodies in a way they had been doing for 40 years. Leo felt as if he belonged inside Jed, their bodies fitting together, moving at one with each other. He paused, buried inside his lover, and lowered his head to the strong, broad back in front of him and licked off some of the salty sweat he found there, then nibbled his way towards Jed's neck, and nuzzled at his hairline. He loved the area where Jed's thick hair met the nape of his neck, loved the scent of it and the feel of it against his lips...reluctantly he pulled back and began thrusting again and within seconds he felt Jed shuddering and his warm come flooded onto Leo's hand. Leo thrust a few more times and then felt his own climax taking him. It was good – but then it was always good, Leo thought to himself as he came deep inside his lover's body and then came to rest, his hands wrapped around Jed's torso, his cock still buried deep inside him, his face resting on Jed's back. They were still for a moment, and then Leo withdrew and toppled sideways onto the bed, drawing Jed against him.

"You always make me feel young again," Jed murmured.

"Yeah. You too," Leo said, pulling Jed around to face him, and capturing his lips in a loving kiss.

"Thanks, Leo. I'm sorry...about earlier. I was just...hmm, maybe I just needed this more than I thought," Jed commented, snuggling in closer.

"Maybe," Leo replied with a sigh, wrapping his arms around his lover and holding him tight. Whatever was troubling him, Jed still didn't want to talk about it.

They lay there for awhile, happy and sated, and then Jed pulled away from Leo, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and reached for his sweatpants.

"Where the hell are you going?" Leo demanded.

"Home." Jed shrugged, pulling on his pants.

"Jed, are you out of your mind? It's nearly 3 am!" Leo protested.

"I have a driver, Leo. It's not like I'm going to get ambushed or anything on my way home."

"Well, you know, if you did then I'm sure you could take 'em," Leo commented with a grunt.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay." Jed waved a hand in Leo's direction.

"Jed – stay," Leo said, putting a firm hand on Jed's naked shoulder. "I mean it. I'm not wild about you barging in here at 1 o' clock in the morning and then shipping straight out again

when we're through."

"Leo – we often have quickies," Jed objected.

"I know – but usually after we've had a meal together or at least spent some time together and not usually this late so that we miss out on virtually an entire night's sleep."

He felt Jed stiffen under his hand and wondered what the hell that was about.

"The secret service agents will wonder..." Jed began.

"No they won't," Leo snapped. He got up, pulled on his robe, and walked out of the bedroom and into the living room of his suite. He unlocked the door, pulled it open, and addressed himself to the agent outside. "It's late – he's going to be staying the night in the spare room," he told them, and then, without waiting for a reply, he shut the door and put the chain across it again. Jed emerged from the bedroom, his hair ruffled, still bare-chested, with an annoyed look on his face.

"You think they bought that?" He asked.

"I don't care – they're your security detail not your father – they don't need to question what time you're going to get home," Leo replied. Jed's jaw did a slight clench and Leo felt that once again he'd hit on a sore spot. He was getting tired of tip-toeing around Jed's mood without knowing what the hell was going on.

"So you're lying to the secret service now? Or am I really sleeping in the spare room?" Jed raised an eyebrow. "Actually that makes sense. That way we can both get some sleep and you won't have to put up with my snoring..."

"We're both sleeping in the second bedroom – unless you wanted to sleep on the wet patch in the main bedroom?" Leo commented, wondering why the hell Jed had just suggested sleeping alone when he knew that his old friend loved nothing more than curling up warm and naked against him after sex, revelling in just being close and having Leo all to himself – a rare enough occurrence these days. Leo put an arm around his lover's naked shoulder and drew him into the other room. He had an extensive – and expensive – suite, complete with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room and a small dining room. He occasionally had to entertain here and sometimes various of his family members came to stay, although not very often because he was usually too busy.

Leo steered Jed into the bed, took off his robe again, and got in beside his lover. He shivered against the cold sheets after the comfortable warmth of the bed they'd made love in, but Jed was as warm as toast and before long they were both cosy and comfortable together. Leo shut his eyes, enjoying the fact that he had Jed all to himself for a whole night for once – or at least what was left of the night. Jed relaxed against him, but he could still feel the tension in his lover's body. He stroked Jed's chest affectionately, and his friend sighed and pressed back against him and before long Leo had fallen fast asleep.

He woke just before 5, disoriented, wondering what he was doing in the second bedroom and then remembered and reached out for Jed – only to find that he was alone in the bed – and in the room. He could hear the very faint sound of music and got up, reaching for his robe again. He opened the door to the living room and found his lover lying wide awake on the sofa wearing the grey sweatpants he'd arrived in and one of his own tee shirts which fit Jed well enough as they were of a similar size. Simon and Garfunkel were softly tinkling from the stereo.

"Hey – did I wake you?" Jed looked up anxiously. "I'm sorry, Leo. I didn't mean to – I turned the sound right down. I borrowed a tee shirt – I was too hot in my sweater. Why do they keep these places so ridiculously well heated?"

"Jed..." Leo came and sat down beside him on the sofa. "It's 5 am," he murmured.

"I know. Why are we whispering, Leo, seeing as we're both awake?"

"I don't know. Mostly I'm wondering why we're both awake though," Leo replied. Jed shrugged and raised his hand, in what Leo knew to be a clear attempt to distract him from this line of discussion.

"Hear this, Leo?" Jed asked, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "This takes me back. Old friends..." He sang along. "Can you imagine us years from today, sharing a park bench quietly? How terribly strange to be seventy...Old friends, Memory brushes the same years. Silently sharing the same fear...' That's us, Leo – old friends," he commented.

"Old friends who aren't being honest with each other," Leo said softly. There was a long silence and then:

"Yeah." Jed gave a long, slow sigh. "I'm sorry, Leo."

"So how long has it been?" Leo asked.

"Since when?" Jed shrugged, still not meeting Leo's eye.

"Since you last slept," Leo said softly. Jed studied his fingers for a long moment.

"If I tell you, you have to promise you won't yell at me," he murmured.

"How long, Jed?" Leo repeated firmly. Jed sighed again.

"Including tonight?" He asked, glancing at Leo from under his eyelashes, looking like a little kid.

"Yeah." Leo reached out and put a firm but reassuring hand on his lover's neck and massaged gently.

"Four nights." Jed made a face and flinched, waiting for Leo's inevitable reaction. Leo

stopped massaging Jed's neck. "Okay, that's a long silence. Leo? Hello?"

"I'm counting to ten. You told me not to yell at you," Leo replied. "Oh what the hell, I'm going to anyway. FOUR NIGHTS, JED? Four! How the hell are you even still functioning right now? God, no wonder you're in such a bad mood all the time. Four nights? And don't think I don't know that you stayed away from me because you knew I'd wheedle this out of you – so that means you were deliberately keeping it from me. At what point were you going to mention this little bout of insomnia, Jed? When you keeled over in front of the senior staff? Or on national television so the entire country could talk about how your MS was kicking in and making you unfit to be President?"

"See, this is why I didn't tell you," Jed growled.

"No, you didn't tell me because you knew I'd ask you questions and I will. Why aren't you sleeping, Jed?" Leo squeezed Jed's neck, requiring a reply.

"I have no idea." Jed shrugged.

"Oh don't play this game with me, Jed. You've been prone to insomnia all your life and there's always a reason. What's it about this time?"

Jed shrugged again.

"Jed." Leo squeezed his lover's neck once more, trying to get him to look at him.

"Leo...I really don't know. I just can't switch off. I'm tired – I'm so tired I could weep, but the minute I lie down and close my eyes I feel as if I'm wide awake. Nothing works – I took a sleeping pill last night but still didn't sleep – although I think it did kick in during that National Security Briefing earlier."

"Oh, you mean when you were just 'resting your eyes'," Leo commented acerbically. Jed winced.

"Yeah. Sorry about that, Leo but I knew you'd make a big deal out of this and I thought it would pass."

"But it hasn't," Leo said softly.

"No." Jed sighed. "I left the office soon after you did – went to the Residence and straight to bed in the hope of catching up on the sleep I've missed...but I just lay there, tossing and turning. Gave up around midnight and came over here instead."

"Yeah, because if you can't sleep there's no reason why I should be allowed to after all," Leo commented grumpily.

"I'm sorry, Leo," Jed said and he sounded so abject that Leo couldn't stay angry with him.

"Jed, sometimes I swear you're impossible," he sighed, moving his hand down to clasp his friend's shoulders and bring him in close. Jed came, clearly wanting the affection and comfort that his lover could give him. Leo turned Jed's face towards him and kissed him lovingly on the mouth. Jed leaned into him, resting against Leo's chest. Leo stroked his lover's hair, having made his decision.

"Jed, I'm going to bring someone in. Someone for you to talk to," he said.

"What, you mean a shrink?" Jed frowned, pulling back. "Leo, I'm not in need of psychiatric help for god's sake!"

Leo stood his ground – he knew this idea wouldn't go down well, but he was determined. "You need to talk to someone – nobody can keep functioning without sleep, and you're the President of the United States – there's too much riding on your shoulders for you to start falling asleep in important meetings. Sleep deprivation causes mood swings and difficulty making decisions – that's a pretty lethal combination for a man in your position."

"I'll call Abbey. She might be able to..."

"You mean you haven't spoken to her about this already?" Leo interrupted, feeling his anger rising again.

"No – she's enjoying herself in Manchester with the grandchildren. I'm not going to worry her." Jed shrugged.

"Or maybe you thought she'd ask the same questions I asked," Leo said, studying his friend carefully. Jed's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Leo, I'm not seeing a shrink," he said firmly, pulling away so that they were no longer in body contact.

"Yes you are," Leo replied, equally firmly.

"Leo, could I point out that you're not my boss – just the reverse in fact," Jed snapped.

"Don't you dare pull rank on me when we're alone like this, in private, just a couple of hours after making love, Jed," Leo said, in a dark, dangerous tone of voice. "Don't you damn well dare."

"This isn't an issue about us, Leo. It's presidential," Jed snarled.

"Oh, explain that to me please!"

"If word gets out that the President is seeing a psychiatrist..."

"You think I can't do this without anyone finding out?" Leo growled.

"You mean like the way you went to rehab without anyone finding out?" Jed threw back.

There was a stung silence. Leo gave Jed a hard glare and he could see from Jed's expression that his friend knew he had gone too far.

"I'm just saying..." Jed adopted a more reasonable tone of voice. "I'm just saying, don't tell me to do this like it's an order, Leo. You don't give me orders. You don't tell me what to do."

"Yes I do," Leo said calmly. Jed's eyes flashed angrily. "Sometimes I do," Leo continued. "Jed – there've been times in my life when I've needed you to be there for me and you have. You've told me the hard truth and you've stood firm when I needed you to, even when I didn't want to listen to what you had to say – and there have been times when I've done the same for you. This is one of them. This isn't going to go away by itself. You have to see someone."

Jed's jaw had settled into a hard line although Leo could tell that his argument had gone some way to persuading his friend.

"I don't think it'll help, Leo," he said, shrugging. "I really don't."

"You will talk to someone, Jed," Leo said softly. "Are you sure you don't know what this is about?"

Jed looked at him for a moment, and then shook his head, some invisible barrier coming down over his eyes. "No, Leo," he murmured and Leo knew he was lying. This wasn't the first time he'd been lied to by his lover and he doubted that it would be the last. While Leo had been hurt that Jed hadn't told him he had been diagnosed with MS, he had understood why because he knew the man so well; the truth was that Jed didn't like to admit to being weak. That folksy charm hid an iron will and a need to transcend the stresses and weaknesses that other men succumbed to. He was a man of infinite compassion and he understood weakness in others – had understood Leo's weakness all too well back in 1993 when he'd supported his friend through rehab - but Jed Bartlet didn't like to show any weakness himself. Leo thought he knew why as well – 40 years was a long time to know a man as intimately as he'd know Jed Bartlet, and he had an understanding of his friend's psyche that was matched only by his friend's wife.

"And you can't talk to Abbey?" Leo pushed.

"I just told you I don't know what it's about," Jed replied, a shade too fast.

"Okay." Leo shrugged. "Well, if you won't talk to me and you won't talk to Abbey, then you'll talk to a shrink."

"I can't," Jed replied, shaking his head.

"You can," Leo told him.

"I won't," Jed flashed back, a trace of petulance in his eyes. Leo's expression hardened.

"You. Will," he said, with a note of finality in his voice. They stared at each other for a long time, and then, finally, Jed broke. He sighed, and rubbed his face wearily.

"Who?" He asked, a catch in his voice.

"Stanley Keyworth."

"Stanley Keyworth?" Jed frowned.

"The guy I called in for Josh. He's good, he knows what he's doing, and he's got the kind of personal style I think you'll respond to. He didn't go easy on Josh – he's combative, and he won't take any of the shit you'll throw at him."

Jed's eyes flashed again.

"You know what you're like, Jed," Leo continued implacably. "You need someone who'll stand up to you or you'll walk all over them – I expect you'll try to walk all over Stanley but I think he's strong enough to take you."

"He's a trauma specialist," Jed pointed out. "Insomnia isn't his area."

"He's a shrink, and a good one. We know he's good at his job and we know he'll keep his mouth shut." Leo shrugged.

"I really don't want to do this, Leo," Jed told him miserably. Leo smiled, sensing the battle was all but over. He pulled his old friend close and kissed him again.

"I know," he said. "And you know something else – I really didn't want to go to rehab, Jed."

Jed sighed. "Yeah. I know," he replied. Leo got up and retrieved his cell phone.

"You're calling him now?" Jed queried, a note of panic in his voice.

"Sure." Leo nodded, putting through a call to the White House to get the number he needed.

"Leo, it's 5.30 in the morning!"

"Yes it is – and that means it's another night the President has gone without sleep. His Chief of Staff didn't get much either," Leo commented. "We're calling him, Jed. I want you to talk to him before another night passes."

"Oh, right – you think I'll talk to him and then, hey presto, I'll be able to sleep again?" Jed argued, spreading his hands wide.

"I have no idea – but the sooner we get him here the sooner it's likely that you'll get some rest and then maybe you'll ease up on the grouchy bear routine."

"You think he'll be able to just drop everything and get over here?"

Leo raised an eyebrow. "When the White House calls I expect him to do just that, yes," he said firmly. Jed gave a wry smile.

"Well, as long as I'm not the only one getting his ass kicked by Leo McGarry tonight," he commented. Leo rolled his eyes, then walked into the main bedroom and dialled the number he had been given. The phone rang several times and then a sleepy Doctor Keyworth answered. His tone woke up considerably when he realised who was calling and he agreed, with only a little firm insistence on Leo's part, to clear his schedule, arrange a flight, and be in Washington DC by late the following night. Leo didn't enlighten him as to who he'd be seeing – in fact he subtly implied that it was Josh he was worried about, and not the President. He decided that it would be a good idea to let Josh seem to be giving Keyworth a tour of the White House when he arrived – that was the best way to get him into the Residence. A meeting like this couldn't take place in the West Wing – it was far too sensitive for that. No, it would have to take place in the Residence. As always, Leo's active mind was one step ahead as he considered the best way to go about the arrangements and he was confident that this was as discreet as he could make it.

Leo finished with the call, and then returned to the sofa. Jed gazed at him mournfully as he came in, a hangdog expression on his face. When he wasn't being the President of the United States, when he was just being Jed, his Jed, the one he'd known since they were both 17 years old, then he really could be very endearing, Leo thought with a sigh. He shook his head, still wanting to be angry with his lover but a memory of a boy with thick dark hair and gentle if impatient blue eyes made it impossible. Right now, Jed was that boy again, and Leo never could resist him when he looked like this. Leo picked up Jed's bare feet, sat down on the sofa still holding them, and then began massaging them with his fingers. Jed sighed and relaxed back into the sofa, a smile playing over his mobile lips. It felt good being just Jed and Leo again, when so often nowadays they were President and Chief of Staff. It felt good to touch base and remember the wealth of shared experiences and mutual affection that bound them so inextricably together after all these years.

"You know – we have a couple of hours until we need to be at the office...and seeing as we're both awake..." Leo grinned. Jed looked at him from out of those infinitely tired eyes and grinned back.

"Leo – I'd choose you over sleep any day," he said.

Chapter 2 by Xanthe

1963

Jed parked his car and ran into the bus station as fast as he could, hoping he wasn't late. His stomach was churning and he was still cursing the damn car under his breath. Sometimes it

started and sometimes it didn't and it had to pick today, of all days, to decide to be difficult. He'd managed to get it going eventually but it had taken nearly an hour and while he'd left plenty of time for this particular journey, he was still a few minutes late. He hoped Leo's bus hadn't arrived already, leaving his friend waiting. This reunion was fraught enough as it was; Jed hadn't seen Leo for a year and he was uncertain what to expect. They'd met the previous summer at Boy's Nation, had fallen in love and slept together in a way that still shocked Jed when he really sat down and thought about it. When he was apart from Leo he found it hard to believe that they had really done all the things he remembered them doing. He knew he'd been swept along on the wave of some strong emotion but it all seemed so unreal now. He had been corresponding with Leo ever since, and always looked forward to his friend's long, intelligent letters with a passion that never seemed to fade. Now, after a year apart, Leo was coming to stay for the summer, and Jed was overwhelmed by a combination of nervousness and excitement so acute that he thought his entire body would burn up.

He had struggled with his feelings this past year, trying to convince himself that they weren't as strong as he thought, that this was just a passing phase. He had never felt like this about any of the boys at school, had never looked at boys the way he looked at Leo, and he was confused. He wasn't sure what to expect from this reunion – would he still feel the same way about Leo, or had the spell of that magical summer passed? Maybe their feelings could only exist in a certain place and time. Jed wasn't sure what he wanted – he longed to feel that tingling, electric charge that he remembered so well, but at the same time his feelings and the implications of falling in love with another boy scared the hell out of him. What would his family say if they knew? Did this mean he was homosexual? Would he never have the wife and family he had always assumed would one day be his and all the happiness that went with them? Lost and confused Jed had turned increasingly to his religion for answers, and the one answer that came up each time was that he had to end his relationship with Leo. He tried not opening Leo's letters but was too weak willed to resist – Leo's letters were his lifeline in an emotionally sterile life. His relationship with his father was difficult and at times painful, and Leo gave him an easy affection he had never known before. He found himself longing for those letters too much not to open them. Then he tried to make himself reply in an offhand way, to snub Leo, or dismiss whatever he said in a brusque fashion, but Leo always wrote back with a steady affection – he didn't seem to have the confusion and mood swings that Jed was beset by. So now, a whole year later, Jed was waiting to meet Leo at the bus station with no idea what to expect.

The bus was fifteen minutes late, by which time Jed's emotions had been stoked up even more. He stood with his hands in his pocket, wondering what would happen, wondering how he'd feel seeing Leo again after all this time, wondering whether Leo had changed – or, more importantly, whether his feelings for Leo had changed. He searched the passengers getting off the bus with some impatience, and his heart missed a beat as he caught sight of a familiar stocky figure and a blond head. Seemingly not of his own volition, he found his feet moving swiftly to meet his – what? Friend? Lover?

"Jed?" Leo had seen him and now Jed found his feet were running faster, and he was charging across the bus station towards the other boy. "Jed!"

Jed stopped a few feet from the youth he hadn't seen for a year and studied him, trying to gauge his own emotions, trying to figure out what he was feeling, but all he could think about was how Leo was as attractive this year as he had been last year. His hair was shorter – shorn into a crop, but those blue eyes were still sparkling, full of quiet amusement, that quirky mouth was smiling that familiar impish grin, and that strong jaw was still jutting out obstinately.

"Leo!" He closed the remaining distance between them and gazed at his friend, transfixed. Leo held out his hand and Jed took it – and immediately felt that erotic, electric charge leap straight through his skin and all the way to his groin. He'd never known that just shaking someone's hand could cause this reaction but it always happened with Leo and that hadn't changed. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or annoyed about that. Leo shook his hand vigorously and then leaned forward and whispered into Jed's ear:

"All I can think about is how much I want to kiss you right now."

Jed felt a tingling on his skin and a humming of the blood in his veins and then he knew that nothing had changed. It didn't matter that a year had passed since they'd last set eyes on each other, or that he was scared by the intensity of what had happened between them last summer – when he was with Leo all his doubts disappeared.

"Me too," he whispered back, meaning it, and Leo grinned at him and squeezed his hand even harder. Finally they broke apart and Jed found that he missed that erotically charged touch of skin on skin so much that it actually physically hurt. He grabbed Leo's small suitcase from his friend's hand and walked as close to Leo as he could on the way to the car, their shoulders and thighs occasionally brushing each other and each time sparking that electric current running between them. By the time they reached the car, Jed was in a fever pitch of excitement and he knew that Leo felt the same. He slung Leo's case in the back of the car and they both got in. Jed turned the key in the ignition and Leo winced as the car made a grinding sound in response.

"What's wrong with your car?" He asked as Jed turned the key again.

"I have no idea. I've taken the thing apart but it still doesn't work," he sighed.

"I'll fix it," Leo said confidently.

"You know about cars?" Jed asked in surprise. Leo shrugged.

"A little. I bet that between us we can fix it," Leo grinned, with an infectious confidence. There was no room for any doubt whatsoever in his voice – and Jed knew that Leo totally and absolutely believed that they could fix the car.

Jed gazed at his friend in a haze of hero worship and then gave a peal of delighted laughter. Leo looked at him for a moment, and then joined in.

"Oh god I've missed you," Jed said, still laughing stupidly. "Nobody else is like you."

"Yeah," Leo said softly, and he put his hand over Jed's where it was resting on the steering wheel and they both gave a startled gasp as a jolt of that same erotic charge ran through them once more. "I was counting down the days until I got here."

"Did you worry?" Jed asked suddenly.

"Worry?" Leo frowned.

"That it might not be the same? That it was just one of those things? That we'd both have changed?" Jed blurted out. Leo looked surprised.

"No, I wasn't worried about that, Jed," he said softly. "I don't think I'll ever worry about that. It'll never happen."

Jed felt strangely calmed by his friend's assurance. It was if Leo had put his finger on some essential element about their relationship – it was something that neither of them had any control over. It was a constant in their lives and always would be. Nothing could ever change the way they felt about each other. Not now, and not at any point in the future. It almost had the feeling of being somehow ordained, or decreed, although whether by fate, chance or God, Jed was unable to say. He turned the key in the ignition again and this time the engine sprang into life. They talked non-stop as Jed drove them back to the school.

"Did you know that the day after tomorrow is June 17th?" Jed said, glancing at Leo.

"So?" Leo shrugged. "What's so important about that?"

"We met last year for the first time on June 17th!" Jed told him, his dark hair flopping into his eyes. "I can't believe you don't remember that!"

Leo suddenly broke into a wide grin and he reached out to flick Jed's hair off his forehead. "Had you!" He laughed. Jed frowned at his friend in annoyance.

"What?"

"I know we met on June 17th last year. It was the first day at camp. You were wearing jeans and a blue shirt," Leo told him confidently. "And the first thing you did was argue with me non-stop for half an hour so yeah, I remember, Jed. You're a tough person to forget!"

"So why...?" Jed began grumpily.

"Because you're cute when you're angry," Leo grinned. "And because you are waaaay too gullible and that makes you lotsa fun to tease."

"I'll get you back for that," Jed said, feeling impossibly happy. There was something about being with Leo that just felt so right.

"Oh yeah?" Leo grinned at him sideways.

"Yeah!" Jed proclaimed, little realising that he was starting a battle that would last for the rest of their lives.

"Jed..." Leo glanced around the quiet country road they were driving along. "Is there anywhere we could go?"

"What...you mean to...?" Jed glanced at his friend only to find that Leo was looking at him with a particular expression in those blue eyes that made Jed's mouth go dry and his stomach flip.

"It's pretty quiet out here," Leo said seductively, putting his hand on Jed's neck and stroking gently. "And I don't think I can wait much longer. I've wanted you from the second I saw you at the station and if we don't pull off somewhere soon then I'm going to have an accident here." He grinned in the direction of his pants. Jed swallowed hard and glanced around.

"We're about twenty minutes from the school. There's a little road just down here that nobody ever uses – it leads to an old mine and it's completely hidden by trees," he said.

"Sounds perfect," Leo told him, with a smile of such sexual hunger that Jed's cock hardened instantly.

Jed put his foot down and drove the next couple of miles to the turning as fast as he could, as eager as Leo was to renew their relationship. The turning he had mentioned was perfect, completely hidden from the road and never used by any other cars as it didn't lead anywhere. Jed drove half way along it, and then stopped the car, and Leo grabbed him the moment he put the hand brake on.

That first kiss almost stopped Jed's heart. Leo's lips were both familiar and unfamiliar. He remembered now the exquisite joy of kissing Leo, of feeling those insistent lips against his mouth, of the smell of Leo, the taste of him, and the feel of those hard, young muscles against his own hard, young body. Leo's hands fumbled insistently at Jed's shirt and he pulled it open. He stroked Jed's chest and then went lower, tugging at Jed's belt insistently, his mouth still devouring Jed's mouth. Jed wrapped his arms around Leo and slid his hands down the back of Leo's pants, finding Leo's ass. Leo's cock was digging into his thigh and his own was so hard that it hurt. Leo fumbled down the front of both their pants for a second, intent on releasing their cocks from their prisons, and then their liberated cocks rose up, unfettered, and clashed against each other. Jed came there and then, just from the feel of Leo's cock against his own, and Leo thrust against Jed and came a few seconds later, his tongue still halfway down Jed's throat. Jed sagged against Leo, utterly exhilarated and they sat there panting, the upholstery of the car sticky with their semen.

"Oh god," Leo whispered, kissing Jed's cheek. "I've missed you so much." He took Jed's face in his hands and kissed him again and again, and each time he pulled back their eyes met and they gazed at each other, lost in a haze of adoration. Leo ran his thumb over Jed's lip and Jed trembled as his skin zinged with an almost painful erotic charge.

"I missed you too, Leo," he replied, his hands still caressing Leo's ass. Leo smiled and Jed's heart missed a beat

"I've been waiting a whole year for this. Oh god – it's always so much better with you than with anyone else." Leo brushed Jed's hair with his fingers, still smiling at him fondly, and Jed felt a pang of jealousy.

"Have you been seeing anyone?" He asked, trying to make it sound casual. Leo shrugged.

"There was a girl. Debbie. We had some fun and it was good but it wasn't like this." He frowned, as if he truly was unable to make sense of it. "It's never like this with anyone else," he murmured, going back in for another kiss. Jed pushed him back.

"How do you meet all these damn girls?" Jed growled.

Leo grinned and shrugged. "Did you get to fourth base with David Wheaton's sister yet?" He asked.

"No - I didn't even get to first base with her," Jed snapped. "She wouldn't look twice at me."

"Why not?" Leo sounded surprised. He traced his fingers down over Jed's exposed collar bone, giving Jed the shivers.

"Because..." Jed struggled to find the words as Leo's hand went lower.

"She doesn't know what she's missing," Leo grinned, his hand tracing patterns on Jed's flesh, making Jed tingle and burn and having the effect of rendering his cock instantly hard again, and anything he might have said in reply was lost as they spent the next twenty minutes making out all over again.

2002

"Ah, the last meal of the condemned man," Jed commented, as he sat down at the dining table in the Residence late the following evening. Leo sat back in his chair and gazed at him impassively, his cell phone pressed to one ear. Jed ignored him and continued with his theme, picking up the lids of the dishes on the table to investigate the contents. "Ah, green beans. Isn't it tradition that the condemned man gets food that he actually likes, Leo? There are far too many vegetables in this meal and I don't like green beans – a fact that I'm sure the entire world knows. You'd think that for a last meal they could have done better."

"You are not going to make me feel sorry for you, sir," Leo said smoothly. "You're meeting a psychiatrist not a firing squad."

"Is he here?" Jed began piling food onto his plate.

"His plane just touched down. He'll be here soon." Leo put his cell phone down on the table.

"Don't let me keep you from working, Leo," Jed told him, waving his hand around. "I know you're a very busy, very important man. I also know that you're only here right now to make sure that I keep this appointment."

Leo nodded grimly. "That's right, sir."

"There's no need, Leo," Jed shrugged. "I told you I'd see him and I will. I might not like the idea but please note that I'm doing as you say and you can therefore stop breathing down my neck."

"Sir...there's something we need to talk about before you see Stanley," Leo murmured, leaning across the table.

"Shouldn't we call him Doctor Keyworth? If he's going to be poking around inside my psyche I would at least like to be reminded of the fact that he's fully qualified to be there," Jed said, knowing he was being deliberately difficult about this but unable to stop himself.

"It's not like he's doing brain surgery, sir," Leo commented calmly. Jed sighed and rested his fork on his plate, gazing at Leo.

"Leo..." He began.

"You'll see him. He'll be here soon," Leo told him, clearly having rightly predicted that Jed would try, one last time, to get out of this.

"I don't like shrinks, Leo. I don't like this whole modern habit of wallowing in our own problems, giving in to our self-obsession. It's indulgent," Jed snapped.

"I thought that way once too," Leo replied, "but I went to rehab because it was the right thing to do and let me tell you it isn't all touchy feely crap. I had to face up to some hard issues at rehab and I'm the stronger for it. I think..." He hesitated.

"Oh by all means go on, Leo," Jed prompted. "Give me the benefit of your vast wisdom and experience on this."

His petulant tone seemed to sting Leo who gave him an irate look and continued with some heat in his voice.

"Okay. I will. I think that a man can go through his entire life without ever facing himself, sir. I think there are some things a man would rather put in a box and never look at than tackle head on. And for a lot of people that might be fine – it's a coping mechanism and sometimes it works...until you hit a wall. I hit a wall with alcohol and you hit one with your sleeping. Then you have no choice but to get that box out and open it up – you can't circumvent the process, sir. Or at least, if you do, you'll just keep on banging your head against the same wall – and in an election year you have to ask yourself whether that's a liability you can afford."

"But once the box is opened up, you can't close it again either," Jed commented.

"Yes, sir. Is that what you're afraid of?" Leo asked softly.

Jed paused, with his fork raised to his mouth. Was it? He put his fork down and gazed at his old friend thoughtfully. "Maybe, Leo," he murmured. "Maybe."

"You hit a wall, sir," Leo told him. "And you'll keep on hitting it until you look at what's in the box. It might be tough, but you can handle it."

Jed gazed silently into space, wondering, privately, whether Leo was right about that.

"Sir?"

"Hmm?" Jed glanced at his friend again, still lost in his own preoccupation.

"We have to talk about something," Leo told him, leaning across the table in an almost conspiratorial manner, speaking in low tones. "I don't know what's going on for you right now, but there's no point us calling in Stanley if you aren't going to be honest with him."

"What do you mean?" Jed frowned.

"I mean that no part of your life can be off limits to him," Leo said softly. Jed threw his cutlery down on the plate where it made a loud, clattering sound.

"Damnit, Leo. This is a monstrous invasion of..."

"Sir," Leo raised his hand. "Let's keep this quiet shall we?" He said, glancing at the door.

"Oh excuse me, Leo – I thought you were the one just advocating that I share the most personal and intimate details of my life with a complete stranger!" Jed snapped.

"Sir, I'm just saying that if you need to talk about us - about me and our relationship – then that's fine. You might need to," Leo told him urgently. "Stanley is a fine psychiatrist and I have no doubt whatsoever that he'll keep this completely confidential. I'm saying that I don't mind, that's all. Just do what you have to do."

Jed took a deep breath; he felt as if all the wind had been taken out of his sails and he was humbled by what Leo had just given him permission to share with this stranger who was coming to his house. They had been lovers for 40 years but this secret was theirs – it belonged to them both and they had always had an unspoken agreement that it was to be shared with nobody except the closest of family members.

"Leo..." He reached across the table and covered Leo's hand briefly with his own. "Okay." He nodded. "Okay." He gave a short, bitter bark of laughter. "Okay – I'll see this guy and I'll..." He paused, tried to avoid Leo's sharp, knowing blue eyes, and failed, as he always did in the

end. "I'll do my best to open the box, Leo. I promise," he murmured.

"I know you will, sir." Leo gave him a smile that warmed him all the way through. Jed gazed at his friend moodily. He wished he could explain to Leo what this was all about – wished he could explain it to himself. He knew what had started it, but he was less sure what had turned it into this obsession that was making it impossible to sleep. Maybe it would be easier to talk to a stranger than it was to talk to Leo or Abbey on this particular subject. Maybe...Or maybe it was easier not to talk about it at all. He really didn't want to dredge all this up again. Not after all these years. It had been buried – locked up in that box that Leo talked about. Was it really necessary to get it out and examine it? Couldn't it just stay there?

The sound of Leo's cell phone broke through his reverie. He watched as Leo spoke for a few minutes and then turned back to him.

"Sir, he's here. Josh is taking him up to your study."

"Okay." Jed picked up his glass and took a deep sip of wine.

"Sir..." Leo got up.

"You go on ahead, Leo. I'll be there. Just give me...just give me a few minutes alone," Jed told him. Leo gazed at him steadily for a moment and then nodded. As he walked past Jed on his way to the door, he rested his hand on his friend's shoulder for a second, and then was gone. Jed gazed at the remains of his dinner glumly, trying to gather his thoughts. His conversation with Leo had changed everything; he knew how to play people and he had intended to walk his way through this, to give the easy answers and to get rid of Stanley Keyworth as fast as he could. Leo would never know... but now... now he had promised Leo he would look inside that box and he didn't break the promises he made to Leo. "Damnit," Jed muttered under his breath. "Damn you for this, Leo and damn Stanley and damn Toby and damn..." He trailed off and gazed into space again for a moment, shaking his head. "Damn," he whispered. The past pounded in his head, demanding his attention and he was getting so tired of pushing it away and pretending it didn't matter.

Jed took a few deep breaths and then got to his feet and walked up to his private study. Josh and Leo were both talking to man with intelligent brown eyes and a no-nonsense manner. Jed stiffened, feeling combative and adversarial, sensing immediately that this man was clever – it would be hard to hide anything from him even if he hadn't given his promise to Leo...but he felt stung all the same. He didn't want to be here, didn't want to be discussing his own personal, private thoughts with some stranger.

Leo and Josh made their excuses and left the room. Leo paused beside him on his way out and they exchanged a glance and a brief word, and then his old friend and lover for 40 years left, and Jed was on his own in the lion's den.

He was not, however, going to give in that easily. He wasn't going to just sit here and spill his guts to this man with the knowing brown eyes and deceptively soft-spoken manner. Dr. Stanley Keyworth would have to prove to him that he knew what he was doing first before

Jed would trust him with any personal details about his life.

1963

"Mom's away for the summer," Jed told Leo as they climbed the stairs to the house, which was adjacent to the main school building. "She and my aunt – her sister – have this yearly rotation thing. Aunt Sal comes to stay with us one summer and my mom goes to her place the next year. She said to say 'hi' and that she was sorry to have missed you and instructed me to put you in the spare room, here." He opened the door to a small room at the end of the landing and Leo glanced in and nodded.

"And where are you?" Leo asked, his lips grazing Jed's ear as they stood pressed up against each other in the small doorway.

"Just across the hallway," Jed grinned, pointing.

"Good. Not far to travel then," Leo murmured.

"Yeah. These are the only two bedrooms up here - Dad sleeps on the landing below and Jon's bedroom is the little one next to his so we're all alone up here in the attic," Jed pointed out, grinning as Leo stroked his ass, still standing too close, invading his space in a way that made Jed's body tingle with need all over again, despite the fact they'd already made love three times on the journey home.

Leo tore himself away and threw his suitcase down on the bed. He sat down beside it, gazing at it thoughtfully, and then glanced back at Jed and beckoned. "Come here. I've got something I want to show you," he said. "Close the door."

"Leo – we can't...I mean, not here, not during the day. It's too much of a risk," Jed hissed.

"It's okay – I wasn't suggesting that – tempting though it is." Leo grinned up at him. "Come and sit down, Jed. There's something I wanted to talk to you about." Jed joined him on the bed, and Leo opened up his case. He removed a couple of tidily packed items of clothing and then pulled out a small tube and held it up.

"What is it?" Jed asked.

"It's lubricant," Leo told him, reaching out a hand and resting it on the nape of Jed's neck, kneading gently.

"Like...for a car?" Jed frowned, glancing at his friend. Leo's lips turned up at the corners in a twisted grin.

"Kinda...but not," Leo told him. "Jed...you know there's a lot of stuff we haven't done, right?"

Jed gazed at him – somehow he was pretty sure that Leo wasn't referring to going to college

or books they hadn't read.

"I...I dunno." He shrugged.

"Don't get me wrong," Leo said softly, his hand still massaging the back of Jed's neck. "I love what we do together, when we're on our own – and if that's all we ever do then it'll be enough for me. But...I'm just saying there's other stuff we can do if we want. Stuff we could try."

"Like what?" Jed asked, gazing at the tube in his hand in terrified fascination.

"Well..." Leo removed his hand from Jed's neck and took the tube of lubricant from him. He opened it, and smeared a small amount onto Jed's fingers. "It makes it slide easier...stops it hurting," he murmured, gazing at Jed steadily. "I read about it. We could try it and see if we liked it but only if you wanted to."

"You mean...?" Jed felt as if he should be shocked – only he wasn't. He wondered what it would feel like to have Leo's cock inside that part of his body, or to be inside Leo in such an intimate way. They'd sucked each other before, and frequently jerked each other to climax with their hands...but this was something else, something much more important.

"Does it disgust you?" Leo asked, his blue eyes never leaving Jed's face.

"No...I mean...no," Jed sighed. "But I know it's wrong, Leo. Everything I've ever been taught tells me it's wrong but then just letting you kiss me and suck me is wrong and however much I tell myself that it doesn't *feel* wrong when you're doing it."

"Jed, is it wrong because your faith says it's wrong or is it wrong because you know it's wrong in your heart?" Leo asked him. Jed shook his head.

"My faith isn't separable from my heart, Leo," he replied. "And you're a Catholic too."

"I know...but I don't have faith, Jed. I stopped having faith when Dad blew his brains all over the garage," Leo told him with a shrug. Jed gazed at his friend, sensing Leo withdrawing from him, as if bracing himself for rejection. Leo had told him about his father's death before, but always in cold, clinical terms, like recounting a story that had happened to someone else. Jed had never seen a glimpse of the wider impact that his father's death had had upon his friend.

"Are you saying you don't believe in God, Leo?" He asked.

"I'm saying I don't know." Leo shrugged. "I know you have faith, Jed, and that's fine, but don't expect me to think and feel the same way as you. I want you – I want you in every way it's possible to have you, and I'd like you to feel the same way. I'll understand if you don't want to do this because it disgusts you or scares you but I won't understand if you hide behind your faith because we've done enough already and where was your faith then?"

Jed gazed at his friend for a long time. He had never seen Leo like this and it fascinated him. There was a wounded quality to Leo's soul that he had kept carefully hidden. Up until now Jed had always seen Leo as a fixer, possessed of an amazing amount of confidence and the brains to justify it. Leo was someone who could keep up with his own intellect, the first person he'd ever met who he could really talk to. Sometimes when they were talking Jed felt as if he was flying, soaring into the air, free and unfettered; nobody had ever made him feel like that before and it was exhilarating. Now he could see that Leo had a darkness in his psyche, a pain that didn't go away, something he guarded fiercely, like his namesake lion, and didn't let anyone get close enough to see. Jed felt honoured that Leo had shared that side of himself with him – and he had no intention of letting Leo down.

"Leo...I respect that. I haven't walked in your shoes...I don't know what it's like to live through what you've lived through. You hardly ever talk about your father, Leo."

"No." Leo gazed at his own hands and shrugged.

"If you ever wanted to then I'd like to listen one day," Jed said softly.

Leo nodded. "Thanks," he murmured.

"As for this." Jed put the tube into Leo's open palm and closed his hand around it. "Bring it to my room tonight, when everyone's asleep. I want you too, Leo – in every way possible," he added, echoing Leo's words back to him. Leo's blue eyes shimmered and he rested his forehead against Jed's. Jed put his hands around Leo's shoulders, feeling oddly grown up. Up until now, despite the fact that they were the same age, Leo had always seemed to be the older one, the worldly one, the one who had lived and experienced so much more than he with his sheltered upbringing, and yet now, for the first time, Jed felt as if that situation were reversed – and he liked the feeling of strength and being needed that gave him.

"Hey – is that Leo?" A voice asked from the doorway. Jed drew his arm away quickly and turned to face his little brother, resolving to be more careful about displays of affection in future.

"Yeah. I'm Leo." Leo grinned at the small, sandy haired boy.

"This is Jon," Jed said, waving a hand at his brother.

Jonathan didn't look a whole lot like him – he had his father's paler skin and colouring. Jed was fond of the kid; Jon looked up to him and was well behaved, kind of quiet, and very bookish. Jed loved passing on some of his favourite books to his brother and talking about them afterwards.

"Dad says not to be late for dinner," Jon instructed Jed.

"We won't be," Jed replied with a nod.

"Only..." Jon made a face. "Uncle Simon dropped by earlier." He didn't elaborate but Jed

understood the warning well enough.

"Oh. Right." Jed sighed.

"Okay! See you then, Leo." Jon gave a cheery smile and then ran off.

"Nice kid," Leo commented.

"Yeah – for a kid brother he isn't too bad," Jed grinned.

"He doesn't seem to have a lot to say – unlike his brother," Leo observed. Jed burst out laughing.

"He's never been exactly chatty. He reads a lot and sometimes he comes out with these startling observations that make us all wonder what the hell kind of stuff he's borrowing from the school library - but he's a good kid. Dad dotes on him." Jed frowned absently, and got up. "Speaking of which – I should leave you to unpack. Dinner's in about 15 minutes and Dad hates it when we're late for meals. He's got a real thing about it."

"And I take it he doesn't like your Uncle Simon?" Leo raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Jed gave a wry laugh. "Nope. Uncle Simon is big in New Hampshire politics and he throws his weight around a bit. He enjoys making Dad feel small and parochial I think. Mind you, Dad hates it even more when Uncle Jack visits!" Jed grinned. "I like them both – Uncle Simon always has these really amazing stories to tell. He's smart – we have great conversations. I wish he'd drop by more often," he commented wistfully. "If he and Dad were on better terms then I guess he would, but Dad is always in a bad mood after either of his brothers visit so I suppose it's better that they don't come by more often. Anyway – if he is in a bad mood then we'd better not be late for dinner."

"Okay." Leo smiled broadly, and put the lubricant back into his case with a knowing smile in Jed's direction. Jed felt a wave of erotic excitement sweep through his entire body. He could hardly wait for the evening to be over so that he could experience this new thing Leo had planned. He grinned at his friend stupidly.

"I'm so glad you're here," he murmured, wondering how he'd survived the previous 12 months without Leo by his side.

"Me too," Leo replied softly. "Me too."

Chapter 3 by Xanthe

2002

Jed took a deep breath as he closed the door behind Leo and then he turned and introduced himself.

"I'm Jed Bartlet

"Stanley Keyworth."

"I guess we knew that."

"Yes, sir."

"I've been having trouble sleeping."

Such deceptively easy words but what did they hide? Jed walked impatiently around the room while Stanley asked a series of gentle questions. His own replies were facetious, difficult, smart ass - he knew that, but he couldn't stop himself anyway.

"Well, Mr President...um...tell me about the nature of your sleeping problem," Stanley asked.

"I can't sleep." Jed shrugged.

"What happens when you try to sleep?"

"I stay awake," Jed shot back.

Stanley didn't even blink. He had to know he was being toyed with, but he ploughed on regardless. Jed felt a brief moment of shame – this guy had been brought here not knowing who he had been called to see. He'd been given no time whatsoever to adjust to the idea that the person in need of his help was the President of the United States no less, a President who was doing his best to give dumbass answers to all his questions - a president who was only here under duress because his best friend and lover of 40 years had insisted. This wasn't even Stanley's area of expertise, but Leo trusted him and Leo didn't trust people easily so Stanley was stuck with the highly unenviable task of getting into Jed Bartlet's psyche, and right now Jed knew he was making that task as hard as he possibly could.

"How long has it been?" Stanley asked.

"Four nights," Jed replied. Stanley didn't react quite as violently as Leo had, but his eyes registered his concern all the same.

"You haven't slept in four nights?"

"Right."

"Must be hard."

"Yeah."

"Have you tried taking a sleeping pill?"

Jed nodded. "The third night."

"And it didn't work?"

"Not until the next morning in the middle of a National Security briefing."

A light flashed in Stanley's eyes and for the first time Jed got a glimpse of himself and the situation as this man must be seeing it. This was no longer abstract – this wasn't just a case of a man not getting a good night's sleep; this was something that could affect national security – this was important. Stanley hadn't signed up for this and he was taking some time, feeling his way, trying to figure out the best way of approaching his difficult, obstructive patient, a patient who just happened to be the President of the United States.

"Well, that's no good," Stanley commented neutrally.

Jed found himself unable to sit still. He got up and walked impatiently around the room as they talked, found himself a cigarette and lit it. He was feeling a little bit ashamed of himself but all the same, he knew that he couldn't behave any differently. He answered Stanley's questions about his smoking and his physical health, all the time knowing he could cut them both to the chase if he wanted to, and spare Stanley all this tedious questioning - and himself all the equally tedious replies. Only he couldn't. He couldn't because he needed to make Stanley work for this. He couldn't because he wasn't sure he wanted to start this, and open that box Leo had told him he had to open. He couldn't because he was Jed Bartlet.

Jed turned on the television. He knew that in part he was trying to impress Stanley with his status, trying to show this psychiatrist that he wasn't weak, that despite his insomnia he was still in charge, still in control. He hadn't called a psychiatrist here because he couldn't handle his own thoughts and emotions. He could. He watched on the White House closed circuit TV link as CJ handled a question and answer session with her usual adept skill and then turned back to Stanley. The psychiatrist didn't look impressed. In fact he just looked curious, as if he realised that entire charade with the TV had been for his benefit. Jed checked himself – had he been showing off? Showing off his status and his importance in a way that his father would have scolded him for – or worse.

Jed poured himself a glass of water, trying to distract himself from that train of thought. Stanley talked to him, his questions puncturing Jed's attempts to keep on top of this, to keep Stanley from getting close to anything dangerous. He found himself answering more irritably now and checked himself, sliding instead into another of his age-old coping mechanisms – telling an anecdote. Stanley sat back comfortably and listened but he had that psychiatrist's trick of watching you closely as you spoke and it unnerved Jed. What if even this harmless story about Arthur Miller was somehow betraying some aspect of his psyche? Damn but he hated this. Stanley's brown eyes were boring holes into his soul and he could almost hear Leo growling at him: "For god's sake, Jed. I didn't call the poor man all the way up here from San Francisco for you to tell him about Arthur Miller. Just get on with it will you, because if you don't I'll damn well kick your ass."

"I can't sleep," he said with a sigh. "I can't sleep. I'll be tired, I'll lie there, and it doesn't happen."

"What happened four nights ago?" Stanley asked.

"I won the Iowa caucus."

"Anything else?"

"That's not enough?" Jed shot back glibly, still deflecting, still keeping himself safe.

"Mr. President," Stanley sighed, finally calling him on his behaviour. "If you were any other patient..."

"Say what you'd say to any other patient," Jed said wearily, finally accepting his fate. Leo had said this guy was tough, that he'd call him on his bullshit, and now, finally, he thought he might have pushed Stanley's patience to its limit.

"I'd say screw around if you want, but it's your money, it's about to be my money, and I sleep fine," Stanley said firmly.

Jed gazed at the ceiling for a long moment, struggling with himself. He could still hear Leo whispering in his ear: "Jed – now would be a good time, before we all lose patience with you. This guy has a life you know. He isn't going to stick around forever waiting for you to spill your guts – President or not he's going to give up on you if you don't start doing some serious talking."

"I had a conversation with one of my aides that night after we got back from Iowa," Jed said with a sigh, still gazing at the ceiling, unable to meet Stanley's eye. "He called me on something."

"What?"

"Well I guess we talked about a lot of things. Who we thought the Republican challenger was going to be, and incumbency and campaign strategy...strategic overview..." Somewhere in his head he could hear Leo's growl of sheer exasperation with his delaying tactics, and finally, he snapped. "...But the long and short of it is that my father never liked me at all."

There was a long silence. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Stanley nodding, acknowledging that they had reached the crux of the problem.

"Well, at least we're closer to my area now," Stanley commented.

Jed felt his anxiety rising and he took a mental side-swipe at Leo. "Yeah, I thought you'd enjoy that," he said.

"What exactly did your aide say to you?" Stanley asked, taking Jed by surprise.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I think my father didn't like me?" He raised an eyebrow, still trying to keep control of this conversation.

"You can tell me that if you want, but I'm more interested in what your aide said that upset you so much that you haven't been able to sleep for four nights," Stanley said calmly.

"My father was a headmaster of a large boy's boarding school which I, as his son, attended," Jed told him, ignoring the question. Stanley nodded. "It was an unusual upbringing in that respect, I'll admit," Jed continued. Stanley threaded his hands together in his lap and waited. "But I got a first class education and while my relationship with my father was formal, I don't think it was unusual in that era."

"Sir – what did your aide say?" Stanley asked in that same calm, insistent tone of voice. Jed ignored him.

"My mother had her own life – I adored her but I didn't spend much time with her; and before you ask, that didn't bother me - none of the other boys at the school saw their mothers much after all." Jed swung the water around in his glass thoughtfully.

"You're not answering the question, sir," Stanley pointed out.

"I'm a politician, Stanley. We make an art form out of not answering the questions we don't want to answer," Jed replied with a wry grin and then could have kicked himself for giving too much away.

"Why don't you want to answer this one?" Stanley asked, too smart not to have picked up on Jed's mistake.

"Because...I'm not sure it's relevant," Jed parried, feeling himself sinking fast. He remembered his promise to Leo and psyched himself up. He could feel himself putting one hand on the box, and faltered. "Toby was reaching. He didn't know anything."

"What did he say, Mr. President?" Stanley pressed. "What was the question that upset you so much that you haven't slept in four days?"

Jed felt himself trying to open the box but it was hard; the lid was heavy and it hadn't been opened in a very long time.

"Sir?" Stanley pushed. "What did Toby say?"

"He..." Jed gazed at the contents of his glass. He saw Leo's face, heard Leo's dry tones. You have no choice but to get that box out and open it up – you can't circumvent the process. "He...asked me if my father hit me," Jed finished. He took a sip out of his glass and glanced over at Stanley.

"And what was your reply?" Stanley asked softly. Jed shrugged.

"Yes. I told him yes."

"Okay. Yes." Stanley nodded thoughtfully. Jed felt himself bristling.

"It wasn't unusual in those days, Stanley. Sons had a very different relationship to their fathers than they do today...it was normal for..." He trailed off and then rubbed his eyes wearily. "No, it wasn't normal, even for those days. He didn't just hit me – sometimes he punched me. Toby said it was because he didn't like me very much and that's a truth that I think I've known for a very long time but I just didn't want to face until 4 nights ago. Not just that he didn't love me – he didn't actually like me." Jed was silent for a long time. "That's the crux of it, Stanley. My father didn't like me – Toby said that's what people do when they don't like you. They p..." Jed stopped. Stanley's eyes filled his vision, brown and steady, not without compassion but firm all the same. Jed struggled with it for a moment and then continued.

"He liked my brother, Jon, but he didn't like me. Jon wasn't noisy like me – he didn't ask questions, didn't talk too much. He and my dad were more alike – quiet, undemonstrative people. I was more like my mom – and my dad and mom didn't get along too well. Dad never hit Jon." Jed shrugged, fighting back a sense of desolation. "Don't get me wrong – I'm glad about that, but now I'm wondering what it was about me that annoyed my father so much. Why did he dislike me? Why did he hit me?" Jed bit on his lip and shook his head. "Mostly it was just a slap around the face, a backhander – those were what I thought of as his equivalent of a 'sharp word'." Jed shrugged. "But then...occasionally...just occasionally..." It was tempting to stop this – to stop it right now, to backtrack and charm and sweet-talk Stanley into accepting that this wasn't so big a deal after all. There were places in his memories that Jed didn't want to go, places that had been private, personal, known only to himself and his father – something they had shared, experiences they had spoken of to nobody until Leo had come along 40 years ago and changed all that. Leo...Leo who had changed everything. Leo who was still changing everything, Leo who was insisting that he look inside the box – Leo who already knew what was in the box because Leo knew just about everything there was to know about him. Jed took a deep breath, and tried again.

"There were occasions when it was a lot worse. I'd like to think that they were spontaneous eruptions of anger but the truth is that they weren't. Sometimes it felt as if he'd planned them. He'd call me to his study about something – usually something I'd done but not anything that I could have anticipated would upset him." Jed paused again, shaking his head. He was aware that Stanley was sitting very still and he wanted to laugh. This all sounded so melodramatic. It was years ago – it didn't matter now. He'd long since stopped being that teenage boy who couldn't fight back. And yet...and yet...

"It was almost formal – like a ritual. He'd call me in, close the door behind me, and lock it – and I knew then that it would be bad. If he locked the door then I knew it would be bad. He'd start off with a few cold words but there was a look in his eye and I knew that whatever I said and whatever I did this was going to happen and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I used to try anyway – I used to try different ways of getting him to stop. Sometimes I'd shout at him and argue, while at others I'd be conciliatory, and

reasonable...but nothing made a difference. When he had that look in his eye I think he just needed to hit me and it didn't really matter what I said or did. I annoyed him. There was something about me that brought out the bully in him but I couldn't stop being me so what could I do?"

Jed was silent for a long time but Stanley didn't say anything – so eventually he continued.

"His 'sharp words' inevitably involved him slapping me hard around the face without warning, but these sessions were different. When he locked the door..." Jed put his glass of water down because his hand was shaking. "When he locked the door, I'd be scared – I knew what was coming next. Whenever I went into a room alone with my father I never shut the door. Not ever. I always left it open in case he was in one of his moods – just in case."

He nodded to himself, lost in memories of a time long gone.

"He rarely punched my face during these sessions – I guess, looking back, that he didn't want people knowing what he did to me – didn't want any visible signs, although...god, that sounds so pre-meditated and I find it hard to believe he was thinking so coherently." Jed sighed. The truth was closer to the fact that he didn't want to think that his father had made such a cold-blooded decision. It was easier to believe the man just lost his temper than to think that he planned those sessions so meticulously. "He punched me, and if I went down he'd sometimes kick me...and then it would be over. I'd hear him unlock the door and he'd leave me in the room. The next time I saw him he'd be back to normal – he never mentioned what happened and I never referred to it. It was kind of like our secret, although he never told me not to tell anyone. He just seemed to know that I wouldn't. And, to be honest, who would I have told?" Jed shrugged and glanced at Stanley.

"How old were you when it started?" Stanley asked softly.

"I'm not sure – in my teens," Jed raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"He didn't hit you when you were younger?"

"No...not beyond a light smack here or there when I was naughty as a small kid. The sessions behind the locked door didn't begin until I was 12 or 13."

"And when did they end?" Stanley asked.

Jed hesitated.

"Sir? When did they end?"

"When I was 18." Jed shrugged.

"Do you know why they ended?" Stanley pressed in that quiet, calm way of his. Jed turned back to his drink, desperately wanting the cool water, but his hand was still unsteady and he

didn't trust himself to pick up the glass.

"Why is that important?"

"Well, I wondered whether you felt you still had unfinished business with your father or whether..."

"No. It was over. We moved on," Jed said tersely.

"Then why, after 40 years, are you having sleepless nights about it?" Stanley asked him softly. "What aren't you telling me, sir?"

Jed gazed into space for a long time, and then he turned back to the psychiatrist with a wry smile on his face. "Stanley, everything I tell you is confidential right?"

"Of course, sir." Stanley nodded patiently.

"Why should I trust that?" Jed asked. "What's to stop you going straight out of here and phoning a newspaper?"

Stanley gave a smile, those brown eyes of his looking wryly amused. "I'd never work again if I did that, sir. Who would trust me?"

"Stanley, I could tell you something that, if you sold it to a newspaper, could earn you enough money that you wouldn't have to work again for the rest of your life anyway," Jed told him.

"Ah, but I love my work, sir." Stanley shook his head. "And I think you know what it means to love your work – I'm not just talking about liking what I do, about feeling pretty glad that I've got a good job to go to every day and enough money to pay the bills – I'm talking about loving it; about living and breathing it. My work isn't just a job to me, sir – it's much more. I think you understand that because I think you feel the same way. Take away my work and you'll take away a part of me and all the money in the world wouldn't be enough to buy that back."

It was an impassioned speech coming from this supremely dispassionate, dry witted man and Jed knew, instinctively, that Stanley wasn't lying. No, Dr. Keyworth was a kindred spirit, and for the first time since this conversation started, Jed began to trust him. He sat there for a moment, thinking about it, and then, finally, he nodded.

"Okay, Stanley," he said. "I'm going to make you really earn that exorbitant fee you charge now."

1963

"What the hell took you so long?" Jed whispered fiercely as Leo closed the bedroom door behind him and slipped inside.

"You said to wait until everyone was asleep," Leo replied, crossing the room to where Jed was sitting, impatiently, in bed.

"If you'd waited any longer they would all be waking up again!" Jed grumbled. Leo gazed at him with that calmly implacable gaze of his, radiating steady good humour. Jed felt like hitting him. "Did you bring it?" He asked as Leo sat down on the bed beside him. Leo rolled his eyes.

"Damn. I knew I'd forgotten something," he said in a sarcastic tone and then, with a shake of his head. "Yes I brought it - you are so high strung, Jed Bartlet."

"I am not! I just want to damn well get on and try this and don't appreciate you keeping me waiting half the night!" Jed snapped.

"High strung." Leo shook his head sagely. "Like a race horse."

"You're comparing me to a horse?" Jed growled – although at this moment in time his nerves were so frayed from anticipation that he would have argued about anything. Leo grinned at him.

"Not just any horse – a very valuable, very handsome, very nervy thoroughbred. With a thick, dark mane," he added, pushing Jed's hair off his forehead. Jed snorted.

"Any jokes about mounting said horse will *not* go down well right now, Leo," he hissed, burning up with nervous excitement about what they had planned.

"I wouldn't dare," Leo grinned, grabbing Jed's head and kissing him firmly on the lips. Jed surrendered to the kiss, feeling Leo's solid sense of calm transmitting itself to him through his lips, soothing him. He shivered, thinking about what they planned to do next, and Leo pulled back and looked at him with a quizzical expression.

"Jed? You're shaking. We don't have to do this you know," he whispered.

"I want to do it, damn it," Jed snapped. "I just...do you think it'll hurt, Leo?"

"I don't know. I was hoping it would feel good but I think there might be some pain first before we get to the good bit," Leo said. "Jed – I can go first if you want. We don't have to do it the other way around unless you're sure. This is supposed to be good, Jed, not an ordeal!"

Jed went very still, gazing at his friend in the glow of the moonlight that was glancing through the windows. Leo was wearing a pair of navy blue pyjamas and a dark green robe and his short, wispy blond hair was tousled. How could he explain this to Leo, he wondered? How could he explain to himself that he wanted this with an almost feverish hunger, that he didn't want to wait another second, that he had been fantasising about what it would feel like to have Leo inside his ass ever since Leo had handed him that tube of lubricant earlier.

He grabbed hold of Leo's neck and pulled him close, kissing him again.

"I want to go first," he whispered. "I want to feel you moving inside me, Leo."

"Okay," Leo replied, with a slow, burning smile. "I'll be careful, Jed. If it hurts then just tell me and I'll stop."

Jed nodded, and then went back in for another kiss, his fingers fumbling to remove Leo's pyjamas. Leo slid under the covers of the bed and before long they were both naked.

"This feels good. I like it best when I can feel your skin under mine," Leo whispered. "I love the way your skin feels." Leo had a particular tone of voice for when they were in bed and it made Jed harden instantly. Leo's voice was low, dark and seductive and he seemed to take such immense pleasure in Jed's body. Jed wasn't sure why, but somehow it turned him on knowing how much he turned Leo on. It had amazed and embarrassed him at first that Leo would say such obviously affectionate and admiring things about him when they were making out, but his body invariably responded. Leo made him feel sensual and admired, and he responded like a cat being stroked, loving the attention.

Leo's hands were as knowing as ever as they caressed Jed's body, soothing some of his anxiety away. Jed might have been impatient and nervous but Leo seemed completely unfazed by what they had planned. He was as attentive as always, his lips and hands exploring Jed's naked body in a way that hadn't been possible in the narrow confines of the car. Jed had discovered that Leo was something of a connoisseur – their quick, urgent couplings were very necessary to both of them, but after their initial sexual need had been satisfied, Leo liked to linger and take some time really making love rather than just having sex. Jed's entire relationship with his own sexuality thus far had been stroking his cock to orgasm and it had therefore taken him completely by surprise to find that Leo's interest was not just in that part of his anatomy. Leo's tongue and fingers had found parts of his body that responded just as eagerly as his groin did to any kind of erotic attention and Jed was amazed by what he had learned about his body from Leo's skilful hands. He felt much clumsier by comparison, much less sure of himself. He hoped he gave Leo some of the same pleasure that Leo gave to him but he suspected that he didn't. Leo didn't complain – he seemed to like exploring Jed's body almost more than having his own body explored, but Jed still felt guilty about it. He knew that Leo had had a lot more practice and experience than he had but even so, he didn't want to be a lousy lay.

"How do we do this?" Jed asked, as Leo's hands went dangerously close to his buttocks. "Do I get on my hands and knees?"

Leo frowned. "There are various ways but I was thinking you could put your legs on my shoulders – I want to look at you when I'm doing this."

"Why?" Jed asked blankly.

Leo shrugged. "I dunno. I just do," he replied. "Anyway, you aren't ready yet."

"Leo I have been waiting here in a state of nervous anticipation for the past two hours so don't tell I'm not ready!" Jed protested angrily. Much to his surprise, Leo burst out laughing.

"Like I said - high strung," he chuckled, his hands exploring Jed's body thoroughly as he spoke, making it impossible for Jed to respond with the indignation he was feeling. "When I said not ready, I mean I want to prepare you first. So it hurts as little as possible," Leo said, turning Jed onto his front and leaning over to grab the lubricant from the nightstand.

"How are you going to...oooooh," Jed hissed, as his buttocks were parted and a cool finger played with his anus for several seconds and then gently slicked inside his body. "Oh shit," he whispered.

"How does that feel? Does it hurt?" Leo asked anxiously.

"No...it feels...really nice," Jed murmured dreamily. He rested his head on his hands and opened his legs wider, enjoying the sensation of Leo's finger sliding in and out of his body. He wasn't sure why he was allowing Leo to do something so intimate – if anyone else had done this to him he knew he would have hollered the place down but he trusted Leo not to hurt him. He felt a greater pressure on his anus and then squirmed as Leo pushed two fingers inside him.

"Okay?" Leo whispered, stroking Jed's buttocks lovingly.

"Yeah...don't stop, Leo. It feels..." Jed bit on his lip. He knew it *should* feel wrong but instead it felt intensely pleasurable. He liked the fact that it was Leo doing this to him. Leo with his sturdy good sense, and implacable sense of calm; Leo with that quirky sense of humour who he could rely on to make him laugh; Leo who always seemed so steady even in the face of Jed's more explosive moods; Leo whose very touch sent a charge of electricity down Jed's nerve endings and deep into his groin. Somehow, knowing that Leo's fingers were inside him and that Leo's cock would soon be there instead, made Jed feel unbearably turned on. His own cock was now rock hard with need and he found himself pushing back onto Leo's fingers in a way that felt positively shameful, like a cat on heat. Leo inserted a third finger but Jed was now so relaxed that all he could think about was that he wanted much, much more. He backed onto those fingers urgently, quivering with tension, making little mewling sounds in the back of his throat.

"Whoa..." Leo murmured, in an amused tone. "This feels good then, huh?" He began moving his fingers in and out of Jed's anus and Jed gave a gurgle of sheer pleasure.

"You have no idea..." Jed sighed, hanging onto his orgasm by a thread. "We should have jerked off first, Leo. I don't know how long I can hold this. It feels so...intense."

"I love the way you look when you're like this," Leo grinned. He trailed the fingertips of his free hand down Jed's spine and Jed shivered with sensation.

"Oh god, Leo...you have to do it now," he said.

“Okay...but tell me if it hurts,” Leo warned. Jed nodded, and then could have wept when Leo removed his fingers from his ass. Leo turned him over onto his back, and Jed quickly put his legs on Leo’s shoulders. He studied Leo as the other boy pulled him close, and parted his buttocks. Leo’s shoulders were sturdy beneath his ankles and his close cropped blond hair looked almost silver in the dimly lit room. Leo reached for the lube and then paused, grinning down at his friend.

“This is going to be so good. You look so damn edible lying here waiting for me like this,” he purred. Jed’s already hard cock almost went into spasm. He thought this moment would last forever; Leo kneeling here, a sparkling light in those blue eyes of his, looking down on him so affectionately. Jed watched, fascinated, as Leo applied a generous amount of lube to his pulsing erection. Leo’s cock looked so big and swollen that he couldn’t imagine that it would even fit inside him but he longed to feel it moving inside him in the way Leo’s fingers had moved.

“Ready?” Leo whispered, positioning himself. Jed nodded, his dark hair flopping into his eyes. Leo grinned, and, leaning forward, deposited a burning kiss on Jed’s lips, and then he grasped Jed’s buttocks in his hands and slowly nudged his cock into his entrance. Jed gasped – his first thought was that he had been right, that Leo’s cock was too big to fit inside him, that this was going to hurt...there was a moment of brief but intense burning and then, suddenly, Leo seemed to slip right inside him. Jed felt as if his body was being impossibly stretched. His ass seemed to be filled and there was a pressure building up that he wasn’t sure he could bear. He was just about to cry out, to tell Leo to withdraw, when his body seemed to adjust, and the pain receded. Now he was assaulted instead by a spark of pleasure, as if something deep inside his ass was being stimulated by Leo’s cock.

“Okay?” Leo said, pausing. Jed grinned.

“Okay,” he replied. “Keep going. I want to feel all of you inside me.” Leo nodded, and, leaning forward, slid the whole way in with one smooth move. Jed gasped out loud and reached out blindly, clutching at Leo’s hips frantically.

“Jed? Is that okay? Jed?” Leo asked anxiously.

“Oh god – don’t stop!” Jed moaned.

Leo grinned, and ducked his head down to claim Jed’s lips in a deep, loving kiss. Jed thought he was about to pass out – all he could feel was Leo’s cock deep in his body and Leo’s tongue in his mouth. Then Leo pulled back and began slowly thrusting in and out and Jed lay there, utterly abandoned to the sensation. He had never known something could feel so good; now his cock wasn’t his main focus – he was transfixed instead by the starbursts of sheer fizzing pleasure that were emanating from deep within his body. He lost track of what was happening but at one point he knew he cried out so loudly in pleasure that Leo put his hand over his mouth and hissed at him to be quiet. Jed wasn’t aware of much else after that, except that he was transported onto a different plane of pleasure to any he had ever experienced before. He was lost in the sensation of Leo inside him, transfixed by the sight of Leo as he thrust into him, his lips slightly parted, his blue eyes locked with Jed’s, his sturdy,

muscular chest covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Jed knew the event had reached a climax, could hear Leo's gasp as he came, felt the warmth of his own come on his belly and Leo's come trickling out of his ass, but through it all, the one thing that stayed with Jed was the expression in Leo's eyes; Jed had never felt so incredibly loved before in his entire life. Every single atom of Leo's being seemed to be focussed on him, and he radiated a sense of such total adoration that Jed was lost in it.

Then it was over. He was dimly aware of Leo withdrawing, and that his ass felt hollow and empty and sore. Then Leo was lying down beside him; he wrapped Jed in his arms, pulled the sheet over both of them, and kissed the back of Jed's head, inhaling the scent of his hair in a way that sometimes made Jed laugh and push him away but which now just felt extremely nice.

"So, we won't be doing that again," Leo commented pragmatically as he nuzzled.

"Wha...?" Jed turned his head in bleary amazement.

"Way too much noise," Leo said with a shrug. "And very messy. Not really worth it for all the effort."

"Leo McGarry if you..." Jed began in a heated tone and then he saw the grin on Leo's face. He thumped Leo on the thigh with his fist in mock protest.

"Had you then," Leo said, laughing.

"In more ways than one," Jed replied, and then they both laughed out loud. "Seriously," Jed murmured, several minutes later when they were both calm again. "Was it as good for you as it was for me? How did it feel?"

"You can try it tomorrow night," Leo said. "Although if I react the way you do then I can see we're always going to be fighting over who gets to give and who gets to receive." He grinned. "But it was good – it felt amazing, really tight, so much sensation."

They were both nearly asleep when a thought occurred to Jed. He elbowed Leo in the ribs and Leo pinched his ass exasperatedly in response.

"Leo, it's nearly 3 am," Jed whispered.

"So?" Leo replied grumpily.

"So, that means that tomorrow is June 17th."

"Yeah. You woke me up just to share that startling observation with me?"

"Yes." Jed turned over in the narrow bed and gazed at his lover. "I was just thinking – we should do something special to mark the occasion, Leo. You know you said that things would never change between us? That we'd always feel like this?"

"What? Sleepy?" Leo grumbled.

"You know what I mean," Jed remonstrated, elbowing Leo in the ribs again.

"Yeah. Okay."

"Well, our lives are going to take us to different places – we're going to different colleges soon for a start."

"You're going to Notre Dame and I'm going to the University of Michigan," Leo pointed out. "They're hardly at opposite ends of the universe. We could meet up every so often."

"I know, but our lives will change – so I'm just saying that we ought to have a plan about meeting up. I want you to promise you'll spend every June 17th with me," he whispered.

"What?" Leo frowned.

"Every year, no matter where we are, or what we're doing, I want you to promise that you'll spend every June 17th with me," Jed said urgently.

"Why?" Leo growled.

"Because it's our anniversary," Jed told him.

Leo rolled his eyes and tried to bury his head under one of the pillows. "Oh god. You're a romantic," he sighed.

"Yeah," Jed grinned, removing the pillow from Leo's head. "Humour me."

"Will you let me get some sleep if I do?" Leo asked.

"Sure – only for another couple of hours though. Nobody usually comes up here but you should be gone by 5 just in case."

"Okay." Leo closed his eyes again. Jed waited a few seconds and then poked him in the thigh with his finger.

"Okay to June 17th or okay to being gone by 5?" He asked.

"How did you get to **be** this annoying?" Leo said, opening one eye.

"I'm a high strung, very valuable, very handsome thoroughbred," Jed replied with a grin. "I think you should just agree to whatever I say or I might race off with some other jockey." Leo's eyes narrowed. Jed's grin widened. "Had you then," he crowed. "And as for June 17th – just consider it one of those things you don't have a choice about."

Leo sighed heavily, then wrapped his hand in Jed's hair and pulled him close for a thorough kiss.

"Okay," he said softly when he released him.

Chapter 4 by Xanthe

2002

Jed took a deep breath, and then launched into what he had to say, what Leo had told him he had to say, without pausing for air along the way.

"Stanley, I was 17 when I met Leo McGarry. We became lovers and we have been ever since, wives and girlfriends along the way not withstanding. I love my wife and my family, and I love Leo. I'm fairly sure that he feels the same way about me."

There was a long silence. Jed gazed at the contents of his glass. Damn you, Leo, he thought to himself. Damn you and your stupid box. This is one of those things that's just between us. It's not something that other people can understand. It took me long enough to get my head around it and now I have to parade it out here for this guy to pick apart and analyse? I hate this!

"Don't you have anything to say, Stanley?" He asked finally, unable to bear the silence any more. "No expressions of amazement? No comment to make? It isn't every day you hear that the President of the United States has been sleeping with his Chief of Staff for forty years."

"No it isn't." Stanley gave a wry smile, "But you'd be surprised at some of the things I've heard during my career. I wouldn't say this was the most amazing thing – not by a long shot."

"Oh, so we're pretty ordinary are we?" Jed felt unaccountably annoyed.

"I wouldn't say ordinary, no, sir." Stanley shook his head. "I was just wondering why you chose to tell me about Leo in connection with your current problem. Does Leo have anything to do with this? Was he there when Toby spoke to you a few nights ago?"

"No. Leo doesn't know any of this. I didn't tell him about the conversation with Toby. He doesn't even know why I'm having sleepless nights." Jed shook his head.

"Why not?" Stanley asked softly. "You've been close to him for 40 years after all. I'd have thought he'd be one of the first people you turned to about this. Him or your wife."

"I won't bother Abbey." Jed shook his head.

"So why not bother Leo? You're still close?" Stanley's gaze was intent.

"Yeah." Jed made a face. "As a matter of fact it's all his fault that I'm seeing you, Stanley. He said much the same thing as you did – if I wouldn't talk to him or to Abbey then I had to talk to someone. I didn't want to see you, you know."

"I figured." Stanley grinned. "You have a fairly combative approach to this whole process, sir."

"Yeah. Well – just so you know. None of this was my idea. Leo had to drag me here kicking and screaming all the way – metaphorically speaking anyway."

"So, why didn't you speak to Leo about what Toby said?" Stanley asked imperturbably.

"You don't let up do you?" Jed grimaced. "You don't get sidetracked. You'd make a good reporter, Stanley. Ten minutes on Capital Beat with you and many a seasoned politician would be tied up in knots."

"Sir. You haven't answered my question," Stanley said. Jed sighed.

"I'm so damn tired. Four nights without sleep – is it going to be five, Stanley? Can you really help me or am I just spilling my guts for nothing?" There was silence. Jed sighed again. "Oh god forbid that any of you people ever give anyone a straight answer to anything. I don't know why I didn't tell him, Stanley. I don't know. Maybe I just didn't want to bring this whole thing up again. It was a long time ago and maybe I'm just in - what's the word you people are always using? - ah, yes, denial. Maybe I was in denial about it. I just thought it would all blow over and things could go back to the way they used to be." He knew he was gabbling, speaking too fast, knew that Stanley would infer something just from that. God how he hated these shrinks, always looking at you and pulling you apart, trying to find out what was inside, picking and prodding away until it made him want to...

"Sir?"

"I don't want to see that expression in Leo's eyes again, damnit!" Jed roared.

"Which expression, sir?"

"The one where he feels sorry for me. The one where he thinks I'm weak and can't take care of myself!"

"Is that how you're feeling, sir?"

"I'm the most powerful man in the world, Stanley," Jed snapped, clenching his hands into fists.

"I know." Stanley nodded. "That must be a pretty good place to be for a kid who gets beaten by his father. Nobody gets to have any power over you now, do they, sir? Nobody gets to make you feel weak. Nobody gets to kick you when you're lying on the floor, or to slap you around the face for saying something they don't agree with. You found a place where

nobody could make you feel that way again, a place where you're strong and invincible and people respect you. Nobody, nobody locks a door on you and uses you as a punching bag any more. Everything you say is listened to, every word hung upon – you don't feel you're wrong just for being alive, or that you'll be ignored even if you're screaming and sobbing in pain...and then look what happened. You found yourself feeling that way again anyway. You're the most powerful man in the world but it isn't enough. Inside, you're still 15, 16, 17 years old, and you can't get your father to stop hitting you."

Jed gazed at Stanley, his mouth open in surprise.

"And you won't talk to the only two people in the world who don't treat you like you're a king because that would mean admitting to yourself that even if you are the President of the United States you can still, occasionally, feel weak and powerless inside," Stanley finished softly.

1963

"Leo..." Jed knocked on his friend's door and then opened it to find Leo already washed and dressed, lying on his bed reading a book. Jed grinned, pleased that, like him, Leo seemed to thrive on very little sleep – they'd certainly had little enough the previous night.

"Hey." Leo put the book down and gazed at Jed with a look of searching affection. "How are you feeling?" He asked, his sharp blue gaze giving the question a meaning beyond the obvious. Jed smiled.

"Fine." He glanced at the hallway to make sure nobody was around. "Sore, but pretty good apart from that." His grin widened. "Leo – I'm not sure how you feel about this but would you come to church with me today?"

Leo frowned. "Jed, I already told you..."

"I know – it's not for that reason. There's something I wanted your opinion on. I won't tell you what until after." He grinned mysteriously. "Apart from anything else, everyone goes – my father will probably ask questions if you don't go and there's someone I'd really like you to meet."

Leo thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "Okay. I guess I could go," he sighed. "I thought this was a big protestant school though."

"It's a non-denominational service." Jed shrugged.

"And this person you wanted me to meet?"

"I want to see what you think of her." Jed gave another mysterious grin.

"It's a 'she'?" Leo raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Yeah, and that's *all* I'm saying," Jed replied with a laugh.

Jed watched as Leo got changed into a more formal shirt and tie – he had never seen Leo in formal clothes before and his heart lurched. Leo looked very grown up – more grown up than he did, he was sure. Then they went downstairs for breakfast which was a silent affair as his father liked to read the Sunday paper in peace over breakfast and Jon had his face buried in a book as usual. Thus far, Jed wasn't even sure that Leo had impinged on his father's consciousness; he was just another boy to a man who dealt with a multitude of boys on a daily basis. Jed hoped that he wouldn't be like this during Leo's entire visit – his father could, occasionally, when he was in one of his good moods, be a very interesting dining companion. He had a tendency to hold forth and lecture rather than engage in conversation but Jed had learned a lot that way. Leo didn't seem to find his father's silence surprising or rude though – he spent most of the meal grinning slyly at Jed in a way that reminded Jed of the previous night's activities and sent a thrill through his veins. All the same, Jed couldn't help wishing that his mother was here so that Leo could see that his family weren't all so introverted. He missed his Mom when she was away. When she was here at least there was some good conversation over the dining table.

After breakfast they walked over to the church. It was a sunny day, and Leo, despite his current lack of faith, certainly knew all the words to the hymns and the required responses to the prayers. Jed closed his eyes and allowed his own prayers to soar with the music. Last night he and Leo had done something that his faith told him was wrong, but it hadn't felt wrong. It had felt very right. He prayed to God for guidance, wondering whether God was telling him to become a priest – this was something that had been on his mind for a little while now, and he revisited it often, playing with the idea. It seemed to offer such peace – and an escape from the turmoil of the strong emotions he felt for Leo. Jed also knew there was a little part of him that longed to do it just to spite his father – he knew his father was still angry with him for having chosen his mother's religion over his own, and he knew that becoming a priest would be a sure-fire way to assert his own independence even if that meant annoying his father even more - and that was very tempting too...and yet...and yet...Jed was by no means convinced that this was the path God had chosen for him. He had the sense that he was destined for something else, and he wasn't sure what, just that it was important and that it would be a momentous undertaking - and that Leo was somehow a part of that destiny in a way he didn't yet understand.

After the service, they filed out into bright sunshine, to be immediately accosted, as Jed had known they would be, by a familiar voice, calling across the courtyard.

"Jed! I want a word with you!" Jed grinned at Leo and turned.

"Hello, Mrs. Landingham."

"Oh, you have a friend." Mrs Landingham looked Leo up and down and Leo did exactly the same to her, before finally holding out his hand.

"Dolores Landingham, this is Leo McGarry. I met Leo at Boy's Nation last year," Jed prompted her as she looked as if she was trying to place Leo.

"I thought you didn't go to school here," she commented, still giving him that appraising look. She glanced at Jed and then back at Leo and for a split second Jed felt as if she knew exactly what they'd done the previous night, and then, as if Leo had passed some special inspection she was giving him, she broke into a wide smile.

"I'm staying for a few weeks." Leo smiled back at her, as if she had passed *his* test as well.

"How did you enjoy our service?" Mrs. Landingham asked, gesturing with her head towards the church.

"It was fine...but it wasn't a non-denominational service," Leo said glancing at Jed. Jed gazed back at his friend in amazement and then burst out laughing.

"It isn't is it? I told you it wasn't, Mrs. Landingham," he said in delighted tones.

"I guess I walked straight into that one," she said briskly, as Jed danced around jubilantly.

"No – Leo didn't know! I was going to ask him but you beat me to it! He doesn't know that I don't think it's a non-denominational service either. I've been saying this for ages, Leo, but nobody listens to me," Jed grumbled.

"Well that's because you say so much – you can wear a person down through sheer volume of words, Jed, and never mind what you're actually saying," Mrs. Landingham commented.

Leo laughed out loud at that and Jed shot him a mock-hurt look and then they *all* laughed. Jed felt a warm sensation in his stomach – he had desperately wanted Leo and Mrs. Landingham to get along and they were already behaving like old friends.

"Catholics don't say 'for thine is the kingdom, the power and glory forever and ever,'" Leo pointed out.

"That's *it*!" Jed said, dancing around again. Mrs. Landingham gave him a reproving stare but that wasn't enough to stop him.

"Well, if it really bothers you that much you should take it up with your father, Jed," she sniffed. Jed stopped dancing and shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Maybe I will," he murmured, an iciness descending on his mood, unwilling to tell them that he already had.

"And while you're at it, you could raise the issue of equal pay which I happen to think is even more important," Mrs. Landingham added.

"What's this?" Leo turned to Mrs. Landingham with a gleam in those blue eyes of his and Jed could tell that his friend was intellectually excited by what she'd said. Mrs. Landingham's eyes gleamed equally in response, as she scented an ally to her cause.

"I've been talking to Jed for quite some time about the inequality of pay among the staff," she said in those quick, clipped tones of hers. "Do you think it's fair that the female teachers are paid less than the male teachers for exactly the same work, Leo?" She asked. Leo shook his head thoughtfully.

"No, I don't, Mrs. Landingham."

"Well then – perhaps you could get Jed to speak to his father about it. I've been trying for weeks but somehow he never seems to get around to it." She gave Jed a reproving glare and he sank his hands even further into his pockets, unwilling to offer any explanations.

"Did you give him figures?" Leo asked and Jed found himself meeting Leo's steady gaze, amazed by how in tune they were.

"I sure did. I'll dig them out and bring them over for you to look at too, Leo – no, scratch that, why don't you two boys come over to my place for lunch? My two are away camping with their father and I could do with the company."

"That would be very nice, Mrs. Landingham," Leo said, glancing at Jed for confirmation. Jed sighed, seeing he was outflanked – he was hardly dismayed by the invitation to lunch but he dreaded a whole afternoon of the pair of them nagging him to speak to his father on the issue of equal pay for the school staff. He was delighted by how well they were getting along though. Mrs. Landingham seemed to sense in Leo the same kind of kindred spirit she had sensed in Jed – maybe that was why they all got along so well.

Lunch at Mrs. Landingham's house was completely different to any meal that took place under his father's auspices. Jed was in his element as he and Leo helped Mrs. Landingham in the kitchen, chatting away endlessly between them, although Jed had to admit that he did half the talking and Mrs Landingham and Leo shared the remaining half between them. He was in heaven though – these two people were on his wavelength and he felt completely at home with them. He could relax in a way he couldn't with his own family. It occurred to him as he watched Mrs. Landingham in an acerbic exchange with Leo that they had similar personalities – both of them had cool, calm exteriors which hid passionate natures, both of them used humour to keep people at a distance until they got to know them - and both of them had a protective attitude towards him. He wasn't sure that he needed protecting, or why he brought out that side of their personalities, but he did know that he felt very blessed that two people who he liked and respected so much had a high opinion of him, and cared about him in return. He wasn't sure he really deserved it, but it made him feel good.

"Mrs. Landingham is right," Leo said, frowning as he studied the figures she had thrust under his nose. "The female staff is being underpaid."

"There, see." Mrs Landingham gave Jed a disapproving glare.

"I know. I never disputed your figures, Mrs. Landingham," Jed shrugged. "I just don't know what you want me to do about it. I don't run the school."

"Your father does," she pointed out. "I thought you were going to speak to him about this, Jed. I thought you'd made up your mind to do that."

"I was going to." Jed shrugged, and turned back to the stove, where he stirred the gravy, his previous good mood fading as he fell back into silence. Mrs. Landingham glanced at Leo who gazed thoughtfully at Jed.

"So what happened?" Mrs Landingham asked. "Did you speak to him, Jed? Did he knock you back? Is that what happened?"

Jed looked up at her sharply, reacting to her choice of words, and then saw by her expression that she hadn't meant anything by it and shook his head. "No. I never said anything to him, Mrs. Landingham. There wasn't a right time. He...it has to be the right time or he won't listen. I know him. If I ask him at the wrong time he might take against the idea completely and that wouldn't help our cause any."

Leo was still gazing at him thoughtfully in a way that was starting to make Jed uncomfortable.

"Would it help if I was there?" He asked suddenly. Jed frowned. "I mean, you could bring it up and I could back you up, Jed. If he saw it wasn't just you asking, if he saw there was a wider issue, then he might be more open-minded about it. I'd like to help here – my mom came up against this kind of pay discrimination after my dad died and it was tough on us for awhile."

Jed considered Leo's offer, his mood lightening by the second. If Leo was there then his father couldn't hit him – and he was pretty certain that would be the outcome if he tried tackling his father on this issue alone. He couldn't be sure because he never could predict his father's moods. Sometimes he'd say something, sure that his father would react angrily, and instead he'd get an approving glance and a word of praise, and at other times he'd say something he considered to be fairly innocuous only to be met by a stiff backhander that threw him completely off balance. It was the uncertainty that always unnerved him. If he could only **tell** how his father would react then it would be easier knowing what to say and when to say it. Jed wasn't sure how his father would feel about this equal pay issue and he had been so cold towards him since Jed had written that article for the school magazine criticising the banning of certain books from the school library that Jed hadn't felt it was wise to attempt to interfere in any other aspect of the running of the school. However, with Leo by his side he was sure that he could put a good case for equal pay – there was something about Leo that made him feel that he could do anything at all, and Jed knew that if he could only have a few minutes to argue his case that his own passion and the sheer rightness of his arguments would win his father over. He couldn't see how any intelligent person could defend a system that was so obviously unfair and just plain wrong.

"That might work," he mused thoughtfully, nodding at Leo. "Let's do it! Let's do it tonight!"

Mrs. Landingham gave Leo a big grin. "My, you're quite the miracle worker aren't you, Leo

McGarry," she said, in a deeply impressed tone. "I've been asking for weeks and then you come along and wave your hand and Jed jumps to it."

Jed could feel his skin colouring and he purposefully turned back to the gravy, hoping that Mrs. Landingham hadn't noticed.

"He just knows a good cause when he sees one," Leo commented, deflecting the observation gracefully away from more dangerous areas. He changed the subject, and soon had Mrs. Landingham thoroughly engaged in discussing the current political situation. When he next passed Jed, he put a hand briefly on Jed's arm. It was a tiny gesture but it made Jed's skin tingle with that familiar Leo buzz, and, looking around, he flashed a big smile at his friend, remembering how it had felt the previous night when Leo had been inside him, remembering the burning intensity in his friend's blue eyes as he'd looked down on him. Jed felt a warmth start in his groin and flood through his entire body. Somehow, he had a feeling that everything was going to be okay with his father. With Leo by his side he felt ten feet tall – and he knew that he couldn't fail.

2002

"You think this is about me not wanting to appear weak?" Jed gazed at the carpet sightlessly.

"No, as a matter of fact I don't." Stanley shrugged. "I think you not wanting to talk about it is, but I don't think what's bothering you has anything to do with that. Sir – your father's been dead for a long time. Nobody has hit you in forty years..." He broke off as Jed stiffened slightly. "Or maybe I'm wrong about that," he amended.

"Toby thinks I let the pitch go by. He thinks I try to please people, that I try to soften things out because I need my father's approval." Jed shook his head. "He doesn't know about me and Leo. I long ago stopped needing my father's approval."

"But you need Leo's approval instead?" Stanley ventured. Jed sighed and shrugged.

"Leo's my touchstone. When I've done well...he makes me feel that he's so damn proud of me. You don't know what it's like to be on the receiving end of Leo McGarry's praise, Stanley. He isn't like me – he's quiet, understated – if he says you've done well then by god he means it. You should watch the staff sometime – they'd walk through hell and high water for Leo. He's one of those people. They all vie for his attention, for his praise – it isn't obvious, but it's always there, that undercurrent of people striving to do well for him, to earn one of those brief words of praise that make you glow inside. That's the kind of person he is. He was always like that...and I've spent most of my life doing the exact same thing – trying to impress him."

"I think that even an uninformed observer of your presidency would say that you have a similar tendency to bring out the best in your staff yourself," Stanley commented. "I'm hazarding that a word of praise from you is as treasured as one from Leo."

Jed shrugged. "I should damn well think so – it has to mean something if the President of the United States says you've done well after all, and I don't in any way have an undersized ego. I know I'm a good leader – I know they all bust a gut to do well for me." He grinned. "I'm not in competition with Leo over this," he murmured. "I'm just trying to explain why Leo is important. He isn't some kind of father figure – we're too close in age for that for a start. I didn't fall in love with Leo because I wanted some kind of stable male role model to gaze on approvingly while I showed off – what happened with Leo when we were 17 was like a lightning bolt from the sky; I couldn't have avoided it if I'd tried. If I'm honest nothing much has changed in that respect. I still feel as if I've been hit by that lightning bolt, even after all these years. Leo's place in my life has always defied my understanding but I don't question it any more."

"You did once?" Stanley asked, conversationally.

"When I was a kid, yes." Jed shrugged. "Who wouldn't?"

"Why is your relationship with Leo on your mind in connection with what Toby said to you, sir?" Stanley asked softly.

Jed shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just talking – just trying to fill in the gaps. You started all this," he said defensively. "You're the one who keeps asking questions. I haven't a clue where we're going. I kind of hoped that you did – isn't that what I'm paying you for?"

"How did the beatings end, sir?" Stanley said, taking him by surprise by returning to the question he hadn't answered earlier.

"You never give up, do you, Stanley?" Jed grinned.

"Not when it's important, sir, no. How did they end? Did they just trail off as you got older, or did something happen to draw that part of your life to a close?"

"Oh something happened all right." Jed glanced sideways into those intelligent brown eyes.

"What happened, sir?" Stanley pushed gently.

"Leo happened," Jed replied. "And that's all I'm saying. If you want to know anything more I suggest you ask him."

"Maybe that would be a good idea," Stanley commented. Jed glanced up, sharply. "I often arrange for people's partners to attend therapy sessions where I think it would be helpful," Stanley said.

"You want to drag Leo here?" Jed asked incredulously.

"Do you have any objections?"

Jed thought about it for a moment and then he gave a slow, malicious smile. "No, Stanley, I

don't," he said. "None at all."

Stanley smiled and nodded. "Okay then," he said.

"Although this really isn't about him," Jed added. Stanley nodded again.

"I know that," he agreed. "But some of it is."

Jed shrugged. "I'm just saying, don't get hung up on Leo. None of this is his fault. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm sure you're going to say I've got unresolved issues with him, or with my father, or with Abbey, or Toby, or anyone I ever talked to, but hell, Stanley, this is real life. We all have unresolved issues with someone – there are some things that are better left unsaid. I have a job to do and I'd like to do it to the best of my ability." They were silent again. "I don't want all these doubts, damnit!" Jed roared suddenly. "I need to move on. I need to get some sleep and then tackle whatever it is that comes next. I need to make decisions, I need to achieve...I can't sit around on my ass examining who said what to who when there are more important things at stake!"

"It can't be easy being you," Stanley commented.

"I told you..." Jed began wearily.

"I don't mean the job, I meant you know, being inside your head."

"What's wrong with my head?" Jed asked, annoyed. He felt so tired, not just from lack of sleep, but from all this talking. They'd been at this for close to two hours and he still hadn't quieted the noisily partying demons in his head. He sniped back and forth with Stanley for a few more minutes, both of them circling each other warily, although Jed felt that it wasn't a fair fight – he was all too well aware that he was disadvantaged in this particular battle. Jed had noticed there was a pattern to their interaction. First they'd parry, each of them fighting their particular corner and then Jed would offer up some part of his soul, sacrificing it on the altar of the great god of psychiatry. Then Stanley would back off for a bit, gentling him, calming him, before launching some huge blindside of psychiatric insight at him that left him reeling. It was exhausting and he was too tired to be on his best form, too tired to defend himself properly...and yet, conversely, he could feel himself becoming addicted to the process, addicted to the way those sharp brown eyes gazed at him so intuitively, as if they could find the raw wound at his core and heal it, and he thrashed around, hating the process but wanting that healing too bad to give up on it.

"We're done for the night," Stanley said suddenly, surprising him.

"What?" Jed glared at the psychiatrist. First the man had come in here asking him all kinds of impertinent questions and now he was shipping out before they resolved anything? What kind of a charlatan profession was this?

"We've been here for two hours – it was a double session – we're done for the night."

Jed felt an unaccountable sensation of loss. He wanted to close in on this problem, damnit, to wrestle it to the ground and put it to bed for the night, to get back the peace of mind Toby had shattered 5 nights ago. Stanley couldn't ship out now. Christ – when he thought of what it had taken for him to agree to this in the first place!

"Stanley, I hate to put it this way but I'm me and you're you and we're done when I say we're done," Jed said firmly, pulling rank without any compunction at all.

"No," Stanley replied with a sigh. "I think you could use some assistance right now, sir. Use me, don't use me, but all I can offer you is this: I'll be the only person in the world other than your family that doesn't care that you're the President. Our time is up."

And with that he left the room. Jed remained where he was for a long moment, and then he got up and reached for his cigarettes. His eyes alighted on the picture of his father that he kept on the desk, and he tried his best to fight down the memories but it was no use. Leo was right – some things just wouldn't stay in that box no matter how hard you tried to keep them there.

Chapter 5 by Xanthe

1963

Jed was jumpy as they walked back to the house later that afternoon. He was full of enthusiasm for their plan to address the equal pay issue, but also on edge about it too – for reasons he wouldn't tell anyone, not even Leo.

"Are you sure about speaking to your father tonight, Jed?" Leo glanced at him with that thoughtful, quizzical look in those blue eyes of his, seeming to have picked up on Jed's mood.

"Yeah. Tonight – while everything we talked about is fresh in my mind, while I have all this enthusiasm!" Jed grinned excitedly. "This is something I can actually *do*, Leo," he exclaimed. "This is something where I can actually make a difference."

"Okay." Leo grinned amiably, but his eyes were alight with the same fire that Jed was feeling. This kind of stuff enthused them both – and Jed knew that it was as much meat and drink to Leo as it was to himself.

They ate dinner, and his father seemed to be in one of his more benign moods. He finally noticed Leo for the first time and asked him a series of questions about his school and family while Jed looked on, full of pride as every quiet, considered answer Leo gave marked him out as a friend to be proud of. There was really nothing about Leo that his father could object to. His brother was sent to bed at the end of the meal but Jed and Leo hung back.

"Dad – I wanted to talk to you about something that came to my attention recently," Jed said cautiously.

"Hmm?" His father glanced at him absently across the dinner table. Jed glanced at Leo and took some courage from the steady, blue-eyed gaze that was fixed on him, supporting him all the way.

"It's about the way the staff at the school are paid," Jed continued.

"You have a problem with how much I pay my staff?" His father's attention was now firmly fixed on him and Jed swallowed hard, then continued.

"No – well, not in general, but the female staff is paid less than the men," Jed said in a firm tone.

"And your point is?" His father glanced at Leo with a frown and then back at Jed.

"That it isn't fair."

"Well if you're comparing kitchen staff with teachers who have spent years studying at college then..."

"I'm not," Jed interrupted. "I'm talking about staff who are paid different wages for broadly doing the same kinds of work – the female teaching staff is paid less than the men."

"Ah, this is about you wanting to put the world right as usual, Jed," his father said in a sneering, patronising tone.

"No...I..."

"Jed, are you telling me how to run my school?"

"I think Jed is just concerned about equality, Mr. Bartlet," Leo put in smoothly.

His father's head swivelled and he gazed at Leo sharply. "I know my son, and I think we'll find this is less about equality and more about him liking the sound of his own voice – as usual," he snapped. Jed felt his face flush as the humiliation of that comment sank in. He didn't even dare meet Leo's eye, feeling utterly small and worthless. This definitely wasn't going as well as he'd hoped.

"He does have a good case," Leo said, not backing down in the face of Mr. Bartlet's wrath. Jed glanced up, startled by Leo's steady defence of him.

"Ah. Well, I'm always happy to hear a good case, well argued," his father said smoothly. "Leo – please leave the room. I'd like to talk to Jed about this in private – we'll see if he can convince me of his 'case' without your help."

Jed's heart sank – he could guess what was going to happen next and he fought down a wave of panic. Strangely that panic was directed more at Leo than his own fears about his father's mood. He didn't want Leo to witness anything of what happened between him and

his father – it was too humiliating, and he couldn't bear for Leo, of all people, to see it.

Leo hesitated. He looked at Jed intently, and Jed knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if he asked Leo to stay then he would, regardless of the weight of his father's authority and position...but Jed had no intention of asking Leo to stay. He nodded at Leo, and grinned, implying that he and his father just wanted to have a heated discussion on the topic in private. Leo gazed at him uncertainly for a moment and then, when Jed gestured with his head towards the door, Leo rose, and, with one last look at his friend, he left the room. There was silence for a long time, a silence broken only by his father slowly tapping his spoon against his coffee cup.

"So, you want my school to be uncompetitive," he said finally.

"No, sir. I'm saying that..."

"Yes you do, Jed. You have simply no idea what the real world is like. You live in a fantasy world, boy," his father said coldly. "Idealism is all very well but you need the money to pay for it. If I pay more than the market rate for my female staff then I won't be able to compete with other schools. The fees will have to go up and I'll lose pupils."

"Education isn't just a matter of money!" Jed objected. "If a school has a good reputation then even if the fees are fractionally higher that won't matter."

"*If* a school has a good reputation? IF?"

Jed bit on his lip recognising his father's tone. Everything had been a prelude to that one comment, the one thing that would make his father angry and he had, unwittingly, just said it.

"This school has an excellent reputation, Jed."

"I know that, sir. I wasn't saying..." Jed began, but he stopped when his father got up and walked towards the door. His heart sank – and he knew that all discussion was now at an end. He watched as his father locked the door and then turned back towards him.

"Please, Dad...I only meant..." He got up, scared by the coldly furious expression in his father's eyes. His father said nothing, but he stalked towards his son, every movement one of barely controlled anger. "It isn't idealism...it makes good sense. If you pay the female teachers the same as the men then you'll attract better quality staff and..."

His father's fist flew out and caught him a sharp blow in the ribs. Jed gasped and doubled up. He took a step back, trying to get away, and his father grabbed him around the upper arm, and pulled him forwards. A backhander slapped his jaw and his arm was wrenched out of his father's grasp as he went back, losing his footing as he fell against a chair, sending it flying in the process. His father leaned over, took a fistful of his hair and landed another punch on Jed's stomach. Jed tried to ward him off with his hands but even so a couple of his father's furious blows made contact with him. He doubled up, protecting his already aching

ribs and stomach, and felt two more blows on his back as his father kicked him, and then, just as suddenly as it had started, it was over. His father straightened up and looked down on him with barely concealed loathing. He took a deep breath and the cold, angry look that had been in his eyes lifted, to be replaced by a more familiar expression of distance. He glanced at one of the chairs that had fallen over in the tussle and gave a grimace of annoyance.

"Tidy this room, Jed," he said, and with that he turned on his heel, walked over to the door, unlocked it, and left the room. Jed stayed where he had fallen for a moment, trying to get his breath back. His ribs and stomach hurt and his head ached from where his father had pulled his hair – clumps of it were lying on the floor. Jed picked them up and put them in his pocket, and then got up. He tried to calm down, tried to take deep breaths, but his knees felt wobbly and he wasn't sure whether he could walk. He took a shaky step towards the table and then sank into the nearest chair. His first thought was that Leo mustn't see him in this condition. He couldn't bear for that to happen. He had been so sure of himself, so excited, so full of his plan to raise this issue with his father, and now he felt like a crowing bird, knocked off his perch for daring to be so full of himself. Hubris, the ancient Greeks had called it and he could have kicked himself. Hubris was exactly what it was. He only had himself to blame. He sat there for a long time, trying to ignore the dull, aching sensation in his ribs, and then he got up, and began listlessly tidying the room.

It was late when he returned to his room. He didn't turn on the light, wanting only to creep beneath the covers of his bed and forget about what had just happened to him, but a soft voice broke through his reverie, startling him.

"Hey. How did it go?" Leo asked. Jed stopped short, and was just able to make out the shape of his friend, sitting on the bed, his blond hair and his teeth about the only things visible in the dark.

"Uh...fine. I just...he wasn't ready to listen but I think maybe we planted the seed of an idea in his mind. Maybe when he's had some time to think about it." He sat down on the bed. "He'll probably come around in a couple of months' time and then he'll pretend it was all *his* idea!" Jed said, trying to sound as normal as possible.

"Yeah!" Leo laughed. "You were gone a long time."

"Well, you know, I wanted to give him all the facts and figures. He can be a bit intimidating but once you get talking to him he's not so bad," Jed shrugged. "Sorry about him sending you out of the room but I think he felt ganged up on. It was better talking about it privately, just him and me."

"Jed..." Leo's voice was soft, and Jed couldn't bear the sound of it.

"I'm really tired, Leo. I just want to go to bed. We can...another time, can't we?" He said.

"Sure. I just..." Leo glanced at the alarm clock by the bed. "It's just it's after midnight and I know what a fuss you wanted to make about this particular date." He glanced at Jed, and

Jed could just make out his white teeth gleaming in the darkness.

"What?" Jed frowned. "Oh yeah!" He laughed. "We can...maybe tomorrow night," he murmured. "It'll still be June 17th then - if you come over here early enough anyway. I'm really tired now, Leo. Maybe you could sleep in your own room," he said, in a low tone.

"Okay. Sure." Leo's voice sounded uncertain. "Jed..." he began again.

"I'm just tired," Jed said quickly, wanting Leo to be gone so that he could crawl into bed and be alone with this. He had developed a routine over the years and it worked for him. He just needed some space, some time alone to smooth things out in his mind, and then everything would be fine. He'd be quiet for a few days but he'd bounce back. He always did.

"Okay." Leo got up, and as he walked past he put out a hand towards Jed's shoulder. Jed flinched, causing Leo's hand to miss his shoulder. Leo hesitated, and then leaned down and kissed Jed's cheek. Jed remained stock still, feeling like a statue – inside and out. Everything felt numb and he needed Leo gone before he started feeling anything again. Leo hesitated again and then walked slowly to the door. He said goodnight and then he went, leaving Jed alone. Jed sat there for a long time, unable to move, and then he kicked off his shoes and crept under the covers of the bed, fully clothed. He hugged his arms around his body. If he closed his eyes he could feel where every single blow had landed. He welcomed the throbbing pain in his body – he liked to concentrate on it because then he didn't have to think about anything else.

Jed lay like that for a long time, just hugging his ache to himself. Then the numbness started to fade – he tried to hold onto it but the tide of desolation was too strong and in the end he had to give into it. It was then that the tears started to fall. He wept as silently as he could, hoping that the pillow would muffle the sound, his body scrunched into a ball of pain, and he was so caught up in his misery that he barely heard the door open and close again. He was dimly aware of footsteps and then someone got into the bed beside him, and wrapped him up in his arms. Jed didn't speak because he couldn't – but he couldn't stop crying either. It was too late for that. Leo didn't speak either. He just held him while he cried himself out and Jed was suddenly aware that being held made a difference. The desolation he had felt began to recede a little. He turned his head and cried into Leo's pyjamas, hating himself for being so weak and pathetic but unable to stop the emotions pouring out all the same. Then, finally, he was done, and he found himself lying on Leo's chest. Leo was lying on his back, his arms wrapped loosely around Jed's body, one hand endlessly soothing his damp hair away from his eyes. Jed wasn't sure how long they laid like that but he was grateful that Leo wasn't asking him any questions.

"My dad drank a lot – he and mom were always fighting and I know he had other women," Leo said softly, breaking the silence for the first time. "I envied you your family, Jed. When I first met you and you told me all about this place, and how you lived here with your family, how you had so many good, stable people around you. I envied you so much. My dad didn't have a whole lotta time for me between the booze and the women."

"My father has time for me," Jed murmured. "I know he and mom don't get along and that's

why she goes away so much. I guess he gets lonely. Sometimes...when he forgets that he always has to be in control of everything, then he can be fun. He used to take us on these fantastic picnics when we were younger. He taught me to swim. He..." Jed found that even now he couldn't share this with anyone, not even Leo. It was too personal. He wondered what had happened to the man he'd known – the father who hadn't started hitting him until he was old enough to talk back. Was that it? Was it that simple? That he just didn't like that Jed wasn't a little kid any more, easily impressed by his father's intellect, a little kid who did what he was told, had no opinions of his own, and never answered back? Or was it to do with his Mom? She was usually around – at least sporadically - during the term, when his father was too busy to spend much time with her, but she disappeared most vacations. When she was here there was a tense, tight-lipped atmosphere between his parents. Jed had sometimes wondered if they would get a divorce, but his mom was Catholic and his father had his position as headmaster to think about – a divorce would undoubtedly be a scandal in the small, school community. So they carried on with what was clearly a sham of a marriage – even Jed could see that. Sometimes when his father was feeling lonely he'd come and talk to his eldest son – not about anything personal, but they'd have a quiet conversation and Jed loved those times although they were few and far between. He treasured the memory of those moments after sessions like tonight, and hung onto them mentally because he got to see a side of his father that he longed to see more of - but whenever he thought they were getting close, his father always pulled back. Jed wished he knew a way of bridging the distance between them, and becoming the son his father wanted him to be. If only he knew what he was doing wrong, he'd do anything to put it right. He tried to push down the memory of his father's icy, angry eyes, and the jumbled, pain-filled images of himself lying on the floor doubled up, warding off his father's blows, and began talking to distract himself.

"He just shouts that's all. I don't know why I'm crying. He just shouts. I guess...I was hopeful that this time he'd listen but he shouted." Jed held on tight to Leo, wishing he didn't have to lie, but this was something he couldn't talk about - not even to Leo.

Jed closed his eyes, rested his chin back on Leo's chest, and allowed Leo's hand to soothe him some more. In fact his father hadn't shouted; he'd barely raised his voice. His attitude during these sessions was always one of cold, agitated fury, like a mist had come down over his eyes, making him into someone else. After he was done, he always looked at Jed with loathing – as if he hated Jed for having made him lose control.

"Yeah," Leo murmured, still soothing Jed's hair with his hand. "Yeah."

2002

Leo glanced at his watch. The President had been ensconced in his study with Stanley for nearly two hours. How much longer would it take and what was happening in that room? He wished Jed could have confided in him but he knew his friend all too well. Jed didn't confide the stuff that went really deep unless he was forced into it. He'd always been this way and Leo wasn't expecting him to change any time soon. He'd known Jed lie and obfuscate rather than tell the honest truth about something that was hurting him. Sometimes, just occasionally, he was caught out in that lie, but Leo wondered how many times he wasn't. He

thought he'd become adept at spotting a Jed falsehood when he saw it, but Jed was as good at concealing his hurt as Leo was at ferreting it out, so maybe they were even on that score. It was strange coming from a man who was so disarmingly honest in most other respects. Jed wore his heart on his sleeve – it was easy for people to see when he was in a good mood or bad, when he was happy or angry or amused...but nobody ever got to see when he was in pain, not unless you were Leo McGarry or Abbey Bartlet and you managed to either wheedle or goad it out of him, and even then there were no guarantees that you'd be successful.

Leo pondered his earlier conversation with Toby. All this had something to do with what Toby had said to Jed five nights ago, after the Iowa caucus. Toby wouldn't say what the substance of that conversation had been – just that it was 'personal' and Leo had guessed that much already anyway.

He glanced at his watch again and then got up, buttoning up his jacket as he did so. He walked up to the Residence and waited in a chair along the hallway – not right outside the study – Jed would hate it if he thought he'd been spied upon – but near enough that he'd be able to see Stanley leave. He sat there for about ten minutes and then heard movement and voices near the door. A few seconds later Stanley left the room – he had to pass Leo on his way out and Leo stood up, and waited. Stanley gave a start of surprise as he almost bumped into him and Leo fell into step beside him.

"So, your stuff is in Josh's office. We'll swing by and pick it up. We've booked you into a room in my hotel. I've arranged a car for you – we can ride back there together," Leo said in a conversational tone.

"Hmm." Stanley glanced sideways at him. "You do know that everything we talked about in there is confidential don't you?" He said.

"Stanley, I went to rehab. I know how these things work," Leo said with a faint grin. "Can you tell me if he's going to be okay?"

Stanley frowned, and then nodded. "I can work with him," he said. "I think I can help him. If he trusts me."

"He trusts you," Leo said with a nod.

"And if he didn't, somehow I have the feeling you'd make him," Stanley commented. Leo gave a wry chuckle.

"I don't know what he's been telling you but nobody makes Jed Bartlet do anything he doesn't want to," he replied. They walked in silence back to the now deserted West Wing, and stopped in Josh's office to collect Stanley's bag.

"Leo..." Stanley paused as they were about to leave and put a hand on Leo's arm. "I think it might be a good idea if you joined us in our next session," he said.

Leo gazed at him, dumbstruck. "He wouldn't tell me what this is about. Is it something to do with me? How can I help?" He asked.

"It doesn't appear to be about you – at least not directly – but it's clear to me that you have a bearing on it, and there's something that he needs to figure out that relates to you. I'd like you to attend the next session. I think he'd be more forthcoming if you were there."

"I don't think this is such a good idea." Leo shook his head. "He might talk to you because you're a doctor and you don't..." He hesitated. "Don't love him," he said finally with a shrug. "But if I'm there he'll clam up for sure."

"I don't think he will." Stanley looked at Leo for a long time with those steady brown eyes of his. "I suggested it to him and he's okay with it. We could just try it and see. If it doesn't work then we haven't lost anything. How do you feel about that? He was pretty adamant that he was only talking to me because you insisted – do you have a similar loathing for psychiatrists?"

Leo gave a wry laugh and shook his head. "I can tolerate 'em," he said. "But I'm not the one having sleepless nights, Stanley. He is. If it'll help I'll join you, but I don't know how it'll help – that's all I'm saying."

"Okay then. I'm seeing him again tomorrow at 10 pm."

Leo sighed. "I'll be there."

Stanley smiled and patted his arm. "It's really not that painful," he said cheerily.

"Kind of in the same way having a tooth pulled isn't really painful," Leo muttered under his breath. Stanley grinned and Leo escorted him to the door. "Y'know...I think I'll let you take the car by yourself," Leo said, pointing out the car that was waiting for him by the door. "I'll catch you tomorrow morning."

"Okay." Stanley gazed at him thoughtfully.

"It's been four nights," Leo said, almost defensively. "Tonight will make it five unless you've worked some miracle on him in the past couple of hours."

"My miracles don't usually work that fast," Stanley said with a wry shake of his head.

"Well then. Five nights." Leo shrugged.

"I understand." Stanley smiled and got into the car.

Leo turned and walked slowly back to the Residence. He found Jed where he knew he would be, in his bedroom, standing by the window looking out.

"Hey," Leo said softly, closing the door behind him. Jed glanced back at him over his

shoulder.

"Hey," he murmured. He looked utterly weary but his shoulders seemed a little less hunched and dejected.

"So, I just saw Stanley," Leo commented, going to stand beside him.

"Laid in wait for him more like," Jed snorted.

"Yeah." Leo shrugged. "He says - and I'm still not sure how you managed to do this - that I'm roped into the next therapy session."

Jed grinned at him, a faded, exhausted grin. "Well, what's sauce for the goose, Leo..." he said.

"I knew you were mad at me but not this mad," Leo grouched. "Jed – do I get to know what this is about, or do I have to wait until tomorrow?"

Jed glanced up at him, a strange expression on his face. "I don't know why Stanley thought it would be a good idea for you to come to the session tomorrow but I don't have any problems with it," he said.

"So you're not going to answer my question?" Leo pushed. Jed shrugged, and gazed out of the window again.

"It was a very long time ago, Leo," he said. "He wanted to know how and why it stopped. He kept asking. That's why he wants you there."

"How what stopped, Jed?" Leo asked, not moving, not taking his eyes off his friend.

"The thing with my father. When he used to hit me." Jed swallowed down the last contents of his glass of water and put it on the table.

Leo felt his heart do a flip inside his chest. Not *this*. Not after so long. He felt some familiar emotions rise inside him and struggled with them for a moment.

"Damn it," he swore under his breath.

"See, I knew this would happen," Jed sighed. "I knew you'd do this."

"Do what?"

"Get angry," Jed snapped. "You always get angry. First with him and then with me and finally with yourself and then we have an argument and you won't listen."

"I listen," Leo said, stung. "I don't understand why you defend him but I listen."

"And you get mad."

"Because I never got to say everything I wanted to say to him," Leo snapped.

"How would that have made anything any better?" Jed asked incredulously. "He was my father, Leo. I loved him."

"He didn't deserve you," Leo said in a hard tone.

"Well, he got me all the same." Jed gave a bitter little laugh.

"Why has this come up now?" Leo asked despairingly.

"It doesn't matter. Leo, I don't want to talk about it any more tonight. I'm done with talking. I hate this damn stupid box you had me open. I want to be alone. I just need some time and space." It was said in such a reasonable tone of voice that anyone else would have been fooled but Leo just gazed at him steadily.

"I know what you think you need and you're always wrong," he said. "You think that if we all go away then you can push it back down but you never can, so you might as well have someone with you while you're hurting."

Jed gazed back at him glumly. "I've known you too long. You know where all the bodies are buried," he said.

"Come here." Leo opened his arms. Jed hesitated for a moment and then, with a sigh, he gave up and walked into them. Leo closed his arms around his friend's body and held him, rocking him gently against his chest. After a little while, Jed started shaking. Leo soothed calming circles on his back with his hand and whispered to him, little meaningless words of comfort. Jed clung to him, his sobs low and choked, his tears flowing into Leo's jacket. It reminded Leo of the first time they'd done this, 40 years previously. It was always hard getting Jed to admit he was hurting; you couldn't do anything except be there for him, waiting patiently until he was ready to open up. Finally, the sobs died away. Jed stood there, pressed against Leo, both of them rocking slightly, Leo's hand tangled in Jed's damp hair, gently soothing it. Neither of them moved for a long time.

"I'm too old for this," Jed murmured finally.

"Yeah."

"I'm so tired," Leo.

"Yeah. You should go to bed."

"I won't sleep," Jed predicted.

"You might. I'll watch over you." Leo led Jed over to the bed and pushed him down. He knelt

and undid Jed's shoes and pulled them off, along with his socks. Then he took hold of Jed's sweater and Jed lifted his arms like a little kid so that he could remove it. He unbuttoned Jed's shirt and pulled it from his shoulders, then undid his jeans and helped him out of them, before finally laying his old friend down on the bed and pulling the blankets over him. He kissed Jed firmly on the mouth, and smoothed his hair some more. Jed closed his eyes.

Leo removed his jacket, placing it over the back of a nearby chair, and then sat down on the bed beside him. Jed moved over automatically and put his head on Leo's lap and Leo wrapped his arms around him and leaned back against the headboard, closing his eyes. He was tired but not as tired as Jed was right now, and he wouldn't sleep while his friend remained awake. He stroked Jed's hair softly as they lay there, watching over Jed as he'd promised he would. The President sighed and his body relaxed a fraction. Leo smiled, and gazed down on his old friend absently, finding the boy he'd once known in the features of the man. Jed's hair wasn't quite as thick as it had been back then but it was pretty close – he'd been luckier with his hair than Leo. Jed's face, his scent, and the feel of his body were so familiar to Leo. Jed's eyes were closed, his breathing deep enough to show that he had completely relaxed under the watchful gaze of his lover, but not so deep as to show that the President had fallen asleep. Leo ran his hands gently through Jed's hair; Jed kept his bangs shorter now than he had as a boy but there was still plenty to stroke. Leo missed those longer bangs though – he had enjoyed flicking that dark fringe out of his friend's eyes.

Sometimes, when it was just the two of them like this, Leo felt a sense of wonder kicking in. Was it really possible that Jed Bartlet and Leo McGarry had done this? Had they really become President of the United States and Chief of Staff? How could those two kids have grown up to do something so weighty, historic and important? Two kids who only played at politics back then, who laughed and wrestled with each other and talked endlessly, energising each other with the sheer joy of their shared intellectual passions – and then there was the physicality of their relationship. Leo could remember urgent kisses in a dorm, and snatched moments in a car. He could remember fumbling fingers and hot, hasty, caresses. He could remember a time when his breath caught in his throat when he so much as thought about Jed, when it was painful to be near his friend because all he wanted to do was make love to him. What had happened to those two boys? This wasn't the first time Leo had asked himself that question – he remembered the last time as if it were yesterday; he had been gazing down at his friend's injured body in a hospital room after Jed had taken a bullet at Rosslyn.

Leo had done one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do in his life that day, in that hospital room. Discretion had dictated that he just stand there, watching, his emotions closing in around him when every instinct in his body had been screaming out his pain and distress at witnessing his lover lying there, injured. Jed had, in typical Jed fashion, managed to satisfy both discretion and emotion by drawing Leo towards him, and kissing him firmly on the cheek. His hand had lingered on the side of Leo's face for a moment, burning him with its imprint, giving Leo the strength to keep going through the next few hours.

Leo continued gently stroking Jed's hair. Even on his hospital bed, Jed had been making jokes, smoothing over the true horror of the event, minimising his own feelings until he could deal with them in his own time, when he was alone. Now he was hurting again, in a

different way, and was trying to hide beneath that Jed Bartlet veneer of invulnerability, as he always did. Only Leo knew how much maintaining that charade had to be costing him.

Chapter 6 by Xanthe

1963

"Hey! Leo!"

Leo glanced up from where he was working under the bonnet of the car and saw Jed calling out to him. Leo stood back from the car, wiping his hands on a rag, frowning as he watched his friend approach. Jed was moving slowly, his head down, and he looked like a deflated balloon; that normally full reservoir of Jed energy seemed to have been completely depleted, leaving him oddly listless. Leo didn't like it – this wasn't the Jed he had come to know over the past year. The previous night he had heard Jed sobbing, and, unable to bear the muffled sound, he had gone to his room to comfort his friend. Now he wondered how Jed would react in the cold light of day – somehow Leo had the feeling that Jed wasn't the kind of person who liked others to witness him during a moment of weakness. He hoped it wouldn't affect their friendship, and, more than anything else, he wished he could do something to help. He knew that Jed's tears had something to do with the conversation he'd had with his father but somehow he had the feeling that Jed hadn't told him the whole truth about that encounter. For sure there had been a big fight, and, as a veteran of some blazing disputes with his own father, usually when Leo McGarry Snr was drunk, Leo could empathise with Jed on that score all too well. He still didn't know what had happened exactly to cause Jed's distress but whatever it was it hadn't gone away this morning.

"I wondered where you were," Jed said in a low voice as he reached Leo. "You were gone when I got up and you weren't in your room. Did you have breakfast? What are you doing?" Jed glanced at Leo's dirty hands and shirt, and then at the car. His curiosity was clearly undimmed but his eyes were duller than normal and his questions lacked their usual frenetic energy.

"I thought I'd try and fix it," Leo said. Last night he'd felt utterly helpless in the face of Jed's grief. He had wanted to get to the core of Jed's distress, to be a real friend, but Jed had covered his pain with so many layers of bravado that that had been impossible. So Leo had taken a pragmatic approach to the whole issue; there was one practical way in which he could help his friend right now, and this was it.

"How long have you been here?" Jed asked.

Leo gave a slight smile. "Well, we all turn into pumpkins at 5 am so I guess that's when I got up," he murmured, referring obliquely to the time he'd left Jed's room. He had considered going back to his own but it had been starting to get light outside and he thought this was a better use of his time. It was something he could do for Jed and he wanted very much to do something for his friend when he was so upset.

Jed gazed at him, his blue eyes radiating all kinds of emotions.

"You got up early to work on my car?" he asked. Leo shrugged and wiped his hands on the cloth some more.

"I wanted to fix it for you," he replied.

Jed stared at Leo for a long time, a strained look on his face as if he was fighting back more tears, and then he glanced at the car.

"And did you?" He asked.

Leo moved a step forward, so that his thigh was touching Jed's. Sometimes it was all he could do to be close to his friend and not touch him. Right now, he wanted to kiss this sad, deflated Jed so much that it was distracting.

"I think maybe I did," he replied, with a little grin. "Why don't you get in and try her?" Jed gazed at him with a look that was nothing short of amazement and Leo's grin widened. "What? It wasn't all that hard."

"I read all the books on car mechanics I could find in the library but I didn't manage to fix her," Jed murmured and he sounded sad, with no glimmer of his old, boisterous self showing through.

"Well, that's 'cause you're a klutz," Leo told him, trying to tease the old Jed out of his friend. Jed's eyes flashed and then dulled again and he didn't come back with the blistering protestation that Leo had been hoping for. Instead he seemed to take the rebuke at face value, and nodded, absently. "Jed – get in and start the car," Leo said in a more gentle tone. He hated seeing Jed like this, so quiet and demoralised. Usually his friend had a healthy ego but at the moment Leo thought that any further attempts at teasing him would be akin to kicking a small child. Jed nodded again, his eyes distant, and Leo had to fight an urge to push his friend's floppy bangs out of his eyes and kiss some of the life back into him. He had never seen Jed this vulnerable before and it brought out his already finely honed protective instincts. With an alcoholic, often absent father, Leo had assumed responsibility for both his mother and his sisters at a young age; taking responsibility for the people he cared about came very easily to him. There had always been something about Jed that brought out Leo's protective instincts, but now they were in overdrive. Jed got into the car, and as he sat down behind the steering wheel he gave a sharp grimace and then looked up, anxiously, almost as if he wanted to check that Leo wasn't watching him, and his eyes were dark and evasive. Leo frowned – what was *that* about?

Jed turned the key in the ignition and the car sprang immediately into life. Jed gave a yell and flashed a thumbs-up sign at Leo who grinned with delight.

"She's working!" Jed hollered, a note of excitement returning to his voice. He sounded more like the Jed Leo knew and the blond boy grinned, feeling pleased with himself. He dunked his hands in the bucket of water by the side of the car and washed them, then wiped them on a clean bit of rag and got into the car beside Jed.

"It was the alternator," Leo said helpfully as he got in. "So, where are we going?" He asked.

Jed glanced at him. "Now? You want to go somewhere now?"

"Sure – how about that place you took me to on the way here?" Leo suggested mischievously. He knew he was looking at Jed with a thoroughly lascivious expression in his eyes but he couldn't help it. He found himself devouring the sight of Jed's mouth, concentrating on it, wanting to kiss it, and, when he looked up, he saw that Jed was turned on by his look. His friend's pupils were enlarged, and his tongue was moistening his lower lip suggestively, making it wet and inviting. Leo felt his cock start to swell inside his pants – a pretty constant occurrence when he was with Jed.

"Okay," Jed said in a throaty kind of voice. His dark hair flopped into his eyes and he pushed it aside impatiently. "I should get my hair cut," he muttered absently, as he put the car into gear.

"Please don't," Leo said. Jed glanced at him in surprise. "I love the way it falls into your eyes sometimes. You look like such a kid." Leo grinned.

"Well I'd prefer to look more like an adult," Jed griped, but Leo noticed that there was a little smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Leo sat back in his seat, pleased that some of Jed's natural ebullience seemed to be returning. "Hell, Leo, what did you do to this car?" Jed demanded as he drove. "She's positively purring!"

"Hmmm, I know someone else I'd like to hear purring," Leo commented. Jed gave him a bashful grin which Leo returned with what he knew was an utterly shameful glance of total sexual hunger. Jed blinked through those thick dark eyelashes of his, obviously as totally confused by Leo's interest in him as usual, at the same time as clearly being completely around by it, and it was all Leo could do not to pounce on his friend as he was driving. Luckily they soon turned up the path that led to the old mineshaft, and the minute the brake was on Leo turned in his seat and clambered into the back of the car. "Get your ass back here, Jed Bartlet," he instructed, in deep, sexy tones. He was surprised when Jed got out of the car and moved the driver's seat in order to get into the back instead of scrambling over the seats the way Leo had, but he didn't have time to give that much thought because the next thing he knew Jed's firm, solid, young body was pressed against his and Jed's full lips were claiming his mouth and all his attention. His hands wandered down to grasp Jed's ass and he caressed it through his friend's jeans as they kissed. Leo felt that familiar Jed buzz thrum in his veins, his blood humming so loudly that he could barely hear anything else. He kissed Jed thoroughly, and then pushed his friend down on the leather seats, fumbling at Jed's pants. Jed gave a sharp little gasp and another of those grimaces passed across his face. Leo drew back, concerned.

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" He asked. Jed bit on his lip and shook his head.

"No. I just wondered... we're not going to...you know...are we?" Jed murmured in a meaningful tone, his deep blue eyes flashing evasively in a way that Leo found perplexing.

"No...I don't usually walk around with lubricant in my pocket for a start," Leo replied, still puzzled. "I just want to..." He found Jed's hard cock which leapt instantly to life against his hand as he released it from his friend's briefs. Jed moaned and pressed up against him and Leo gazed at him, forgetting his concerns, lost for a moment in a sex-heightened daze. Jed looked utterly beautiful to Leo at this moment in time. His friend's blue eyes were a vivid, almost violet-blue, the pupils dark with arousal. His floppy dark hair was sweeping untidily over his forehead, and his light golden skin was stretched taut over his adam's apple which was bobbing violently in time to the pulsing of his cock as Leo pumped it enthusiastically with his hand. Unable to resist, Leo leaned in close and pressed a kiss against Jed's adam's apple, and then nuzzled lower, finding Jed's collar bone through the open collar of his shirt. Urgent trysts in the car were all very well but Leo had a deeply sensual streak and having spent one night in Jed's room since his arrival, he needed to feel the other boy's flesh against his own, to taste its saltiness under his tongue, and to find all those many little points on Jed's body that sent his friend screaming into ecstasy. Leo loved the way Jed was so vocal about his enjoyment of their lovemaking. He liked nothing better than making Jed scream, sigh and pant with total pleasure. He thought there could be no better sight in the world than Jed Bartlet, lost in his own sexual arousal, responding to Leo's every touch and caress with the total abandon that Leo was becoming so familiar with. It turned Leo on to just play with Jed's body and watch his friend reach ever greater heights of sexual pleasure until they both gave in to orgasm. Leo's need grew more urgent and he moved his free hand so that he could unbutton Jed's shirt, bury himself in the golden skin of his friend's chest and nuzzle at his nipples...only to find, to his surprise, that his hand was stopped.

"We shouldn't...not here. Someone might come," Jed told him. Leo glanced out of the car window. They were surrounded by trees on a road that led nowhere.

"Here?" he queried incredulously.

Jed flushed and shrugged. "I'm just saying, we shouldn't undress," he hissed. "That way if anyone came..."

"Jed, the only people who are going to be coming around here are you and me – and very soon if I have anything to do with it," Leo said, grabbing his friend's shirt and pulling it out of his pants before Jed had a chance to stop him. Jed made a little noise of protest and his arms flailed out but Leo ignored him as he pushed Jed's shirt up his body and moved his face down to his friend's stomach...and then stopped. Instead of golden skin, he encountered ugly blue and red bruising instead. He gazed up in shock: Jed's eyes were full of horrified shame and he pushed Leo away and pulled his shirt back down angrily.

"I said we shouldn't undress," he snapped. "I told you!"

"Because people might come...not because...not because..." Leo couldn't find the words to describe his own shock. He sat back on the seat, gazing at his friend helplessly. Jed's head was down, his dark hair covering his eyes, and he refused to meet Leo's gaze. "Jed?" Leo said gently. "Who did this to you?"

The very softness of his words seemed to sting Jed into action. "We're going back," Jed said in a choked voice, playing frantically with the seat mechanism to move it forward so that he could get into the driver's seat. Now Leo understood why he hadn't just scrambled into the back over the seats – with bruising like that it would have been too painful.

"We aren't going anywhere," Leo said firmly, stung into action by the implications of what he had just seen. "Come here." He put his hand on Jed's shoulder and pulled him back down – firmly but carefully, mindful of Jed's bruising. Jed came, clearly realising that any further attempts at deception were useless. He sat there, still not meeting Leo's eye. "Show me," Leo said, and, without waiting for Jed to comply, he turned his friend around to face him and began unbuttoning his shirt. Jed sat there, unmoving, not saying a word. Leo pushed Jed's shirt away from his shoulders and then sat back, surveying his friend's battered torso in numb dismay; Jed had a large purpling bruise on his ribs, and there was a clear imprint of someone's hand around his upper arm. Leo pulled Jed forward and found two more dark bruises on his friend's back, as if he had been kicked. Leo fought his emotions as, from out of the left field, a wave of anger swept through him, taking him by surprise; it wasn't Jed he was angry with, but he wanted to yell at someone right now and Jed was closest. He wanted to get out of the car, wanted to kick the damn car, needed to get some clean, fresh air into his lungs and yell at the top of his voice...but he couldn't. Not while Jed was sitting there, his eyes downcast, too full of shame to even look at him.

Leo reached out with careful fingers to examine the bruises to make sure that they didn't hide any more extensive injuries. He was particularly concerned about the one over Jed's ribs, and Jed gave a sharp intake of breath as Leo pressed it gently, but the ribs didn't seem to be broken. Leo gave a sigh of relief, and then he reached out, put a finger under Jed's chin, and tipped his friend's head up so that he was looking at him. Jed closed his eyes.

"Jed?" Leo said softly.

"It's nothing. It doesn't even hurt any more," Jed replied, finally opening his eyes which were full of a strange kind of defiance.

"Jed – did your father do this to you last night?" Leo asked firmly, because it was the only thing that made any sense. Jed pulled away from his grasp and began buttoning up his shirt. "Jed – I saw you naked the night before last and you didn't have these bruises on you then. Your father did this to you, didn't he?" Leo stated, his anger rising all over again.

"So what?" Jed flung back. "Don't tell me that your father never took a swing at you when you pushed him too far."

Leo sat back, truly astonished. "Jed," he said more gently, placing a hand on Jed's shoulder. "Jed – I had some huge fights with my dad and yeah, he did take a swing at me once or twice – but only when he was too drunk to stand and certainly too drunk to think straight. It was easy enough to duck them. He never once laid a finger on me when he was stone cold sober, however much we argued. I didn't see your father drinking anything last night so what was his excuse?"

"Are you telling me your father never even smacked you?" Jed gazed at him incredulously. "You were never spanked, Leo? Not ever?"

Leo had the profound realisation that Jed either didn't know that what had happened to him at his father's hands was not only wrong but also extremely unusual, going way beyond any kind of normal parental discipline, or that he did know and didn't want to admit it to himself.

"I guess I got into the usual amount of scrapes when I was younger," Leo replied thoughtfully. "So yeah, I was spanked a couple of times – but, Jed, you've got to see the difference between that and this." He pointed at Jed's bruised body, now covered again by his shirt. Jed was breathing heavily, the air catching in his throat as he did so. He sat hunched forward on the seat, his hand clutching his shirt around his neck as if to prevent anyone else from seeing the bruises on his body.

"No I don't see..." Jed began, struggling. "You were hit. What's the difference?"

"There's a big difference, Jed," Leo said softly. "I never ended up with any bruises for a start – and despite our differences and the fact that he was a lousy husband and not much of a father either, I always knew that my dad loved me."

"My father loves me!" Jed yelled back defensively, and from the flash of sheer desperation in his eyes, Leo knew that he had hit upon a subject so sore that it made Jed's bruises pale into insignificance beside it. Leo gazed at his friend steadily, a lump rising in the back of his throat. Did Jed's father love him, he wondered? How could someone do this to someone they loved? His relationship with his own father had often been bitter and conflicted, but he couldn't imagine his father ever punching or kicking him just for disagreeing over something so dry as a dispute over equal pay. He could remember huge arguments about his dad's drinking, his absenteeism, his numerous affairs and the way he treated his mom, but never once had his dad lost his temper just because Leo disagreed with him on a political issue. It defied belief to Leo and he struggled to comprehend it. His heart ached for the desolation that was screaming from every pore in his friend's hunched body right now and he wished he could somehow make everything okay for him.

"Was this all about the equal pay thing?" He asked, still hardly able to believe that could have been the reason for such a brutal beating. "Is that why you didn't want to bring it up in the first place? Hell, Jed, did you **know** this would happen?" He asked, utterly perplexed. Jed bit down on his lip but didn't reply. "When Mrs. Landingham said you hadn't said anything to your father I wondered why the hell not – then I figured that maybe you were scared of him and that if I was there...but I never thought he'd beat you for it," Leo murmured. "You went into this knowing he'd do this, Jed?"

"No!" Jed shook his head vehemently. "I can never tell why he'll..." He sat there for a moment, still looking anywhere but at Leo, but clearly unable to use the word Leo had used to describe what had been done to him. "Why he'll get angry, or what he'll get angry about," Jed finished quietly. "If I could it would be easy – if he were predictable...but I did think that if you were there then it wouldn't happen."

"It sure as hell wouldn't!" Leo growled. "Why did you let him send me away if you knew he was going to do this, Jed?"

"Because...because...it's complicated, Leo," Jed said, in a tone of such abject misery that Leo's heart broke in two. "You don't understand," Jed murmured.

Leo shook his head. "How often does he beat you, Jed?" He asked gently.

"He doesn't beat me!" Jed protested. Leo shook his head and placed a very careful hand on Jed's ribs.

"He punched you here," he said softly, and then he moved his hand to Jed's upper arm. "He grabbed you here...maybe you were trying to get away?" He asked. Jed's eyes flashed, telling Leo that was pretty much the truth of it but his friend said nothing. Leo moved his hand gently down Jed's back. "At some point you went down and he kicked you," he said in a very quiet voice. "Tell me how that wasn't a beating?"

"I was showing off," Jed replied heatedly. "It's his school and I went in there, full of myself as usual. I was stupid. I shouldn't have tried to tell him what to do. No wonder he got angry." Jed shook his head.

"Tell me, if one of your teachers had done this, or one of the counsellors at the camp last year – would that have been okay too?" Leo asked quietly, trying to understand Jed's labyrinthine thought processes on this.

"No, of course not," Jed said impatiently.

"Jed, is it the fact that he's your father that makes it okay for him to punch you and kick you?"

Jed hesitated. "It isn't...that is..." He trailed off and tried again, a note of desperation in his voice, and Leo had the distinct feeling that this was a dialogue he'd had with himself on numerous occasions, as he struggled to find a reason to latch onto, something to excuse the inexcusable – something to stop himself from coming to a conclusion that he could not live with. "I live under his roof. He allows me to attend the school, to get a good education...I have to respect him for that. He's my father, Leo."

"I know. Which makes it even worse," Leo told him. "He's suppose to look out for you, to stand up for you...I don't know any honourable man who would kick someone when he's down and to do that to your own son, to someone who can't fight back..." He shook his head. "Jed, you've gotta understand how very wrong this is."

Jed looked up at him, the expression of blind panic on his face showing how very resistant he was to the implications of what Leo was saying. Leo could understand that – if something was this badly wrong then it would need to be fixed, and it was clear as day that Jed was too mired in the situation to have a clue as to how to go about fixing it.

"How long has he been beating you, Jed?" Leo asked. Jed shook his head. Leo reached out and put his hand on his friend's neck, massaging slowly in a way he knew Jed loved. Jed stared into space and Leo knew his friend was holding on by the skin of his teeth. "Jed?" he asked again, softly.

"Since I was 12," Jed murmured. Leo let out a long breath that he didn't even realise he'd been holding.

"He's been doing this to you for 6 years?" He asked, his mind fleeing in absolute horror from the thought of this boy, who he had fallen in love with so profoundly, being on the receiving end of such vicious beatings for so long – and at the hands of someone who was supposed to love him. He tried to imagine his friend as a small 12 year old boy, tried to fathom how **anyone** could look at Jed and want to hurt him. Jed was like an over-eager puppy - full of youthful energy and sheer high spirits, bouncing around enthusiastically – it was testament to his personality and intellectual vigour that 6 years of beatings hadn't extinguished that vibrancy altogether, Leo thought to himself grimly. "And you never told anyone?" Leo asked softly.

"Who would I tell?" Jed asked. "Someone at the school? My father employs them...and besides, who would believe me?"

Leo thought about it for a moment and suddenly understood what it must have been like to be Jed Bartlet these past few years, locked up in this narrow, confined world, where his father was the central figure around whom everyone else orbited. It was as good as being in a prison – Jed **had** no escape from it; no wonder he had tried to think up these rationalisations, to downplay it and dismiss it as just a normal part of growing up.

"What about your mom?" Leo asked. Jed shrugged.

"She's away a lot and when she's here...our family is built on pretty shaky foundations, Leo. It wouldn't take much to knock it all sideways – and I have my brother to think about too. He's younger than me and Dad doesn't hit him – he's still got so much of his school life left. If I said anything...Dad doesn't have to let us go to the school. He could take that away from my brother."

Leo could have wept from the realisation that his friend had been trapped in such a miserable situation for so long, with nobody to help him and no one to turn to.

"Surely, your father wouldn't...you're his sons!" Leo said, flabbergasted. Jed shrugged.

"He's always made it clear that we're lucky to get the education we've received and he makes us work for it – I always help out around the school because he doesn't want us to take anything for granted. And I never wanted to get my father into trouble, Leo. Between times he's a good man – a good father."

"I don't see how you can define him as that," Leo snapped, his anger rising again at Jed's

defence of the man. Jed's eyes flashed with a loyalty that was as strong as it was misguided in Leo's view.

"He *is*. He's taught me so much and he can be very smart, very dry – kind of funny."

Leo had trouble believing that the distant and stern Mr. Bartlet he'd seen could ever be funny but Jed didn't seem to be lying. Maybe he believed that was the case and maybe it *was* the case but even so, Leo struggled to understand where his friend was coming from. This family was very different from his own in so many ways. In the McGarry household they fought and made peace on a regular basis, and nobody held a grudge or even remembered the minor battles that had been waged. Jed's family seemed oddly formal and restrained by comparison, even cold, although Jed himself wasn't remotely cold – he was as fired up as anybody Leo had ever met.

"Jed – when is it going to stop?" Leo asked softly. Jed gazed up at him, that look of blind panic returning to his eyes. "You do know it has to stop, right?" Leo asked. "You're 18, Jed, you're going to be going away to college soon..."

"I know!" Jed interrupted him, a glimmer of hope shining through in his expression. "That's a good thing. I thought maybe if I wasn't here as much..."

"Jed," Leo said firmly. "You can't just hope it'll stop. You can't spend the next few years wondering if and when he'll hit you again and..." He bit on his lip, unsure whether he should mention this, but ploughed on anyway, because he felt it needed to be said. "And...your father might not have touched your brother so far, but with you gone, maybe he'll need to find another punching bag."

The dark expression in Jed's eyes showed Leo that his friend had already thought about this, and Leo was merely confirming his worst fears.

"I'm sorry, Jed, but you've gotta finish it before you leave. You can't just hope it'll stop. You have to *make* it stop," Leo said firmly.

"How?" Jed said in a tone of utter despair. "How do I do that, Leo?"

"You don't collude with him, Jed. You go to him and tell him it's not gonna happen again. Not to you, and not to your brother. "

Jed gazed at him sightlessly for a moment and Leo wondered if he was doing the right thing. It felt like the right thing but Jed looked so distraught at the moment that maybe it wasn't the right time to press the issue. They were silent for a long time, and then Jed's entire body seemed to shudder as he came to a decision.

"I know you're right, Leo," he whispered. "I just...I need some time to think about it."

"Sure...of course you do," Leo said, relieved that he had gotten that much from his friend. "You gotta speak to him before it happens again though, Jed. How often does it happen?"

He asked. Jed shook his head.

"It varies – I can't predict it, Leo. I wish I could." His hands furred themselves into fists of impotent frustration. "Sometimes months go by and it doesn't happen – other times it can happen two or three times in the space of a few weeks. I know it's me – I know there's something about me that sets him off. Something about the way I talk, the way I...he calls it showing off but I don't even realise I'm doing it. If I could pinpoint what it was I do that makes him so angry then I wouldn't do it."

"Jed there isn't anything wrong with you!" Leo said firmly. He'd never heard his friend talk like this before and it distressed him. Jed turned to face him, his eyes puzzled, as if he had never even considered this possibility. "He makes you feel that way – like it's your fault - but it's not," Leo told him desperately. "How could it be, Jed?"

"I don't know. I know I can be annoying..." Jed shrugged. "He doesn't like it when I'm too smart – you know, when I say something he thinks is me mouthing off and being clever."

"Well that's precisely what I like most about you," Leo said fiercely. "I like hearing what you have to say and I like that he hasn't made you too afraid to say it anyway, despite the consequences. Oh Christ, I love that about you, Jed." He shook his head, feeling passionate about what he was saying. It suddenly occurred to him just how special Jed was. If he'd been beaten all these years for the 'crime' of being too smart, too bright and energetic and shining a character and intellect, then it was testament to the strength of Jed's personality that he hadn't turned in on himself and become dull, resentful and bitter. Leo knew that his battles with and disappointment in his own father had shaped him in some way, and caused some deep hurt inside that he guarded fiercely to prevent anyone getting too close. Jed, it seemed, had similar hurts, and guarded them just as fiercely. No wonder they had felt such an immediate empathy – despite their obvious differences, they were more alike than either of them had realised. "There is nothing wrong with you, Jed," Leo said, in a low, forceful tone. "I love you for what you are, and I always will."

He realised what he was saying as he was saying it but he didn't care. It was the truth – he did love Jed Bartlet and he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he always would. Jed stared at him, a variety of emotions passing across his so easily read face. Leo gazed back at him, unflinchingly, not backing down from what he'd said. Jed seemed confused, and close to breaking, his blue eyes full of a combination of distress and hope. Leo reached out, put his arms around his friend and pulled him against his chest. Jed's body was stiff and he didn't come willingly, but Leo wasn't about to take no for an answer. He wrapped his arms around his friend and kissed Jed's hair feeling the tension in his friend's body.

Leo had a sudden sense of how much his friend hated being this weak and vulnerable. He tried to put himself in Jed's shoes – until now they had been equals both as friends and lovers, but now Jed was in a position where Leo couldn't help but feel sorry for him – for the bruises on his body and the years of beatings he had endured at his father's hands and Jed loathed being pitied, or seen as someone who needed to be taken care of. He was a proud young man and this person wasn't who he wanted to be. Leo wished he had the words to tell his friend that it didn't matter, that he wasn't judging Jed for his current neediness, that

he didn't always have to be so strong and confident in order for Leo to love him but somehow he knew that despite all he'd said and all he ever **could** say, Jed's pride would stand in the way of him hearing it. All the same, Jed needed sheer physical comfort right now. He was such a tactile person, desperately in need of the hugging that Leo suspected had been denied him for much of his childhood – at least at his father's hands. Leo wondered whether Jed had even known before his relationship with him just how much he craved being touched and stroked and held. The way he behaved during sex, when he offered his entire body up to Leo's caresses with so much abandonment, and the way he was behaving now, trying to hold back because of his pride but completely unable to, confirmed Leo's view that Jed had no idea just how much he needed to touch and be touched.

"Hey, let it go," he whispered and a shudder went through Jed's body as he finally gave in and allowed Leo to hug him close, his body melting against Leo's. His head came to rest on Leo's shoulder and his arms closed around Leo's body, finally taking the physical comfort he so desperately needed. Leo smiled as his lips nuzzled Jed's hair and his hands rubbed gentle, comforting circles on Jed's back. This, as far as he was concerned, was where his friend belonged.

2002

Jed came to with a start, and glanced up at Leo with a bemused expression in his sleepy blue eyes. The side of his face was squashed and there was a little imprint on his cheek from where he had been lying with his face on Leo's lap.

"Was I asleep?" He murmured. Leo smiled, and stroked his friend's hair. Jed looked ridiculously young like this. Nobody would have guessed he was President of the United States if they saw him half naked, eyes full of sleep, with his hair standing up on end.

"Praise be – you were definitely asleep," he replied.

"How long?" Jed screwed up his eyes and glanced towards the clock on the nightstand.

"Well, the first hour or so you were faking," Leo said. "In the hope, I suspect, that I'd go away." Jed pulled a face but didn't even bother to argue. "But after that I think you **did** actually get a couple of hours sleep."

"How about you?" Jed asked.

"Don't worry about it," Leo said, waving a negligent hand. He had said he'd watch over Jed and that was exactly what he'd done. He might not be able to help his friend with what was bothering him but he could always manage something practical.

"Leo..." Jed began.

"I said, don't worry about it," Leo replied, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, thankful to at last be able to relieve the cramp in his muscles from staying in the same position for so

long for fear of waking Jed. His friend had needed the sleep more than he did – he'd catch up soon enough. He doubted he'd have been able to sleep anyway, not after Jed had dropped his bombshell that this bout of insomnia had something to do with the beatings he'd received at his father's hands so long ago. He wished his friend could have been more forthcoming and it bothered him that Jed's silence on the subject might be at least partly related to his accusation that he thought Leo would get angry. "So, you managed a couple of hours sleep, huh? Something Stanley said to you must have worked," Leo commented, gazing at Jed's still sleep-flushed face. "Think you might sleep some more if I go?"

"No." Jed shook his head. "I doubt it anyway."

"You think Stanley helped?" Leo prodded, wishing that this wasn't such hard work and Jed would just come out and talk to him properly about it.

"Maybe." Jed shrugged. "Yeah. I guess. You know me – I'm goal oriented. Maybe just feeling I'm doing something about the insomnia has helped." He shrugged again and then gazed thoughtfully into space, as if distracted by something.

"What are you thinking?" Leo asked.

"Mmm?" Jed glanced back at him, a distant look in his eyes. "Oh...I was just thinking about Ellie. I haven't spoken to her in awhile. I should. She always talks to Abbey when she calls and often I don't get to speak to her. Sometimes I think she's avoiding a conversation with me. I'm easy enough to talk to aren't I, Leo?" He frowned.

"Well the conversation certainly flows," Leo replied with a slight grin. "Whether the poor girl gets a word in edgeways is another matter."

"I listen to her!" Jed protested, and then a flicker of doubt passed across his eyes. "I hope she knows that I listen to her," he added uncertainly. "I do care about what's going on in her life but...things don't always seem right between us."

"Jed," Leo said gently, understanding what was driving this particular conversation. "You don't hit Ellie. You never have. You aren't your father and there's absolutely no danger of you turning into him. If anything you're your mother's son." He gave a little smile; he had met Jed's mom on a number of occasions over the years, and had always been struck by the similarities between them. Jed was as voluble and intelligent as she was, and had the same dark hair and vivid blue eyes. He had often wondered if that was why Jed's father had disliked his son so much; Jed had adopted his mother's Catholicism and his looks, manner of speech, and every gesture reminded his father of a woman he had grown to detest during the course of their marriage. Jed was certainly not at all like his father – Jed was a very demonstrative, warm, tactile man and Leo's recollection of Mr. Bartlet was of a stern, distant kind of personality. His heart still ached for someone as in need of physical affection as Jed, growing up in that cold, sterile household.

"I know I didn't ever hit Ellie," Jed said, in a tone of voice that made it clear just how abhorrent that idea was to him. "But...you know we're not as close as I wish we were. Millie

said awhile back that Ellie was afraid of me and that stung, Leo. I don't want a child of mine to be scared of me – I know what that's like and it's miserable. I just keep questioning the way I've treated her, whether I've said something or not said something...whether I've somehow made her feel..."

"Jed..." Leo interrupted him, shaking his head firmly, understanding more about the root of Jed's insomnia now if this kind of thing was rattling around, unresolved, inside his friend's head, causing him to doubt his every move. "You can't keep second guessing yourself about everything. You are a good father."

"You and Mallory are close." Jed shrugged. "She talks to you. She tells you what's going on in her life. She teases you, you tease her...you have a good father/daughter relationship."

"You have that too with your kids!" Leo protested.

"Not with Ellie," Jed sighed. "Or not as much as I'd like. You know..." He hesitated and then continued. "I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to have a son," he murmured. "Would my relationship with my father have affected how I treated a boy?"

"I doubt it, Jed. I honestly do," Leo said, shaking his head again. "Don't do this to yourself. It won't get you anywhere."

"Yeah." Jed exhaled a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah. You're right, Leo. I'll try and switch off." He gave an exhausted little smile and nodded to himself more firmly but Leo guessed that switching off the little doubting voice inside his mind was going to be easier said than done. Leo got up, rolling his neck from side to side, pondering the little insight he had just gained into Jed's current problems.

"Where are you going?" Jed asked.

Leo gave a crooked little grin. "It's nearly 5 am," he pointed out.

Jed glanced at the clock and back to Leo, and it was clear that the allusion wasn't lost on him. "Ah, yeah." He gave a little grin of his own. "And don't we all turn into pumpkins at 5am?"

"I've heard it's so."

Jed shook his head. "I can spend the night with who I like now. I'm sure the secret service agents think we spent the past couple of hours talking about important policy decisions anyhow."

"Or playing chess," Leo added with a shrug. "I agree – and I really don't care, but all the same, we've been pretty discreet up 'til now so I think I should be going."

"Back to the hotel?" Jed asked, in a surprised tone. "You'd just get there and it'd be time to turn around and come back again."

"I know." Leo nodded, reaching for his jacket and shouldering himself into it. "I'm only going back to take a shower and change into a fresh set of clothes."

"You could shower here," Jed commented.

"And the clothes?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"You keep a set in your office," Jed pointed out. "I could have someone bring them over. That'd give us more time."

"To do what?" Leo's eyebrow remained raised. Jed gave a tired smile.

"Well not that – I don't think either of us are in the mood...but it's not often we get a chance to just hang out and talk outside the office."

"We'll be doing more than enough talking once Stanley gets his hands on us both this evening," Leo grumbled.

"You're still mad about that?" Jed sat up on the bed, hooked his arm around Leo's waist, and then pulled him back so that he landed on the bed once more, with a thump. "Stay," he commanded, wrapping his arms firmly around Leo's body, and resting his chin on Leo's shoulder.

"Is that a presidential order?" Leo asked with a sigh.

"Yeah...no...oh hell, I just want you to stay, Leo," Jed said. "I just got two hours sleep so I'm feeling a little better about life right now. We could take a shower together – when did we last do that?"

"Can't remember," Leo murmured, wishing he could sleep but realistic enough to know that he'd have to wait out a long day and evening first before that could happen. "Jed...I don't get mad at you about your father," he said.

"Yes you do, Leo," Jed replied. "Let's not talk about this now." He pressed a kiss against the side of Leo's face. Leo gave a little sigh and turned around. He traced a finger down Jed's cheek, gazing at his friend thoughtfully.

"Forty years – sometimes I can hardly believe it's been so long."

"Yeah – somewhere along the way we both got older and fatter and slower," Jed replied with a grin. "We changed in other ways too," he said, in a quieter tone, almost as an afterthought.

"Yeah...but some things never change. Why didn't you tell me this was what was going on for you, Jed?" Leo asked.

Jed sighed. "I thought it would go away."

"Toby said something to you that sparked all this off," Leo commented. Jed stiffened slightly, and then relaxed again, nuzzling closer to Leo. His body felt warm and relaxed and radiated that familiar, comforting Jed scent.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"What did he say?" Leo asked.

"That my father hit me because he didn't like me," Jed replied.

"Damn," Leo winced. Of all the things that Toby could have said, he had to pick that. After he had spent 40 years taking care not to tell Jed that particular truth, Toby had just upped and blundered straight on in there. "He had no right to talk to you like that. I'm going to have a few words with him when I see him."

"No you aren't," Jed told him firmly. "This is my battle. I nearly fired him on the spot if it helps any."

"It doesn't," Leo grunted.

"He only said what you've been thinking for the past 40 years anyway," Jed commented.

"So what?" Leo growled. "I didn't say it. That's the difference."

"That's because you love me and he doesn't," Jed replied simply. "He was right anyhow. My father didn't like me – he didn't like me at all. Thank god you came along and you did – I think I needed you at that point in my life or I could have lost confidence. I needed someone who enjoyed my company, and who didn't think I was showing off every time I opened my mouth."

"Well, that was then of course," Leo commented. "I think that now, obviously."

Jed grinned and poked Leo in the ribs. "Hah. I'm not falling for that one," he said. "You most definitely did not have me there. Where are we on that score anyway?"

"Oh, I am **so** far out in front of you," Leo replied. "You could have me every day for the rest of your life and you still wouldn't catch up."

"Hmm, nice thought," Jed grinned cheekily. Leo sighed.

"You're in a frisky mood. I can tell. Are you sure that shower is such a good idea right now?"

"It's an excellent idea." Jed leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. "I'll call someone to bring your suit over – you can go and get naked."

Leo got off the bed, and did as he was told, pleased that Jed's two hours sleep had at least refreshed his friend to some degree. He got undressed feeling infinitely weary – it still bothered him that Jed didn't seem either ready or willing to tell him how any of this related to him. Not that this was atypical behaviour from his mercurial lover, but even so, it still bothered him. He didn't like the idea of going into *any* meeting unprepared, least of all one with a shrink as good as Stanley.

Jed joined him a few moments later. He was looking a little more upbeat than he had for the past several days; as he'd said, perhaps doing something – anything – to tackle the problem was relieving his sense of powerlessness in the face of his persistent insomnia.

"So, did you read Toby's speech?" Jed asked, slipping out of his shorts and opening the shower door.

"Yeah...Jed, could we not talk about work when we're naked. It feels weird," Leo replied.

"You're not naked yet," Jed pointed out infuriatingly. "I thought the speech was good."

"But you didn't tell him so because that would mean actually talking to him," Leo observed wryly, removing the last of his clothing. "And you're too pissed with him to talk to him right now."

"Okay, you're naked now so we can stop talking about work," Jed said, in what was clearly an avoidance tactic now that the conversation had taken a turn into dangerous waters.

"Or maybe it's not that you're pissed with him – maybe you're worried that if you start talking to him again he'll come at you with more things you'd rather not hear," Leo commented, getting into the shower beside his friend.

"Not only naked but in the shower now," Jed pointed out, grabbing the soap and lathering it vigorously between his hands. "The office talk should definitely stop."

"How the hell did he know?" Leo asked. Jed placed his lathered hands on Leo's shoulders and began spreading the foam over him with extravagant strokes of his hands. "How could he know what happened with your father 40 years ago, Jed? How could he possibly have guessed that your father beat you?"

"I can't hear you," Jed said, standing directly under the cascading water for what looked to Leo like that very purpose. Leo turned around, grabbed Jed's shoulders, and pulled him forwards.

"How do you think Toby knew?" He asked firmly. Jed shrugged, and Leo knew he was putting a severe dent in his friend's good mood.

"I have no idea," Jed replied sulkily. "One minute we were talking about education and the Iowa caucus and the next minute he was asking me if my father hit me when I was a kid."

"Why?" Leo asked, gazing at his friend perceptively. He knew Toby – and this wasn't the kind of observation he'd just come out with unless it was prompted by some behaviour of Jed's. Jed glared at him.

"Well I guess he felt that my past history was affecting my ability to be an effective candidate – and as I'm *his* candidate and he wants me to win, I suppose he thought he'd blindsided me with some amazing insight into my thought processes that would get me back on track," Jed said grumpily. "Can we stop talking about this now?"

"No," Leo said smoothly. "What in particular was he objecting to? What didn't you do in Iowa that he wanted you to do?"

"Leo." Jed frowned.

"Jed," Leo said firmly.

Jed shot Leo a look that would have frozen a lesser man. Leo stood his ground implacably – he'd seen Jed's entire range of looks and none of them frightened him. That was why Jed needed him around – his friend was such a forceful personality that he needed people who wouldn't crumple before him, scared both by his intelligence and the office he held. Jed gave a huge, heartfelt sigh, giving in. "Toby doesn't understand – as President, I can behave a certain way – hell, I've got freedom and independence to act pretty much as I like – but as candidate, well, I have to pull back, Leo. I have to soften up – I have to keep my smart mouth shut and make them like me. I need their approval or they won't vote for me."

"Ah." Leo nodded, wincing inwardly. Now he understood what Toby was driving at – but he still wanted to yell at the Communications Director for having unwittingly hit on Jed's most sore of sore points. "So Toby just came out and asked you if your father beat you?" He commented, impressed despite himself. "That's one hell of a reach."

"I suppose it isn't beyond someone with the kind of weird intuition that Toby has," Jed mused. "There have been biographies and articles about me – most of them total crap but they usually mention that my relationship with my father was a little formal, and maybe Toby..."

"You read the biographies about yourself?" Leo asked, surprised.

"Sure. I need to have some light reading before bedtime," Jed grinned.

"So it was just an intuitive leap based on that?" Leo mused thoughtfully. "I wonder how many other intuitive leaps he might make...?"

Jed glanced at him sharply and then laughed out loud. "You mean about us?" He asked. "Well, he knows we've been friends for years, that we're exceptionally close...but I'm very happily married and so were you for a long time and I'm not sure there's any kind of blueprint for our relationship – so unless we're incredibly indiscreet I doubt Toby has picked up on it. Now, speaking of indiscreet, can we actually get on with the business of our current

indiscretion and stop talking about this?"

Leo guessed that this was as much as he'd get out of his friend for now, unless he pressed the issue – and if he did that he thought it was very likely he'd set off a minor avalanche of revelations that might best be dealt with this evening, with Stanley in the room mediating, or at least keeping score. Leo pushed Jed back against the wall of the shower and kissed his friend firmly, signalling that the conversation was, for now at least, over and done with. Jed responded enthusiastically, returning the kiss, and placing his hands on Leo's buttocks.

They were both too tired and wrung out to do more than kiss and stroke each other affectionately, just enjoying a few moments together away from the gathering storm. Leo loved the scent of warm water on Jed's flesh, and the way several droplets caught in his dark chest hair. Jed was such a solid man, his tanned skin still smooth and appealing after all these years. It was always a pleasure just feasting on these sensual delights – as he'd got older he'd come to appreciate them even more than he had during their younger years, when the outcome of any sexual encounter had to be several mind-blowing orgasms or they felt short-changed.

The warmth and companionship of the shared shower improved both their moods and by the time they got out they were laughing and bantering like that had in the old days, before the weight of the whole world had come to rest on their shoulders. They shaved and got dressed together in a way they rarely had any opportunity for these days – Leo had forgotten how nice it was being around his friend when he was just Jed, not the President, and when he could be just Leo, when neither of them were even contemplating sex, when it was just about companionship and being together, sharing a joke or a reminiscence - it was nice just being *them*. Finally, they took breakfast together, as they did several mornings a week anyhow – Leo often came to the Residence before work so they could read the newspapers and discuss the day's schedule before making the short walk from the Residence to the West Wing. Abbey wasn't a morning person and rarely ate breakfast so it was a good time for them to meet outside the office; the conversation was usually work related but often they had a chance to talk about their families or their thoughts on wider issues.

As they walked to work, side by side, shoulders almost touching, Leo couldn't help thinking that in many ways they resembled an old married couple. They didn't have a perfect relationship – there were still fights and silences, old resentments and tense no-go areas, but the love was still there underneath that, both undimmed and strengthened by the passage of time.

Chapter 7 by Xanthe

1963

It was a subdued, but, Leo thought, a less deflated Jed who drove them slowly back to the school. They hadn't made love, but Leo kept his hand on the back of Jed's neck the whole way, stroking reassuringly so that his friend was in no doubt about his feelings for him.

"Tonight," Jed said, "you'll come to my room won't you?" He glanced at Leo anxiously, looking achingly vulnerable although Leo couldn't fathom why Jed thought that having seen him in his moment of weakness, Leo would reject him.

"Sure," he said calmly.

"Because we never got to try...you know, the other way around." Jed flushed. Leo smiled.

"I'd like to try it – but if you wanted a repeat of what we did last time, then that would be fine too. I can wait."

"No – it's only fair," Jed said stubbornly. Leo shook his head, chuckling – Jed had the most acute sense of fairness of anyone he'd ever come across, but he knew, also, that Jed was trying to make up for what had just happened by appearing resolute and in control – when he patently wasn't. All the same, Leo didn't think it would do him any harm to feel as if he was.

"Okay," he said, shrugging. He removed his hand from the back of Jed's neck as they drove into the school grounds. Jed parked the car and they were both getting out when a familiar voice sounded behind them.

"Jed Bartlet! I've been looking for you!"

Leo paused – he'd forgotten about Mrs. Landingham and it was clear, from Jed's dismayed expression, that he had too. "So?" She came rushing up, her eyes bright with anticipation. "How did it go, Jed? Did you raise the issue with your father?"

Leo glanced at his friend who glanced guiltily back at him. He knew what was going through Jed's mind – usually his friend would lie at this juncture, but with Leo standing here, knowing the truth, Jed was inhibited and didn't know what to do. Leo sincerely doubted that Jed would be able to either lie effectively or maintain that lie knowing that Leo knew the truth.

"We talked to Mr. Bartlet last night," Leo said, stepping in and relieving Jed of the need to say anything.

"And what happened?" Mrs. Landingham asked.

"He wasn't very open to the idea," Leo replied.

"Oh." She rocked back on her heels, looking extremely put out. "You know, I felt for sure that if Jed just spoke to him..."

"You over-estimate Jed's influence," Leo interrupted smoothly. Jed was being uncharacteristically silent, and Leo knew that he was completely out of his depth. An idea occurred to him, and he considered it for a moment. It was risky – at worst it might cost him Jed's friendship – but at the same time, Leo knew he couldn't bear to leave this place

knowing Jed still hadn't resolved the situation with his father. While Leo was here, he was pretty confident that Jed wouldn't be on the receiving end of any more beatings – he wouldn't leave Jed alone with his father for a second for a start, so it just couldn't happen. However, if Jed buried all this down again, as he had done thus far, if he didn't do anything about it – then Leo couldn't bear the thought of leaving in the certain knowledge that it would happen again. That anger rose inside him once more. He wasn't sure where it stemmed from, but the idea of *anyone* laying a violent hand on his lover filled him with such fury that he knew he had no choice but to risk his friendship with Jed rather than let him suffer another beating. "Just because he's the headmaster's son doesn't mean that his father listens to him. Quite the reverse as a matter of fact," Leo said.

Mrs Landingham opened her mouth in surprise at his vehement tone of voice.

"Leo..." Jed began.

"It's okay, Jed. Mrs. Landingham asked and I think she should know. I think you have this view of Jed as some kind of bright, shining, leader, don't you, Mrs. Landingham?" Leo asked. "Jed told me in one of his letters that you called him 'the boy king'."

"Well, that's right!" Mrs. Landingham replied. "He's a foot smarter than the other kids his age, and they all look up to him – oh, not for his brains – kids your age don't care about being smart. They look up to Jed because he's a born leader – people just plain like him."

Leo thought privately that while other people might like Jed, his father clearly didn't but he didn't say so; he knew that was the last thing Jed wanted to hear right now and he could just imagine the pain he would see in Jed's eyes at hearing such a truth – it was one truth too many on a day of painful truths.

"I felt sure that if Jed just talked to his father..." Mrs. Landingham began and then she trailed off, looking from Leo to Jed and back to Leo again, stymied by their silence.

"I did talk to him, Mrs. Landingham," Jed said softly. "He just didn't want to listen."

"Well, you tried – that's the main thing." Mrs. Landingham nodded vigorously. "I'm proud of you for that, Jed."

"You should be," Leo said quietly. "Jed did this knowing what the likely consequences would be and he paid a high price for it. He's braver than you think, Mrs. Landingham." He caught Jed's wide-eyed glare but didn't care. This felt *right*. Jed might try to cover it up all he liked, but Leo didn't feel the same obligation. No, it wasn't his secret to share, but he didn't see why something like this should be a secret at all. They were protecting only one person by staying silent and that person sure as hell wasn't Jed.

"Why, what happened? Don't tell me your father got angry with you for this?" She looked very annoyed by the thought. "I've a good mind to go and tell him what I..."

"He did get angry," Leo interrupted her. "He got very angry."

She paused, a sudden glimmer of realisation appearing in her eyes. Her head turned sharply to gaze at Jed where he was standing, leaning stiffly against his still open car door.

"Jed?" she said uncertainly.

"Why don't you show her just how angry he got, Jed?" Leo pressed. Jed glared at him.

"This is none of your goddamn business – either of you," he snarled, slamming his car door shut and starting to walk off. Leo sprinted quickly to his side, grabbed his arm, and nudged him back in the direction of the car.

"You can't live like this any more. *You* haven't done anything wrong!" He hissed. "Tell her, Jed. She's a good friend – anyone can see that. She's the rare kind of friend - the kind that doesn't come along too often; the kind who'll always be with you."

Jed gazed at him mutely, and then glanced over his shoulder at Mrs. Landingham, but Leo could see that the implications of what he was saying weren't lost on Jed.

"Jed?" Mrs. Landingham said gently, her eyes infinitely sympathetic. Jed stiffened and Leo knew how much he hated being pitied. He squeezed Jed's shoulder, refusing to release his friend. Jed had been living with this alone for far too long. "Jed, did your father hurt you?" Mrs. Landingham asked quietly. Jed's face twisted for a moment, and then crumpled, almost savagely.

"I'm sorry I didn't do a better job for you, Mrs. Landingham," he said in a tired voice. "I did try."

"Jed, this is up to you but I think you should show Mrs. Landingham what we're talking about here," Leo said softly, for Jed's ears only. He put his hand on Jed's shirt and looked into Jed's eyes as he pulled the shirt slowly out of Jed's pants. Jed didn't stop him, but his blue eyes were shining glassily and his expression was glazed and fixed, as if the only way he could get through this was by pretending he wasn't really here. Leo pushed Jed's shirt up just enough to reveal the large, purple bruise on his ribs and Mrs. Landingham gave a choked little gasp.

"Your father did this to you because you spoke up to him about equal pay?" She asked, in a tone of total shock. Leo was glad that someone else was now on hand to help convince Jed of how wrong this was – two voices might prove better than one in this instance. Jed nodded, his face flushed with shame – a shame that made Leo's anger rise again because Jed wasn't the one who had anything to be ashamed of.

"Mr. Bartlet sent me out of the room," Leo told Mrs. Landingham. "Jed didn't tell me what happened until this morning. This wasn't the first time - it's been going on for years."

"That's enough, Leo," Jed hissed, and his hand clamped down hard on Leo's wrist, warning him not to go too far. Leo released his grasp on Jed's shirt and allowed Jed to tuck it back

into his pants. He knew this was hard for his friend, but Leo was of the opinion that sometimes you just had to bite on the bullet and do the hard stuff – that was just life.

"This is...despicable," Mrs. Landingham said, in a low, choking tone, as if she was too angry to speak properly. "Jed, you should see a doctor – and we should talk to..."

"Who?" Jed asked. "I'm going away in a few weeks, Mrs. Landingham. What's the point of bringing anything up now? I'm not going to cause havoc here and then just ship out and leave it behind me. This is between me and my father – you don't either of you *understand*..." His voice broke on that last word, and he turned and walked quickly away.

Leo watched him go, torn between running after his friend, and finding out what Mrs. Landingham's view was on what they should do next. He decided on the latter course of action; Jed was mad at him right now – maybe rightly so – but he didn't regret what he'd done and he thought his friend might come around in time. When he tore his gaze away from Jed's retreating back he found that Mrs. Landingham was looking at him shrewdly, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"He showed you?" She asked.

"I found out," Leo replied ambiguously.

She nodded, slowly, a guarded respect for him showing in her eyes. "You're a dangerous kind of person to have around, Leo McGarry," she observed. He gazed back at her steadily and she elaborated: "You seem so quiet and good natured, but you're the kind of person who moves mountains when everybody else is looking the other way and afterwards nobody is ever sure how you did it. People like you are always the most dangerous; still waters run deep, my mother used to say."

"Hmm." Leo considered this for a moment. "Aren't you glad I'm on Jed's side then?" He asked her at last, with a crooked little smile. "Because I promise you the only mountains I'll ever move are the ones in *his* way, Mrs. Landingham." Her gaze narrowed, and then widened and she gave a little laugh.

"I'm glad to hear that, Leo," she commented, "because I like to know who's playing on my team." She paused, and then sighed. "He really didn't want you to tell me, you know."

"I know." Leo nodded. "But he's been handling this alone for a very long time and he hasn't managed to stop it happening; something had to change, Mrs. Landingham."

"Well he isn't alone any more," she said briskly. "He has two allies – and between us we have to figure out the best way of tackling this. I still find it hard to believe...I mean, Mr. Bartlet is such a reserved man – he's strict, I know that, but that's no bad thing when running a school like this... to do that to his own son though?" She shook her head.

"You do believe Jed don't you?" Leo asked. She glanced at him sharply.

"Of course! That boy wouldn't lie about something like this!" Her eyes were full of a fiery devotion and Leo felt a sudden wave of strong affection and kinship for her. Whatever she might think of him, he knew that her affection for Jed couldn't be doubted – and that was something that would unite and bond them even if nothing else ever did. "You have a plan – I can see that," she said, that sharp gaze of hers never wavering.

"Sure." Leo shrugged. "Jed's probably right about involving anyone else – and I think that's his call anyway. But I've told him he has to speak to his father before he leaves for college. He has to stand up to him. His father can't hit him again," he said firmly.

"Well we both agree on that," Mrs. Landingham replied. "But I'm reluctant to allow Jed to carry on living in that house if this is the kind of treatment he receives under his father's roof. I'll take him in myself if that's what he wants."

"Well, we might need to hold you to that," Leo told her. "But I think the last thing we should do is to push Jed into doing anything right now. He needs some time to get used to the fact that we know and to think about what we've said to him – if we push then he'll dig his heels in. If we give him some space, then I think he might come around."

Mrs Landingham gave a little chuckle and nodded. "He always knows the right thing to do, Leo – he just needs to pick his own time in which to do it," she commented.

Leo grinned – that was an accurate description of his friend. He had a sudden glimpse of his future relationship with this feisty, intelligent, capable woman. She was a supporter – staunch, loyal and true. He, as she had so accurately identified, was a fixer. If he couldn't fix something then he'd fix something else just to make up for it. He could make the hard decisions if need be, as he had done just now when forcing Jed's hand over revealing his bruises to Mrs. Landingham. And as for Jed, well, he was, as Mrs. Landingham had pointed out, a leader; he was the one who ultimately had to follow through on what Leo suggested – and while he might not do so immediately, or with good grace, Leo hoped that he at least knew that Leo always had his best interests at heart and that his judgement could be trusted.

"If he does speak to his father then he can't do so alone," Mrs. Landingham mused. Leo nodded.

"I'll be with him," he said firmly.

"Maybe an adult would be better – one of the teachers..." Mrs Landingham began.

"I'm 18. I *am* an adult," Leo said sharply. "I'm not going to ask him to tell anyone else about this, Mrs Landingham because I know he won't. You and I – we're different. He won't trust anyone else."

"Well...okay," she said reluctantly. "But I'm going to be checking up on him every day – so you should tell him to expect that."

Leo nodded. "I think that's a good idea – I think he should know that we're worried about him. He keeps making out that this is no big deal – I think he should understand that it **is** a big deal, and that it isn't going to go away."

"I certainly agree." Mrs. Landingham nodded. "Leo – you keep an eye on him. If there's anything happening I should know about, then you'd better tell me."

"Yes, Ma'am!" Leo felt like saluting.

She gazed at him and for a moment Leo knew they had reached an understanding that would stay with them for the rest of their days. Jed was theirs – maybe one day the circle of people loyally surrounding him would widen, but for now, he belonged to them, and they'd both do their utmost to protect him in their own way – even if that meant giving him advice that he didn't want to hear. Mrs. Landingham gave him a nod which Leo returned, and then she turned on her heel and left.

Leo gave Jed a couple of hours alone and then went in search of his friend. He found him eventually in the school library, curled up in a chair, reading a book on car mechanics. He glanced up as Leo came in and frowned.

"Leo – I've been doing some reading and I still don't see how you fixed my car," he said, as if the previous few hours hadn't happened at all. Leo took that in his stride – he was coming to understand that this was just Jed's way; he might make no acknowledgement of what had just happened, but it was undoubtedly percolating away in his mind.

"Maybe you need to accept that you are never going to be any kind of mechanic," Leo commented, sitting down beside his friend.

"Maybe not – but I can speak Latin better than you," Jed told him, waving his arm extravagantly in the air.

"Sure. So we're even." Leo shrugged. "Of course my skill is more useful than yours but whatever." He grinned.

"You don't think being able to speak Latin is useful?" Jed asked, in a tone of outrage.

Leo relaxed into his chair; he suspected that at some point he'd be soundly berated for the way he had just forced Jed's hand with Mrs. Landingham, but for now Jed was clearly signalling that their relationship had weathered its first storm and was as strong as ever. Leo couldn't help but wonder whether it wasn't, in fact, just a little bit stronger.

2002

Leo had suggested that they hold Jed's second therapy session in his hotel room. He had a comfortable living room in his suite, and it would be easier for Stanley as he was staying at the same hotel. In addition, Leo wanted to avoid the possibly sensitive sight of Stanley visiting Jed in his private study in the White House alone, two nights running. His hotel room

made more sense – especially if he was also present; if word did get out then people would be far less likely to infer that the President was having psychological problems if his Chief Of Staff was with him during any putative therapy session.

Leo dined with Stanley in his hotel room before the President's expected 10pm arrival time. He liked Stanley – in that wary way he always adopted with all new acquaintances, but especially with a psychiatrist with the kind of fearsome reputation that Stanley had.

"So, you have no intention of telling me what to expect, huh?" Leo asked, as they drank their coffee.

"Hasn't he told you himself?" Stanley glanced up.

"He told me some of it – but there's a lot he didn't share." Leo shrugged. "He's like this – I think that's why he's been prone to insomnia all his life. He just worries away at his problems in private and can't switch off. I bet you had the devil's own job coaxing anything out of him." Stanley's small, twitching smile told him that was pretty much the truth of it.

"So, where do I stand in this?" Leo asked. "I mean, is this kind of like an attorney thing – he's your client and I'm not? Do I need to get my own shrink to make sure I'm getting the best advice or something?" He grinned at Stanley. "Then my shrink can exchange letters with you and we can all make a deal?"

"Oh, I don't think that'll be necessary," Stanley replied with a grin of his own. "This is still the President's gig, Leo – but, if I can do you some good too, well, that's a bonus. I don't anticipate that you'll need to be involved for very long though."

"Thank god!" Leo said, in a heartfelt tone.

They were interrupted by Jed's arrival. Leo admitted the President to his suite, and then shut and locked the door firmly behind him. Jed was a flurry of activity, full of the kind of expansive, overblown bonhomie that Leo knew was because the last thing he wanted to do right now was settle down and have this joint therapy session. Stanley, however, was far too experienced to do anything other than see through such an obvious delaying tactic.

"Sir – if you could sit down," he said, interrupting the President in the middle of one his anecdotes. Leo smiled; usually he allowed Jed's anecdotes to wash over him – he rarely interrupted his friend in midstream although Jed knew well enough when Leo was humouring him.

"Stanley – don't we have any time for niceties?" Jed pouted.

"At \$375 an hour?" Leo raised an eyebrow. "I think we should make the most of every single, gold-plated minute, sir."

"Okay..." Stanley held up his hands thoughtfully. "We need to discuss something first. Leo, you just called the President 'sir'. I'm not sure how appropriate that is in this setting."

"You just called him sir too," Leo pointed out, sitting down in one of the three armchairs that he'd arranged purposefully for this meeting.

"And I think that *is* appropriate," Stanley said with a nod. "Although if it makes you uncomfortable I could call you something else," he said to Jed.

The President shrugged. "Stanley – we already started with 'sir' and I'm fine with that but I agree about Leo. He's very stubborn on this point though so I doubt you'll get him to change his mind."

"Leo?" Stanley glanced at him.

"No." Leo shook his head. "I only ever call him by his first name when we're alone together in private."

"That's true," Jed interjected. "Even if we're alone together in the office it's 'Mr President' this and 'sir' that."

"We're in an unusual situation, sir," Leo said pointedly. "I wouldn't want our long-standing friendship to come before matters of state. I don't think it does either of us any harm to be reminded of our responsibilities and the importance of your office."

"See?" Jed pulled a face. "You thought I was hard work, Stanley, but boy, you wait until you get stuck into Leo." He looked as if he was rather relishing the thought.

"Leo – this therapy session isn't about the Presidency and we both know that you've been in a very close and unusual relationship with the President for several decades," Stanley said. "I think it puts up an artificial barrier if you defer to the President during therapy. I think it might stop you saying what you really think and I think it gets in the way of the really important issues. In this room, I don't want you to treat him as the President – I want you to be able to talk to him openly and honestly as yourself, without anything getting in the way – and I want him to be able to do the same. I don't want him to feel he has to assume a role when he's talking candidly and personally to someone he's been in an extremely close relationship with for the past 40 years."

Leo considered that for a moment, and then sighed. "Okay, Stanley. You win."

"Why, Stanley, you're quite the miracle worker," Jed commented with a low whistle of admiration. "Perhaps you could lean on Leo about calling me 'sir' when he meets me for breakfast in the White House. That's always annoyed me...or those occasions when we're alone together but in which he has deemed us to be in 'Presidential mode' and not 'personal mode' – something he seems to determine according to some bizarre system of calculation all of his own which completely mystifies me. Or perhaps..."

"Jed," Leo interrupted him in full flow. "I think it's time for you to shut up on that subject now."

Jed gave Stanley a 'see what kind of a monster you've unleashed' look and sank back in his chair with a wry grin in Leo's direction.

"So," Stanley said, clearly pleased that Leo had managed to do what he hadn't been able to and settle the excitable President. "Would you like to tell Leo what we discussed last night, sir?"

"Oh I already told him," Jed shrugged, pouring himself a glass of water from the large jug Leo had placed on the coffee table before the session had begun.

"Well, perhaps you could recap the salient points," Stanley prompted. Jed gave an audible sigh and Leo winced; he could see that Stanley had had his work cut out for him dealing with Jed. Not that he was surprised knowing his friend as he did.

"Leo, as I told you earlier, Toby came to me after the Iowa caucus having somehow deduced, probably as a result of some overzealous biography-reading habit he has, that my father used to hit me. He also said..."

"You'd call it hitting?" Leo interrupted. "I'd call it beating."

"Whatever." Jed waved a negligent hand in the air. "Anyway, he also went on to offer the – entirely unwanted and unasked for – opinion that my father hadn't liked me. The physical abuse..." He used the words pointedly, glaring at Leo and daring him to argue with his choice – a dare which Leo decided would be best not accepted, "...wasn't something I'd forgotten and although I didn't like Toby challenging me on the point, it was a long time ago and I think I can say categorically that I've put it behind me. What did bother me was Toby's assertion that my father hadn't liked me and the way he linked that to my performance as President. For some reason, and don't ask me why because it seems to me that this is why we're paying Stanley the big bucks, this has caused me several sleepless nights. That's about it. Over to you, Stanley. Or Leo. Or, in fact, anyone but me."

Jed settled back in his chair with the look of a man who had made his contribution to the debate and would thereafter merely be a witness. Glancing at Stanley, Leo had the distinct feeling that the psychiatrist had other ideas.

"Thank you." Stanley nodded thoughtfully. "Sir – I think there are several reasons why Toby's comment upset you so much. Are you able to pinpoint any of them?"

Jed gave an exasperated sigh. "I have no idea why we're paying you, Stanley, when I have to do all the work," he grumbled. Leo shot a firm look in his direction and Jed sighed again, but this time in a more conciliatory way. "Oh okay. Toby said...Toby's inference was that I learned as a kid that the way to get love and approval is to be unthreatening and unchallenging and that I'm – I don't know – defaulting to my childhood programming or something in the way I'm campaigning for re-election."

"Did that behaviour work for you as a child?" Stanley asked calmly. "Did being

unthreatening and unchallenging stop your father hitting you?"

"No," Jed admitted, shaking his head.

"Well then." Stanley shrugged.

"You're also crap at it," Leo interjected. "It either comes over false or it falls apart when you realise what nonsense you're spewing."

"Thank you, Leo," Jed growled. Leo rolled his eyes at him.

"Sir – I'm curious. I understand that you and Leo have been extremely close for a very long time but is there a reason why Leo is sitting here today and not your wife?" Stanley asked.

Leo glanced at Jed who glared back at him. He knew exactly why he was sitting here and not Abbey – the question was, would Jed answer Stanley's question honestly?

"I told you last night, Stanley – there's no reason to trouble Abbey with any of this," Jed said elusively.

"Yeah, there's that, and there's also the fact he never told her what happened to him as a kid," Leo interjected. Jed gave him a look that would have frozen water. Leo stared him out without any qualms whatsoever. If Jed was going to play games then let him, but Leo didn't see any reason why *he* should. "And I'm pretty sure that if I hadn't actually witnessed the abuse he wouldn't have told me either," Leo added.

"Leo!" Jed hissed.

"What?" Leo sat back with a shrug. "Let's not dick around here, Jed. You're not sleeping – and you need to be or you can't do your job properly. So let's sort it out and then Stanley can go home."

"You want to fix this just like you fix everything, Leo? Like I'm a broken car?" Jed asked fiercely. Leo considered the aptness of the analogy for the moment and then gave a faint grin.

"Yes – what's wrong with that?"

"You – interfering in my life as if I'm incapable of managing by myself!" Jed exploded.

"You're a Nobel prize winner, you're educated up the wazoo, and you're the President of the United States. So I think you manage just fine by yourself," Leo shrugged. "I also think that sometimes, with the really personal stuff, you need a helping hand."

"Like I did when we were 18?" Jed challenged, a fiery look in his eyes. Leo nodded slowly.

"Yes. Like you did back then," he agreed.

1963

Leo didn't wait long before knocking on Jed's door that evening after everyone was in bed. He knew Jed had some kind of fixation with their anniversary and after everything that had happened during the day he wanted to make sure that Jed got to celebrate at least some of the anniversary by doing something enjoyable. He knocked on his friend's door and then entered the room silently. Jed sat up in bed, a surprised look on his face.

"What?" Leo asked, slipping across the room and joining his friend in the bed.

"I didn't know if you'd be coming here tonight," Jed replied, still looking endearingly confused. "I mean...I know we talked about it earlier today in the car...but that was awhile ago, and I thought you might have changed your mind in the meantime," he muttered.

"Of course I haven't changed my mind," Leo said, frowning. "It's June 17th - I thought that was supposed to be some kind of a big deal?"

"It *is*," Jed replied. "But after all that's happened today..."

"What's changed?" Leo was surprised, but then realisation sank in; he remembered Mrs. Landingham's description of Jed as 'the boy king'. Leo wondered how it must feel to be that boy king to almost everyone who looked at you, but inside to be a beaten kid whose father punched him to the ground. What a strange double life Jed Bartlet must have led. Maybe that explained the odd duality in his personality – the shining intellect and healthy ego combined with a vulnerability that Leo personally found just as appealing. He liked both Jeds – so why was Jed assuming that Leo would be repulsed by his weak side? "Hey..." He put his arm around Jed's shoulders and kissed his friend firmly on the lips. When he drew back, he took a deep breath and launched into a speech he hadn't intended to give. "Jed, when my dad shot himself I was angry. I mean, incredibly, furiously angry – I think maybe I still am," he grimaced. Jed gazed at him, frowning slightly, clearly wondering where this was going. "I was angry with my mom, my sisters, myself, God, and, most of all, with my dad. He wasn't around to take it out on so I turned on all the others I just named, one by one. When things got really bad, I used to go out on these long bike rides for hours on end..." Leo pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, gazing at Jed thoughtfully. "I didn't want to go back, Jed," he admitted. "They all relied on me so much – my mom fell apart after Dad's suicide, and my sisters were, and still are, just little kids. I felt trapped. So, I honestly considered not going back...but I always did. I'm still furious with Dad for bailing out on us, but I'm glad I went back. I would have regretted it my whole life if I'd bailed out just like he did."

"So this is about me confronting my father?" Jed said, a note of irritability rising in his voice.

"No." Leo shook his head. "This is about me telling you that I know how hard it is," he said softly.

Jed gazed at him for a long time and then his face broke into a tentative smile. "I'm still

thinking about it," he said.

"That's fine." Leo shrugged.

"Let's not talk about it any more tonight." Jed waved his hand in the air. "It's our anniversary – and I want to spend the entire night celebrating." He gave that excitable, eager, hungry smile that always made Leo want to jump on him immediately.

"The entire night?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"We missed out last night so we have some catching up to do!" Jed proclaimed, turning in the bed and reaching for Leo. "Did you bring it? It's your turn!" He said, his hands sweeping through Leo's robe in search of the lube. Leo grinned and fought him off, but Jed was in no mood to be sidetracked and they wrestled for a couple of minutes, until Jed found the lube in Leo's robe pocket and held it aloft triumphantly, kneeling astride Leo's chest. Leo gazed up at him, panting slightly, smiling at the sight of Jed Bartlet in such an exuberant state – it was such a change to the sad, deflated boy he'd spent the day with. He knew that boy was still inside his friend, wrestling with this decision, but for now, Jed wanted a distraction from his problems and Leo was happy to be just that.

"So, how d'you want me?" Leo asked in a husky voice, reaching out to stroke Jed's ass through his pyjama bottoms. Jed frowned.

"I don't know. The same as when it was my turn?" He ventured, sounding very unsure of himself. Leo kept on stroking, wondering if this was the best time for Jed to be trying this. It had been such a difficult day for both of them, and Leo felt he would prefer to be the one making all the moves tonight. That vulnerable streak of Jed's was a mile wide right now – and if they did this and it didn't go well then Jed would only feel even worse.

"Jed – I can wait. If you'd prefer we can do what we did the other night..." Leo grinned, his hands kneading Jed's buttocks appreciatively. Jed looked very tempted and his eyes positively glowed at the memory, but he shook his head.

"Fair's fair," he said. "It's your turn, Leo."

Leo privately thought that it wasn't a matter of turns, but he was curious to discover what was so good about it that Jed had turned into a boneless mass of jello the other night, so he nodded, and removed his robe and pyjamas as swiftly as he could. Jed took off his pyjama bottoms but Leo noticed that he kept on the tee shirt he customarily wore to bed. He knew instinctively that Jed wasn't comfortable with Leo seeing his bruises but it felt like a barrier between them. Leo decided to let it go – for now – and turned over, and a few seconds later all his reservations were forgotten as Jed slipped a cool, lubed finger inside him. Leo grabbed the pillow tight, trying to become accustomed to the sensation. It wasn't unpleasant, but he had to consciously relax in order to enjoy it.

"Is that okay?" Jed asked, leaning forward to kiss Leo's shoulder.

"Mmm. Nice," Leo said, opening his legs wider to make it easier for Jed to play. Leo felt sure he wasn't as good value for money as Jed. Jed was a curiously uninhibited person in the bedroom – he just seemed to melt under Leo's touch, and he made such satisfying noises. Leo knew he could come just from the sight of a naked Jed, writhing and mewling beneath his own increasingly expert caresses. He found it less satisfying to be the one on the receiving end of all the attention. Not that he didn't enjoy it – he doubted there was any sexual activity he could do with Jed that he wouldn't enjoy – but it didn't arouse him as much. Leo closed his eyes and tried to go with the flow. Jed, anxious to get this right, played with him for a good long time before finally turning him over onto his back. Leo put his legs on Jed's shoulder and gazed up at his friend lazily. Jed's dark blue eyes were full of concentration as he devoted every single ounce of his energy and focus to this task. Leo gave a little gasp of sensation as Jed sank slowly into his body – it hurt much less than he'd expected and was really very pleasant. He relaxed even more and nodded to Jed, who gave a tight little grin and began moving inside Leo's body. Leo gave another gasp as a forward thrust sent a little fizz of pleasure through his limbs. He lay back, relaxing even more, and grinned at the sight of the earnest Jed, still clad in his tee shirt, moving back and forth, a look of total concentration on his face. Trust Jed to take this so seriously and to want to do it so well – his friend was such a perfectionist. All the same, the atmosphere was so intense you could have cut it with a knife, and after all the tensions of the day Leo felt the last thing either of them needed was for Jed to turn this into some kind of virtuoso performance – especially if for some reason the event didn't live up to his expectations; his friend would undoubtedly blame himself and take it to heart if that happened. Besides, the sight of Jed looking so incredibly serious, pushing his dark hair impatiently off his forehead as he thrust into him, tickled Leo's sense of the ridiculous and he couldn't stop himself laughing.

"What?" Jed paused.

"It's just..." Leo continued laughing, aware that Jed was frowning at him in annoyance.

"Am I doing it wrong?" Jed asked anxiously.

"No! It's great...it's just...I didn't know what to expect and you look so cute," Leo said lamely, still grinning inanely, not entirely sure why it was so funny just that it was. Jed was unable to stay straight-faced in the wake of his friend's mirth and within a few seconds he was laughing too. They giggled helplessly for a few moments before finally managing to pull themselves together for long enough to reach a climax and then Jed sank down on the bed beside him and thumped Leo on the arm by way of rebuke.

"You ruined my concentration!" He said, still laughing.

"You were concentrating way too hard for something so easy!" Leo replied between panting guffaws.

"I wanted to do it right!" Jed protested weakly.

"Oh you did it just fine!" Leo replied, and they both collapsed into a heap of sated, utterly abandoned hilarity, giggling mindlessly for several minutes.

"Seriously," Jed said a long time later, snuggling close to Leo and putting his arms around him, resting his chin on his friend's shoulder. "How was it?"

"Great," Leo murmured. "Although – I don't think I experienced it the same way you did. You went completely out of your mind and I just...I really liked it but I preferred doing it the other way."

"Me too," Jed replied simply. Leo turned to gaze at his friend in the darkness. "Not that it wasn't good – just, not *as* good," Jed clarified.

"Well that's convenient," Leo commented sleepily. He was dimly aware of Jed cleaning them both with a washcloth, and then he must have dozed off because he woke feeling stiff, his head angled to one side in the narrow bed and his feet dangling sideways over the edge. He gazed around, disoriented, and then realised that the light was on and Jed was sitting up in bed, flicking through a book.

"Hey," he said sleepily. "Whaddya doing?"

"Reading," Jed replied, rolling his eyes slightly as that much was obvious. Leo sat up, and gazed at Jed stupidly for a long moment, still half asleep.

"No...I mean...why?" Leo asked blankly. "It's..." he glanced over Jed's shoulder to the clock on his night stand. "Three thirty," he said.

"I know. I can't sleep." Jed shrugged, and then went back at his book. Leo continued to gaze at him. "What?" Jed said, looking up again. "It's no big deal. Sometimes I have trouble sleeping. It's a kind of curse. I usually just sit up and read until my eyes sting and then try again."

"Hmmm," Leo said, thinking that it was likely that Jed had a lot on his mind right now and that was probably what was keeping him up. "What are you reading?" He asked, sliding down in the bed again, nuzzling at Jed's arm as he went.

"The Illustrated Man." Jed held it up for Leo to view.

"Ray Bradbury? Is it good?"

"I love it." Jed grinned. "Here – you can have it. I've read it 9 times already so I don't need it - and I'd love to talk to you about it when you've finished it."

"Okay." Leo nodded. "But I have a much better way of curing insomnia." He placed his hand on Jed's cock and felt it spring immediately to life. Leo pulled his friend down in the bed and kissed Jed thoroughly, his hands exploring Jed's body lightly, taking care because of Jed's bruises. On that subject – Leo was determined that he was going to make love to a naked Jed. He liked it best when they were both naked and he could really get his fill of the sensation and taste of Jed's skin under his fingers and tongue. Jed began to moan as Leo

worked on him in earnest, and Leo heard the soft thump of the book sliding onto the floor as Jed abandoned himself to his friend's caresses. He kissed Jed's mouth, nibbled on his earlobes, and sucked a line down his neck, then disappeared under the sheets and took Jed's cock in his mouth. Jed gasped and bucked up into him but Leo continued on down, sucking on Jed's balls for a while before inserting a finger in his friend's ass. Jed seemed to lose all control of his legs, which kicked out exuberantly. Leo smiled to himself and worked his way up again. His lips found the hem of Jed's tee shirt and he started to nose it up his friend's body. Jed's hand came down and tugged the tee shirt back into place but Leo grasped Jed's wrist firmly and pulled the hand away.

"Leo..." Jed began, that vulnerable look returning to his eyes.

"It doesn't matter. Let it go," Leo told him. Jed gazed at him uncertainly. "Trust me," Leo said softly, and Jed hesitated for a second and then nodded. Leo pushed the tee shirt up Jed's chest, nuzzled his way gently over his friend's bruises and then found his left nipple which he took in his mouth and sucked, making Jed cry out hoarsely and grab the back of Leo's head with his hand. Leo continued his inexorable path, revelling in being close to Jed, feasting on him like a starving man. Nothing was better than this – nothing. Leo lived for this kind of experience. He adored the taste of Jed's flesh and the feel of it under his exploring fingertips, loving the way Jed moaned and pushed up against him. He took the tee shirt up to Jed's neck and then yanked it over Jed's head and, with a feeling of triumph, tossed it onto the floor. Jed reached for the lamp, which was still on, and Leo grabbed his hand and stopped him again.

"Leave it. I like looking at you," he said, in what sounded suspiciously like a purr to his own ears. Jed flushed in a way that Leo found incredibly endearing but he did as he was told anyway. Leo returned to his task. He made love to Jed more gently than he had ever done, taking care not to hurt him. He wanted Jed to know how he felt, to feel it being transmitted via his tongue and his fingertips as they roved appreciatively over his friend's body. He wanted him to know that he wasn't alone, that he had a friend and ally who would stand beside him no matter what. He thought, as he lovingly explored his friend's body, that he understood Jed more at this moment in time than any other. It was as if Jed was able to transmit some essence of his soul through their lovemaking, or Leo was best able to interpret it during sex. He understood now why Jed stood up for his father, and why challenging him was so hard for him. Jed needed to be loved – and until now, with an absentee mother and no other close adult relatives around, he had turned to his father for the love he craved – but that love came at a heavy price. It wasn't a price that Leo was going to exact; his own love came for free, and by offering it he hoped that Jed would realise that he didn't need his father's warped version any more. This time he had the real thing – someone who genuinely loved him unconditionally, and would always be here for him, wherever their lives took them.

Leo found the lube still resting on the nightstand and he smeared some liberally on his fingers and cock. He spent a long time stretching Jed into readiness and then entered him smoothly. It didn't seem like only the second time he'd done this – it felt as if he'd been doing this forever. Their bodies felt so right like this and the way Jed threw his head back and gazed at Leo made Leo think he felt that way too. Leo loved looking at Jed as he made

love to him. There was never any artifice in Jed's expression or the way he moved – when they were making love Leo felt as if he was looking straight into Jed's soul. He was completely and utterly abandoned and it aroused Leo more than ever. He took a long time, stoking Jed to climax and then drawing back when he knew his friend was on the brink – Jed's hair was now almost black with his own sweat, and his body was bathed in it, tasting salty, and feeling warm and sensuous beneath Leo's fingers. He finally put his friend out of his misery and Jed came more forcefully than Leo had ever seen him come before, and then sank down with a look of total adoration in his eyes. Leo took his own climax and then just rested on his friend, taking care not to lie on his bruised side. He was so wrung out by the intensity of their lovemaking that he almost fell asleep, but then he realised he was still buried deep inside his friend and started to withdraw – only to be stopped by Jed's fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Don't," Jed whispered. "Stay there a bit longer. I like it." Leo glanced up and met Jed's dark blue eyes. He smiled, and wrapped his arms around Jed's body, bestowing a gentle kiss on Jed's bruised flesh. They were silent for a long time, beyond words, and then finally Jed spoke.

"I'll do it, Leo," he whispered. Leo glanced up. "I'll talk to my father," Jed told him. Leo nodded, pleased that Jed had made up his mind, but aware all the same how hard this had been for his friend. He pressed another kiss on Jed's naked, sweaty torso.

"I'll be there when you do," he said.

"No," Jed replied. "I can..."

"I'll be there," Leo said firmly.

Jed thought about it for a moment and then he squeezed Leo's shoulder gently. Leo looked up and Jed nodded to him. Leo smiled back in return and then rested his face on his friend's body once more, feeling quietly satisfied. He knew that had already won Jed's heart some time ago, but now he had won something just as satisfying - he had won Jed's trust.

Chapter 8 by Xanthe

2002

Leo gazed at his friend, trying to figure out if Jed was serious or whether this was all just a ruse to throw both him and Stanley off the scent of what was *really* upsetting him and causing his sleepless nights.

"Jed, are you seriously telling me that you have a problem with what I did when we were 18 for god's sake?" He protested. "That's, like, all of 40 years ago!"

Jed glared at him. "You should never have told Mrs. Landingham," he muttered.

"Oh. Right. *Now* you finally tell me how pissed off you were about that," Leo replied with

a snort. "I thought at the time that I had it coming, but no, you had to make me wait 40 years for it."

"You shouldn't have involved her! Look how it affected her!"

"It turned out okay for her in the long run. She ended up as personal assistant to the President of the United States," Leo pointed out. "She had a great career – she loved working for you. She adored you, Jed, and you know it. She would have chosen you over being a school secretary any day. When her sons died you were the closest thing she had to a son. I think you were a great comfort to her and I don't think she'd have swapped being part of your life for anything."

"Sir – I think Leo has a good point," Stanley said. "Is this really something that's been keeping you up at night after all this time?"

Jed took a deep breath. "No. I mean...it's complicated. It's all... it's all muddled up in my head, Stanley," he said in a tone of genuine despair. "I thought it was over years ago; I honestly haven't thought about it all that much for 40 years, but then Toby said my father hit me because he didn't like me – and he called into question the way I behave now. As if my actions as President go all the way back to that time in my life and I can't accept that because if I do I start examining *everything* and I don't know where to stop. It just starts up in my head and goes on and on and on," he sighed.

"Helicopter brain," Stanley said with a little grin. Jed raised a questioning eyebrow. "That's what I call it – feels like the rotors of a helicopter are just turning and turning inside your mind and nothing switches them off."

"Yeah. That's about it." Jed gave a faint smile.

"So tell us all the various things that have been coming up for you," Stanley suggested. "It doesn't matter how disjointed they seem – let's see how they all connect."

Jed gave a deep sigh and settled back in his chair. Leo watched him, frowning. He knew Jed was genuinely struggling – and he felt helpless, at a loss as to how to fix it.

"I don't love Ellie any less than I love Zoey or Liz," Jed said.

"Right." Stanley nodded. "Who said you do?"

"It's this thing I had with Millie – Ellie's godmother - a year or so back. It's true that I've always found it hard to get close to Ellie, but I love her just as much as I love my other two girls. That's one of the things that's been troubling me lately. You asked me what's been troubling me." Jed frowned.

"Okay. Go on." Stanley nodded.

"When I was 18 I thought about becoming a priest," Jed murmured. "That's why I went to

Notre Dame."

"Okay..." Stanley looked a little bit surprised by that, but he nodded again anyway.

"Because of Leo," Jed added.

"Because of me?" Leo looked totally surprised. "I thought you were just very religious – and scared of girls." He grinned. "I thought that's why you went to Notre Dame."

"Leo – we had such an intense relationship. It knocked me sideways and I didn't know how to handle it. I thought if I became a priest I could...run away from how I felt about you," he admitted with a sigh.

"I had no idea." Leo shook his head.

"What changed your mind about becoming a priest?" Stanley asked.

"I met Abbey." Jed gave a fond little smile. "I fell for her the same way I fell for Leo. She knocked me sideways too – the other way. I was so damn relieved. When I was 18 I thought I'd never meet any girls – or any girls who'd look twice at me anyway. And I thought that even if they did, I'd never feel the same way about a girl as I did about Leo."

Leo gave a wry snort of disbelief. "I could have told you that was never gonna be a problem, Jed."

"It was okay for you – you had girlfriends. All the time as I recall," Jed growled. "You still do! Anyway, is any of this really relevant?"

"I don't know. Tell me something else that's been on your mind," Stanley suggested.

"I could have handled the problem with my father," Jed said unexpectedly. "I could have done that, Leo. Even if you hadn't shown up, I could have handled it."

"Okay." Leo felt his shoulders hunching defensively. "Jed, I couldn't stand by and just watch..."

"I can take care of myself. You don't have to fix everything for me."

"Did you two ever talk about any of this before?" Stanley asked softly. "I mean, you've been close for a long time. Do you ever talk?"

"We talk all the time!" Jed protested.

"Jed never stops talking," Leo commented dryly.

"Seriously – do you ever talk about anything like this?" Stanley asked. "Anything really personal - anything about what has gone on between you?"

Jed shrugged and exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Leo.

"We're very private people, Stanley," Leo said with a sigh. "Just talking to you is killing us. Some things are best left unsaid anyway. We've done okay – we're still friends after 40 years so we must be doing something right."

"There have been times...when Leo was in the Air Force, fighting in Vietnam, and he was having a hard time... we spent a whole day and a night talking about that. And when his drinking got out of control..." Jed shrugged again. "Well I made him talk then I guess – we argued quite a bit too as I recall." He flashed a grin at Leo who couldn't manage to return it. He still went cold at the memory of the argument they'd had about Leo's drinking back in 1993, when they'd physically fought and Leo had punched Jed in the mouth, knocking out one of his teeth. Now that they were talking about Jed's father, this all seemed too close to home.

"So, Leo's had some vulnerable moments and you've talked about those...but you prefer to deal with your own problems alone, sir," Stanley said quietly.

"We talked about this yesterday, Stanley," Jed muttered moodily.

"He didn't tell me he had MS until 2000," Leo commented.

"I found out about that around the same time you went into rehab!" Jed protested. "I didn't want you to have to handle that at such a difficult time."

"Yeah, and then seven whole years passed before *Abbey* finally told me," Leo snapped. "Not you, Jed. Abbey. If it had been up to you I still wouldn't know. Hell, if Abbey wasn't a doctor and hadn't diagnosed you herself then *she* still wouldn't know either I expect."

"I can take care of myself!" Jed protested.

"Was that what all that was about the other night when you came over?" Leo frowned. "When you kept going on and on about being able to hold your own in a fight?"

"You hated the fact that I just let my father hit me. You've always judged me for that – you don't know why I didn't stand up to him or hit him back – at least when I got older," Jed growled.

"Is that really what Leo is thinking or is it what you ask yourself sometimes, sir?" Stanley probed gently. Jed stopped short, a confused look on his face. Leo winced; Jed wasn't very good at facing up to these kinds of truths. "You know," Stanley said softly, "yesterday you were very resistant to telling me how the abuse ended and I feel that's important. It's something we keep coming back to with this theme of Leo fixing things for you. Why don't we go over that?"

Leo took a deep breath. Jed looked as if he was still reeling from the previous bolt of

enlightenment Stanley had thrown at him.

"Leo?" Stanley requested. "What happened?"

1963

Leo lay back on the blanket they had laid out in the long grass, enjoying the warmth of the bright sunshine bathing his head and shoulders. Jed was seated between his outstretched legs, his head resting in Leo's lap, and Leo was leaning back against a pile of pillows they'd brought with them. He had Jed's copy of *The Illustrated Man* in one hand, and was rifling through Jed's hair with the other, tousling it beyond all hope of redemption from anything but the most stringent hair wax.

"Leo?" Jed said, a slight tone of protest in his voice. "Could you stop mussing up my hair?"

Leo thought about it for a moment, and then grinned. "No. Sorry. I can't," he replied lazily. Life didn't get any better than this, he thought to himself. They had taken to driving out here to this idyllic hillside every day to lie in the long grass and read and talk in the glow of the sun. Occasionally things got physical but as nobody ever came by this remote area they weren't discovered. Leo didn't think there was anything nicer in the entire world than having Jed all to himself during this long summer, as they read and talked, as at home in companionable silence while they both devoured book after book as they were in the endless conversations they had about everything and anything from the books they were reading to politics to – well, just about anything else except the dark cloud that was looming over Jed. Leo hadn't pushed Jed about his father since the night of their first anniversary. Jed had said he would confront his father and that was good enough for Leo. He was slowly learning about his friend's complex and dynamic personality and how to deal with him. Jed was energising to be around but he was also prone to black moods and sleepless nights. Leo wasn't subject to such extremes of emotion himself and he found Jed endlessly fascinating; he loved the way his friend was so open in his emotions, how he liked to talk eagerly about the subjects he was interested in – and there were many of those - how he had the kind of brain that was like flypaper for every stray piece of trivia that he read – and how he liked to endlessly regale Leo with that trivia, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he did so, as if testing how long Leo would last before either deadpanning back a totally ridiculous comment, or leaping on Jed in order to shut him up more directly. Then there were his moods: Leo had noticed how Jed would sometimes say something quick or smart and then wince and clam up afterwards, as if he was listening to his father berate him for sounding too clever or showing off. All the same, being Jed he couldn't resist making those kinds of comments anyway, and sometimes they triggered off one of his morose moods, when he could either explode and say something cutting, or withdraw into himself for awhile. Leo had easily learned to deal with both these extremes; with the first kind of mood, he simply took everything Jed threw at him, and defused it with a wry shrug of his shoulders or a mild, good-natured comment that almost immediately brought Jed back down again – usually accompanied by a full apology for his outburst. Getting mad back at Jed sometimes worked – occasionally his friend needed to be told he'd gone too far - but maintaining a firm, implacable calm in the face of one of his explosions was more often the better option to Leo's mind. Jed's withdrawn moods were harder to deal with, but Leo was a patient person

and he found that just hanging around, being there for when Jed started to re-emerge from his shell, worked best. Occasionally he found he could entice Jed out with a good conversation or the offer of equally good sex, but sometimes there was nothing to be done but to wait Jed out. As he was infinitely more patient than his mercurial friend, this worked well. Leo couldn't help but think that their personalities complemented each other in many ways – there was nothing about Jed that he didn't like and he thought that was reciprocated.

At times like this, lying here with Jed seated between his legs, Leo didn't want the summer to ever end. He was looking forward to going to college but all the same, this felt like a golden time, the calm before the storm, a time that he knew he would remember forever as being the best of his life. The imminent conversation with Jed's father was the only cloud on the horizon, but, sitting out here like this, Leo could even believe that wouldn't be a problem either. He wondered whether Jed was thinking the same way – he knew his friend had far more to be troubled about on that score than he did, but he was involved, whether Jed liked it or not. Leo had been grateful for the fact that they had rarely seen Mr. Bartlet except at the dinner table. The man kept himself distant and aloof and barely seemed to trouble himself with what his eldest son was doing except to regularly remind Jed sternly that he still expected him to help out around the school even if it was the vacation. He did, however, take an interest in his younger son – Leo noticed that Jonathon Bartlet was the apple of his father's eye and he also noticed that Jed was aware of that too. He caught Jed watching his brother and father leaving for a day's outing, the kid saying something thoughtfully, in that quiet way of his to his father who was nodding, encouraging him to express himself. Jed's eyes reflected a kind of hurt, but it wasn't a hurt he would talk about, no matter how skilfully Leo probed around the subject. It was all Leo could do to be civil to Mr. Bartlet when he did see the man – he disliked him intensely, and he had to fight down the boiling anger that threatened to surface when he remembered those bruises on Jed's ribs, and the look of shame in his friend's eyes – shame for something he had no reason to be ashamed of.

Jed's father's attitude made no sense to Leo. Didn't the man see what a bright, shining son he had raised? Didn't he care? How many other kids would work so assiduously around the school just because they had promised, and because they wanted to give something back? He longed to tell the man exactly what he thought of him, but he knew this was Jed's battle and there was nothing he could do except wait until Jed was ready to fight it.

Leo tried to turn his attention back to the book; he had already read it once and was enjoying it a second time. Last year, when they had first met, Jed had lent him a pen, and this year he had given him this book – and Leo thought he might keep both. He wasn't a sentimental person, but he was someone who felt very deeply beneath that outwardly pragmatic exterior, and he liked the idea of keeping mementoes of his relationship with Jed.

He was so lost in thought, his fingers absently stroking Jed's hair, that he didn't notice his friend twisting out of his grasp and a second later Leo found himself lying gasping on his back with Jed astride his chest.

"You see it's not fair," Jed complained, tugging at as much of a handful of Leo's hair as he

could grasp. "Your hair is so damn short I can't give you any payback."

"There are other kinds of payback..." Leo grinned suggestively, and the moment Jed relaxed and grinned back, he pushed up, dislodged Jed from his position on his chest, rolled him sideways and straddled Jed in turn. Jed glowered up at him, all furious blue eyes peeping out from under those dark bangs, but Leo just laughed at him, and, grabbing hold of Jed's hair to hold him still, he went down for a long, deep kiss. Jed opened up immediately, returning the kiss with passion, but the minute Leo drew back, Jed pushed him sideways and he fell onto his back, laughing. They wrestled for several minutes, full of youthful vigour, and then, finally, the wrestling gave way to lovemaking.

It was exhilarating making love to Jed as the sun went down, bathing them both in its orange glow. Jed's golden skin was burnished in dark, erotic shades, a mix of light and shadow that intrigued and enticed Leo as he moved tirelessly over his friend's body, licking and biting and sucking and kissing until Jed was making those loud, mewling noises that Leo loved to coax from him. Jed was at his most uninhibited out here, in this hideaway, where nobody could overhear them or see them. His body was stretched out like a feast for Leo to devour and consume and they were both utterly relaxed in their enjoyment of each other. After their mutual climax, Leo wrapped the blanket they had been sitting on around their naked bodies and held Jed against his chest.

"You know...we only have another week before I leave, Jed," he murmured. "And you'll be going to college soon after that."

"I know." Jed nodded, his body stiffening under Leo's fingers.

"So..." Leo hesitated.

"I know," Jed said again. "I thought...maybe tonight," he murmured. "He's been in a good mood lately. He likes the vacation."

"Yeah." Leo grunted. "For a man who chose to educate kids for a living, he sure doesn't seem to like having them around that much."

"He gets stressed out during term," Jed shrugged. "He likes having some time to spend with Jon during the vacation." His mouth set into a hard line, betraying how upset he was by being excluded, although he didn't say anything. Leo hugged him close and brushed his lips against Jed's forehead. He didn't find it easy talking about his feelings for Jed, and he thought Jed probably felt the same way – but he knew he loved his friend deeply. He thought Jed understood that because his friend glanced up at him, and his face looked less tense than it had a few moments before – the harsh line of his mouth had softened out. He didn't say anything either – he just rested his face against Leo's chest and they stayed that way until the twilight faded into darkness.

They got dressed in silence, slung the blanket, pillows and books into the car, and then Jed drove them back to the school.

"Tonight?" Leo asked as they got out of the car. Jed's eyes looked oddly fierce – almost driven, and Leo knew he had been right not to doubt his friend's determination. As Mrs. Landingham had said – Jed knew what was the right thing to do; he had just needed some time to come to terms with having to do it.

They washed up and then went down to dinner. Mr. Bartlet and Jonathon were already seated at the table and the father gave his son a hard stare as he came in.

"You're late," he commented. "Dinner is always at the same time, every evening, Jed. There's no excuse for tardiness"

"Sorry, sir." Jed gave an apologetic smile and then glanced at Leo. "We forgot the time."

Mr. Bartlet glanced at Leo with an equally sharp stare. Leo smiled back at him mildly – he was in no way intimidated by this man. As far as he was concerned, Mr. Bartlet had lost any right to his respect when he raised his hand against his son. Mr. Bartlet frowned – up until this point he had barely noticed Leo's presence in their family unit for the past few weeks, but now he seemed to see him for the first time. Leo continued to gaze back at him steadily, not backing down, and he saw a flicker of something pass across Mr. Bartlet's eyes – he wasn't sure what it was; disquiet maybe? Or recognition? Did he have any inkling of what he and Jed had spent the past few hours doing, out there in the long grass, naked and entwined in each other's arms? Leo's gaze hardened – he wasn't ashamed of anything he did with Jed Bartlet. The only person who had any cause to be ashamed of his treatment of Jed was the man sitting so sternly at the table in front of him.

"My apologies for being late, sir. I kept Jed talking," Leo said graciously as he took his seat, but his firm gaze didn't falter. Mr. Bartlet gave a little grunt and glanced away – but Leo noticed that his eyes flickered back in his direction a couple of times.

Mr. Bartlet held forth over dinner about the coming school term and some minor headache he'd had with a delivery of books for the library. When they'd finished eating, Jonathan was sent to get ready for bed as usual, while Jed and Leo remained at the table.

"I hope you two didn't waste your day," Mr. Bartlet commented, glancing over his spectacles at Jed. "I want those old books cleared from the library to make way for the new delivery – which will be tomorrow now," he frowned.

"I did that this morning, sir," Jed told him.

"Did you do it properly?" His father asked. "It was a considerable task – it should have taken you longer than a morning."

"Leo helped me." Jed shrugged. Mr. Bartlet's gaze flickered back to Leo again, his eyes registering a degree of annoyance.

"What did you do for the rest of the day?" He asked.

"We went out for a drive. We read. That kind of stuff." Jed shrugged.

"I hope you two boys haven't been roaming the countryside getting into trouble," his father growled. "If I hear any reports..."

"We just went out and sat in a field and read and talked, sir," Leo interjected. "We didn't upset anyone."

"Hmm. I haven't forgotten the time you took my car and went on a joyride to Vermont," Mr. Bartlet said, glancing at Jed without a trace of amusement on his face.

"That was three years ago!" Jed protested. "I was just a kid then." Leo caught the slight wince his friend gave and felt his anger rising up again. He remembered the incident Mr. Bartlet was referring to because Jed had told him about it. It sounded like youthful high spirits to him, but now that he knew more about the particular family dynamic being played out here he could guess that Jed had been punished for it in his father's usual brutal way.

"You're not much more than that now," his father snapped. Jed glanced at Leo, his eyes flashing and his jaw clenching and Leo, who was becoming adept at reading his lover, recognised the signs. Jed was angry – and he was spoiling for this particular fight which had been a long time in coming.

"I'm going to college soon," Jed said a light tone. "I'm not a kid any more, Dad, so you don't have to keep treating me like one."

His father's reaction sent a shiver up Leo's spine; he turned his head, very, very slowly, and fixed Jed with a stare that was so cold the room seemed to drop a degree in temperature.

"What did you say to me?" He requested, in a low, even tone.

"I said that I'm not a kid any more and you don't have to treat me like one. I'm 18 – I'm an adult now," Jed said, his voice faltering just a little.

"An adult who pays for his own meals, hmm? Or who pays for his room?" His father asked. "Do you think you're a man Jed? That's strange – because when I look at you I see a boy – a boy who still lives under his father's roof and will do as his father says for as long as that is the case."

"I've always helped out around the school, sir. I know that I've been lucky to be educated here," Jed said, but his firm tones spoke volumes about his resolve. Leo was proud of him. "However, I'm not a kid any more. That's all I'm saying."

Mr. Bartlet considered the matter for a long time, and Leo felt the tension in the room escalate. Suddenly he could understand how it must have been for Jed all these years. Mr. Bartlet was like a spider, waiting to trap a fly in his web – waiting for Jed to say the wrong thing, to be somehow wrong-footed so that he could take out his own anger and petty resentments on his son. Leo had an image of years of this – of a young Jed standing in this

room, trying to figure out what the correct response was to stop his father from hitting him, and failing every time because there were no rules – there was just one person bullying someone young and helpless and unable to defend himself – until now. Now Jed was staking out the battlefield and making it clear that there was going to be a fight. His father couldn't be unaware of the subtext of what Jed was saying and his response was chilling. He dabbed his mouth with his napkin, and then glanced at Leo.

"You can leave," he said, as if dismissing an employee. "I want to talk to my son alone."

Leo knew exactly what that meant. He glanced at Jed who glanced back at him with alarmed eyes. Leo knew that Jed didn't think for a second that he would leave – but it was clear that now was crunch time. Now was when Jed finally made the move and stood up to his father and he was scared of that. Leo could understand why – Mr. Bartlet had a way of squeezing all the air out of the room, leaving you reeling and gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but I'm staying."

Mr. Bartlet's eyes flashed angrily, and Leo found himself on the receiving end of the man's considerable force of personality. This was a man who had been used to dealing with boys all his career – he was used to them obeying him, and he was used to exerting his own authority to make that happen. Leo clenched his fists, remembering Jed's bruises. This was a man also who had abused that authority and now it was time to call him on that.

"Get out!" The words were hissed in barely more than a whisper but they made both Leo and Jed jump. Leo felt his anger rising – he didn't like being bullied.

"Why? So you can beat your son without any witnesses being present?" He asked in a dangerous tone.

Now it was out in the open – and the silence was electric. Mr. Bartlet looked as if he wanted to strike Leo down where he sat, but instead his anger turned, as Leo suspected it generally did, towards his son.

"What have you been saying, Jed? Have you mislead this boy?" He snapped, getting to his feet and towering over his diminutive son. Leo got to his feet as well, and then, more slowly, Jed followed suit, his jaw set in an obstinate line.

"I haven't mislead him, no," Jed said firmly. "I told him exactly what happened last time you sent him out of the room."

A mixture of emotions passed over Mr. Bartlet's face – shock, anger, and fear – but then his features settled into grim lines and his entire body became consumed by a kind of icy fury. "It isn't any of his business how I choose to discipline my son," he snapped.

"That wasn't discipline – that was a beating," Leo replied angrily. "And what the hell did he need to be disciplined for anyway? For disagreeing with you?"

"Leo." Jed's voice punctured his rage and he subsided. This was Jed's fight and he knew that his friend could handle it all by himself – he was just so enraged that he was finding it hard to stay quiet. "Dad – it has to end. Like I said, I'm 18 now, I've left school. I'll be going to college very soon. You don't get to hit me again," Jed said unflinchingly. Leo was full of admiration for him – Jed was being nothing less than magnificent. He knew how hard this was for his friend, but Jed wasn't shying away from anything that needed to be said.

"Don't you **dare** give me orders, Jed!" His father said in a harsh, icily furious voice. "Don't you dare tell me what I can and can't do under my roof. You're my son and if I think you need to be disciplined then that's what I'll do. I don't care how old you are!"

"No. You won't," Jed said slowly, firmly. "You won't because I won't let you any more, Dad. Don't try and hit me again – because next time I might just decide to fight back. And I won't stay quiet either – I'll make sure that people know what happens when you lock the door."

Mr. Bartlet was quivering now, his entire body shaking with silent anger at his son's words.

"I don't take kindly to being **threatened** in my own home," he hissed.

"It isn't a threat, Dad. I mean it. You don't get to hit me again and when I'm at college you'd better not turn on Jon either."

Mr. Bartlet's reaction to that comment was so unexpected that neither of them saw it coming. His hand flashed out as fast as quicksilver and caught Jed a savage blow on the side of his face, only just missing his right eye, every ounce of the man's barely controlled anger packed into the blow.

Jed reeled back, clutching his face; he clattered into the chair and only just managed to stay on his feet. His father went after him, sensing weakness, his fist raised, and Leo was barely conscious of what he did next: he just knew that he had to get to Jed and his anger lent him both speed and strength. He vaulted the table, and grabbed Mr. Bartlet by the shoulder. The man was both taller and broader than Leo but Leo knew how to handle himself. Mr. Bartlet threw him off but Leo went back at him like a terrier. He saw Jed putting up his hands to protect himself from another vicious punch, and threw himself in the path of the blow, pushing Jed out of the way. He felt a sharp pain as his lip split and tasted warm, salty blood on his tongue as the blow meant for Jed made contact with his own mouth instead. He caught a glimpse of Jed, blood oozing from a cut under his eye and, in a fit of total rage, Leo turned and swung his fist back hard in Mr. Bartlet's direction. The man staggered back, taken by surprise, and Leo was pleased to see that his fist had connected resoundingly with his jaw.

"You little thug!" the man hissed. "How dare you!"

"How dare you?!" Leo shouted back, outraged. "How dare you lay a finger on Jed!"

"He's my son!" Mr. Bartlet growled, as if that made it all right. "He's my duty, my responsibility and I will treat him how I like."

"Well he's mine now so don't you dare hit him ever again or I'll happily take another swing at you and I swear I'll give you back every bruise you ever gave him and more," Leo growled. He wasn't even aware of what he was saying but the stunned reaction to his words brought him up short.

"What do you mean, he's yours?" Mr. Bartlet said. "What kind of filthy, disgusting things have you two been...Jed?" He broke off in disbelief, and took a step towards his son. Jed just gazed at him, utterly stupefied by the sudden turn of events. Leo stepped smoothly between father and son, shielding Jed with his own body.

"I mean that you don't have any control over him any more. He's not yours to bully any more," Leo hissed. "If you touch him one more time then I swear I'll break you in two."

"Have you two been...under my roof?" Mr. Bartlet looked as if he was going to either explode or expire. At least that icy fury had gone, to be replaced by a mixture of disgust and bewilderment.

"Dad...it isn't..." Jed paused, clearly unsure what to say.

"Are you denying that you and this boy haven't been engaging in immoral acts together? Hmm?" Mr. Bartlet snarled.

"It isn't like that," Jed whispered. "Dad..." He reached out a beseeching hand which his father ignored.

"Get out! Get out of my house!" Mr. Bartlet snapped. "Both of you. Now!"

Jed looked at his father and then at Leo and then turned and fled from the room. Leo gazed after him, torn between following his friend and finally having the chance to say everything he'd been dying to say to Mr. Bartlet from the moment he had seen those bruises on his friend's body. He shot the man a furious glance, and was surprised to see his eyes flash with genuine alarm in response – Mr. Bartlet clearly knew that he couldn't harass, intimidate and manipulate Leo McGarry with impunity the way he had his own son. Leo had been in a few fistfights in his time and knew how to handle himself against opponents much tougher than Jed's father. He took a step forward, and Mr. Bartlet took a small step back. Leo was tempted – but, in the end, his concern for his friend won out. Whatever he wanted to say to Mr. Bartlet could wait; Jed was more important right now. Leo took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"I meant what I said. Don't ever touch him again or I will come after you," he said in a low, hard tone, and then he left too.

2002

Jed gazed at his hands, wondering why he couldn't keep them still. God how he hated this! He hated listening to Leo recount what had happened, hated reliving that fateful evening.

They had never talked about it – although Leo had certainly tried a few times, but Jed felt as if he was still numb with shock and he'd put the whole memory in the box, along with all the other things he didn't like thinking about, and buried it deep. Now it was resurfacing, and he was astonished by how raw it felt. This - *this* - was why it wasn't a good idea to see a shrink. This was why it was better to let the past stay buried. If only he'd been able to sleep then none of this would have happened.

"Sir?" Stanley was gazing at him questioningly and he realised that he'd said at least some of what he had been thinking out loud.

"I'm just saying that if only I'd been able to sleep – or at least to stop Leo finding out that I wasn't sleeping - then we wouldn't need to be going through all this right now," he snapped.

"And if you weren't President we wouldn't need to be going through all this right now, and if it hadn't actually happened you wouldn't need to be going through all this right now," Leo commented pragmatically. "It did happen, Jed, and you not sleeping is the symptom, not the cause."

"Hell of a way to be outed to your father," Jed muttered.

"I'm sorry." Leo exhaled a long sigh. "For what it's worth I honestly didn't know that was what I'd done – to this day I'm not even sure what exactly I said."

"You said enough," Jed snapped.

"Were you ever reconciled with your father?" Stanley asked, his mild tones breaking through the tense atmosphere.

"Sure – on my wedding day. The look of relief in his eyes was almost palpable," Jed commented sourly.

"He spent most of the day glaring at me – wouldn't shake my hand and I was the best man," Leo said.

"Well I don't know what you expected," Jed growled.

"Maybe that you wouldn't be so eager to be reconciled with a man who beat you for a huge chunk of your childhood," Leo said angrily. "Maybe for you to give him a hard time instead of just welcoming him back into your life as if he'd done nothing wrong."

"He was my father," Jed said helplessly. "I loved him."

"And you always wanted him to love you in return even though that was never going to happen, and, like the perfectionist you are, you couldn't stop trying, even though the man didn't deserve it," Leo said heatedly. "God I hated the way you'd try and please him."

"It's well known that children with harsh or distant fathers often turn into perfectionists –

they're trying to find a way of pleasing someone who is fundamentally impossible to please," Stanley told them, his calm tones defusing the heated atmosphere once more.

"Leo's a perfectionist too," Jed commented, glaring at his old friend. Leo shrugged.

"I don't beat myself up endlessly about not getting things right the way you do - and you know I didn't have the best relationship with my own father. There had to be some reason why you and I hit the ground running the moment we met. Our difficult relationship with our fathers was part of the attraction we held for each other, Jed. We might not have known it back then but it was."

Jed frowned – it suddenly occurred to him that Leo had given this some thought and he wondered what other startling conclusions his friend had come to. Jed had always been so eager not to talk about anything that might require him to dig up his buried box that it struck him that maybe he'd missed out on a good deal of Leo's thoughtful insights along the way and he regretted that. Stanley was right – he'd often probed away at Leo's weak points but never liked to reciprocate. He expected to share in Leo's life – in both the good times and the bad – but he always refused to share his own bad times in return.

"We shouldn't talk about your father. I knew this was a mistake," Leo growled. Stanley glanced thoughtfully at him and he shrugged. "He says I get angry when we talk about what happened back then," he explained.

"And do you?" Stanley asked.

Leo shrugged again. "Yeah. I do," he said.

"Why?"

"Not for the reason he thinks," Leo snapped. "Not because I think he should have stood up to the man when he was a kid – Christ, I saw the way Jed was treated and this had been going on for years before I got involved, remember. I don't know how he could have handled it any better than he did. No, I get angry because he always stands up for his father. He never condemns the man. He keeps telling me that I don't understand. Well, maybe I don't."

"I told you - he was my father and I loved him. Our relationship wasn't just about him hitting me," Jed said in a heated tone.

"I wouldn't have taken his hand at your wedding even if he'd offered it to me," Leo retorted. "I don't know how you could after all that happened. It wasn't just that you shook his hand - you acted like you were grateful that he deigned to accept you as his son again. You let him back into your life as if he never beat you for all those years."

"You think that because someone hit me I can't love them?" Jed threw at him. "Because if that were so then we wouldn't be sitting here today, would we, Leo?"

Leo went very still and made no effort to reply. Jed bit on his lip, wishing he hadn't said it but not wishing it unsaid all the same. He didn't want to hurt Leo - he didn't really blame him for any of this, but he needed to lash out at someone right now and Leo was nearest. Stanley gazed from one to the other, seeking explanation. Jed got up and poured himself a glass of water. This was Leo's secret. He could explain or not explain but Jed wouldn't be the one to reveal it. Leo glanced up at him, took a deep breath, and then shrugged.

"It was 1993, Stanley. I was drunk off my ass. Jed was calling me on my liquor problem – he tried to stop me from leaving and I hit him."

"Broke my tooth," Jed added.

"And the next day I went into rehab as a result," Leo added. "Nothing excuses it – Jed knows how I feel about it though because I've apologised enough. Does the reason we're here today really have anything to do with 1993, Jed?" he asked despairingly.

Jed sighed. "No. It doesn't. Leo – I don't blame you for that – I didn't even blame you for it at the time. We were both angry and we both lost our tempers; it wasn't even a proper fight, Stanley – more of a scuffle. I started it anyway – I was pushing Leo around and he was just trying to shove me away. I haven't been harbouring any resentment about it," he shrugged.

"So why the hell are we fighting?" Leo asked.

"I don't know. I guess...I guess I've been thinking about the reasons why people do things," Jed said. Both Leo and Stanley gazed at him in surprise, clearly wondering where the hell this was going. Jed wasn't sure he knew himself. There was a long silence.

"Sir?" Stanley prompted.

"Nothing." Jed shrugged.

"The reasons people do things?" Stanley nudged.

"It's nothing...just maybe, if you were feeling guilty about something...maybe you might..." Jed shrugged. "If you'd done something that you hated, something that made you furious when someone else did it, and if you wanted to do make some kind of recompense..." He paused again. "Leo's a fixer. What would be the one thing he could do to make things up to me for what happened that night in '93?" He asked.

Leo opened his mouth wordlessly. Stanley looked slightly stunned.

"Jed - no," Leo managed to choke out. Jed swung around and gazed at him.

"Truthfully, Leo? Are you truthfully saying you didn't come to visit me that day in New Hampshire to persuade me to run for President, that you didn't facilitate that campaign and work so hard at to get me to the White House because you didn't feel the most monumental guilt about what happened that night?"

Leo was staring at him and Jed found himself swallowing down the lump that had arisen in his throat. It occurred to him that maybe far too much had been going on in his mind over the past few days, not all of it very healthy.

"Jed...I don't know what to say," Leo managed at last, shaking his head wearily. "That isn't why I came to you in New Hampshire. It isn't why I asked you to run for President. It isn't why I helped you get here. I did all those things because I believed in you and because I thought you were the best man for the job. I still do. Totally and absolutely." He gave a faint smile. "Even after you made me sit through this torture tonight."

Jed gave a wry grunt, and smiled back at his friend. "It wasn't the same thing at all as what happened with my father – it was nothing more than a stupid quarrel that got physical because we were both trying to push each other around - but as we've never talked about what happened with my father since that night – or at least we haven't talked without it ending in an argument - I didn't know what you might be thinking about it," he sighed.

"Sir – I think this is all interconnected," Stanley said.

"Why am I not surprised? Well, go on, Stanley." Jed waved his hand around wearily. "Stun us with your amazing psychiatric insights so that when I write you that huge cheque I feel the warm glow of it having been money well spent."

"Sir, we talked earlier about how you projected thoughts onto Leo that he wasn't in fact thinking."

"And I'm doing the same now?"

"Yes, sir." Stanley nodded. "It seems astonishing that you and Leo haven't talked about that time in your life for 40 years. It's allowed you to create a whole catalogue of things that Leo is thinking and feeling but without ever checking in with him about it you could find you're way off base on a lot of them."

"I suppose so," Jed muttered, throwing an apologetic glance in Leo's direction.

"Sir, we all act a certain way because of our personalities and because of the way we were raised – you **do** retain a legacy of those years when your father hit you. You are the product of that but you're also the product of so much more, including your long relationship with Leo. While your relationship with your father had many abusive elements, your relationship with Leo seems to have gone some way to repairing that damage. If it hadn't then I don't think you and he would still be close after 40 years. Leo, as you have pointed out, likes to fix things..."

"And you think he's fixed me?" Jed glanced at his old friend with a wry smile. Leo shook his head, and smiled back, the lost, wary look receding from his eyes.

"I think that it's possible he's helped to heal a part of yourself that you wouldn't even

recognise as being wounded," Stanley said with a nod.

"By telling Mrs Landingham what was happening? By helping me stand up to my father?" Jed frowned, trying to understand what Stanley was telling him.

"Well, I think both of those things needed to happen, yes," Stanley replied. "But I was referring more to the fact that Leo made you feel loved and it was only because of that that you were able to finally confront your father. Up until that point you wanted your father's love too much to alienate him. Leo changed that dynamic so that everything else was able to change as well. I know you feel that events slipped out of your hands, but it seems to me that between you, even as young as you both were, you managed to achieve not only what you set out to do but also the best outcome that was available to you."

"What was that?" Jed frowned.

"You stopped your father beating you. He never beat you again," Stanley said softly.

Jed shook his head, a little smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah. I forgot that in all the other stuff that was going on. I forgot. We did do that."

"It was a confusing time for you – your feelings for Leo were so strong that you even considered becoming a priest, you were upset that your father loved your brother more than he loved you – which is why your relationship with Ellie has been on your mind so much lately - and you were trying to find ways to rationalise your father beating you - because he did beat you, sir. From everything you've said and everything Leo has said, your father beat you. Maybe you need to admit that to yourself as well – he beat you because he didn't like you and nothing you've ever done since would make him like you, including becoming President."

"Yeah. I guess," Jed sighed. "But Stanley, you haven't answered the one question I really need answering: why can't I sleep?"

Stanley shook his head and sat back in his chair again. "You really don't know?" He said.

"No." Jed frowned. "I mean we've talked about a lot of stuff – but I don't know what the answer is."

"That's because there isn't one answer, sir," Stanley told him. "There are several. Toby's comment had a domino effect on you – setting off a chain reaction of doubts and worries. There's no doubt you buried your unhappiness about your father's treatment of you – you let him back into your life without further comment on the subject and you didn't even tell your wife about it. You preferred to believe it hadn't happened and for a long time you were very successful at that. I mean, yes, you knew on some level that he used to hit you but you smoothed it out in your mind to such an extent that you managed to convince yourself that it wasn't all that serious – until Toby reminded you that it hadn't just been the case of a stray slap here or there and of course Leo is always on hand to testify to that fact – something that makes you profoundly uncomfortable because if Leo knows what happens,

you can't deny it to yourself. That's why the subject has become a no-go area between you, triggering arguments whenever it's raised, because he knows the truth and you don't want to be reminded of it, sir."

Jed glanced at Leo, who gave him a rueful smile in return.

"Maybe if Leo had accepted that you loved your father despite the way he treated you, you might have been able to talk to him more about this and you could have turned to him earlier about your sleepless nights, but, as you've clearly demonstrated today, this is a really tense subject for you both. Maybe you need to finally talk about it – honestly and without the recriminations. Leo – maybe you have to accept that it's okay for the President to have loved his father and sir, maybe you have to accept that Leo knows the truth about what happened back then and not the spin you put on it."

Stanley gazed from one to the other, and Jed felt like a kid being asked to make up with an opponent after a schoolyard fight – only he didn't really feel angry with Leo. He had felt tired and confused and Leo had just been the nearest person to lash out at. He shot Leo a wry smile, which his friend returned.

"There's more," Stanley continued.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"As a kid you were honestly puzzled by how all the good things you did were always outweighed in your father's eyes by some wrong you didn't even know you were committing and as an adult I'm guessing that you've agonised about why all the good things you've done as President have been outweighed by the other stuff – such as the MS incident."

Jed's head shot up in surprise at that comment but Stanley barely missed a beat.

"And just as trying to figure out how to please your father was doomed to failure, trying to figure out how to please every voter and watering yourself down in order to do that is doomed to failure. Toby told you that your father punched because he didn't like you," Stanley continued. "That was what's really been bothering you, sir; he didn't like you. So you've been going back, going over that whole time over and over again in your mind, trying to figure out why he didn't like you. You loved him – that's understandable –" he shot a look in Leo's direction, "and he didn't like you. You've started wondering if he even loved you. That's something you've never really faced, sir. Not until now, anyway."

Jed gazed at the carpet, a weary sense of resignation settling into the pit of his stomach. "Yeah," he said at last.

"You tried to blame Leo – he was the one who revealed the relationship you were having to your father after all – but that didn't quite work, did it, sir?" Stanley shook his head. "Your father was hitting you long before Leo came along. Leo just made it stop – and so you moved on to the next thing that was bothering you; could you have made it stop without

Leo's help? That's a great big 'if' – you have no way of knowing the answer to that question so there's no point going around and around in circles on it. You turned it into an issue of strength – were you strong enough to end the abuse without Leo's help? Were you strong enough to become President without Leo's help? You don't like seeing yourself as weak, sir – and you've started to wonder just how strong you'd be without Leo by your side."

"I still don't know the answer to that," Jed commented wryly, glancing at Leo again. Leo was saying nothing, his hands neatly folded in his lap as he listened intently to what Stanley had to say. Jed wondered how much of this Leo had figured out already – and also whether he would have heard any of this coming from Leo, or whether it had needed to be someone else, someone dispassionate, someone he would listen to without his own emotions getting in the way.

"What's wrong with needing help?" Stanley asked mildly. "We all do occasionally. There's no shame in it and at least you have people around you whose judgement you trust. But can you see that once you started asking yourself all these questions there was no stopping them? Everything that you ever doubted about yourself, everything you ever pushed down and ignored, started to rise up and preoccupy you. You worried about your own performance as a father – worried that you might be repeating a pattern, that subconsciously you were favouring your other daughters at Ellie's expense, the way your father did with your brother. Then there was your concern about the election – about how you softened yourself on certain issues, wanting to please people, and you asked yourself if you were doing that because of what happened with your father, because of your attempts to appease him all those years ago, to stop him hitting you. Like I said – a domino effect: you stopped believing in your own judgement on many different levels, sir."

"I suppose so," Jed sighed. "I had no idea it was so complex though."

Stanley smiled. "Sometimes the answers are simple – but you're not a simple man, sir, and you don't have a simple job. Now, there's still quite a bit of work that we can do around these issues, but I think that for tonight we've done enough," Stanley said, standing up. Jed glanced at his watch to find that it was, much to his own surprise, nearly midnight - he had no idea that it was so late.

Leo walked Stanley over to the door, showed him out, and then shut the door behind him, and, with a thoughtful glance in Jed's direction, locked it, and put the chain across as well.

He leaned back against the door and stayed there, still looking at Jed. Jed avoided his gaze for a long time and then, finally, looked up.

"So," Leo commented wearily. "That was enlightening."

"I'm sorry, Leo," Jed said with a heavy sigh.

"For what?" Leo pushed himself away from the door and walked back towards him.

"I don't know but I'm sure there's something I should apologise for," Jed replied with a

rueful smile. "For trying to pin some of the blame for how I was feeling on you, I guess." Leo sighed and placed his arms on the back of Jed's armchair. His fingers came to rest, almost absently, in Jed's hair, stroking gently. It was an old, familiar caress but it warmed Jed through and through.

"Jed, I didn't help you become President out of guilt," Leo said.

"No," Jed agreed. "That was dumb of me." He glanced up and studied his friend upside down.

"Yes it was," Leo said.

"What do you think of Stanley?" Jed asked. "Is he right?"

"If he isn't then I'm sure you'll tell him," Leo said, still gazing down at his friend.

"Yeah – but what do you think about all this stuff he's dredged up?"

Leo paused for a moment, thinking about it. "I think you first starting running for the White House the day you stood up to your father in 1963," he said finally.

"I don't think I'd have done that if it hadn't been for you," Jed replied softly. "My life could have turned out so differently without you in it, Leo."

"Mine too." Leo shrugged.

"Then it's a good thing we met," Jed murmured.

"Yeah." Leo's fingers continued caressing his hair. "You okay?" He asked gently. Jed thought about it for a moment, and then nodded.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm pretty tired though."

Leo gave a little smile. "Want to stay the night?"

Jed nodded, suddenly feeling too exhausted to even consider riding home in the car and getting out and into the Residence at the other end. It was warm in here, and Leo was here. That was all he needed right now. He couldn't believe how weary he was – he had been wrestling with all these problems alone in his head for the past few days but somehow talking about them, letting out some of the emotion, had released something inside and he felt better than he had at any point since the Iowa Caucus.

They got undressed slowly, tiredly, and then fell into bed. Leo slung one arm across Jed's thigh and Jed closed his eyes, wondering if sleep would come. He was so tired he could weep.

"A priest huh?" Leo commented behind him. Jed smiled to himself.

"Yeah. What? You don't think I'd have made a good priest?"

"I think you'd have been good at whatever you chose to do," Leo replied, his hand stroking Jed's leg gently. "You'd have been a good priest, Jed, but you're a great President. The church's loss is the country's gain."

"I should have told you at the time. I'm sorry, Leo. Stanley was right. I badger and pester away at you to get you to share whatever's troubling you, but I don't give that back in return – not the really important stuff anyway. Stanley said...I don't like being weak because it reminds me how I felt when I was a kid and my father was beating me." Jed stopped short – there, he'd said it; he'd used the word he'd been resisting for so long: His father beat him. He was surprised to find that he didn't feel anything except a resigned kind of sadness. It had been such a long time ago and he'd had Leo and Abbey since then. It was almost as if God had rewarded him for suffering that abusive relationship with his father by giving him not just one but two people who would love and care for him and be with him for the rest of his life.

"I know. I knew that when we were 18," Leo said softly.

Jed grunted. Somehow that didn't surprise him. Leo and Abbey – between them they saw through all the barriers he put up, even when he thought he had them fooled. They both knew him so much better than he had thought he'd allowed himself to be known. Even Mrs. Landingham had always been able to see right through him. He was lucky to have always had such good people around him.

"Mrs. Landingham said my father was a prick who didn't like the fact that his brothers were smarter than he was," Jed murmured.

"When did she say that?" Leo asked. "It doesn't sound like her. I mean – it kind of does but I can't imagine her using the word 'prick'." He gave a snort.

"It was in the Oval Office...it was just after she died," Jed replied. "I had this long conversation with her."

"Okay, you have to tell Stanley about the whole talking to ghosts thing too," Leo commented.

"I will. That was definitely what she said though. I was surprised too but I figured that maybe being dead had played havoc with her sense of propriety. She knew about us, right?"

Leo gave a low chuckle. "Yeah. She knew. She didn't ask and we didn't tell, but she knew."

"I miss her," Jed sighed.

"Me too," Leo agreed. "Me too. She didn't let you down when you needed her."

Jed closed his eyes. "I know. I never forgot that," he whispered.

Chapter 9 by Xanthe

1963

Jed sat on the bed, physically shaking. He had no idea what was happening – it had all been so fast. A few seconds later Leo appeared in the doorway. He was breathing heavily and there was blood on his chin and shirt.

"Jed. Come on," he said, glancing around the room.

"What happened down there, Leo?" Jed whispered. "Did he tell me to leave? Where the hell am I going to go?"

"To Mrs. Landingham," Leo told him, opening his closet door and grabbing some clothes.

"I can't...I can't involve her in this," Jed said, shaking his head vehemently. Leo stopped what he was doing, dropped the clothes on the bed, and knelt down in front of his friend, resting his hands on Jed's knees.

"Sometimes you have to let people help you, Jed," Leo said urgently. "Mrs. Landingham wants to help and we have to go to her."

"Supposing she doesn't believe us?" Jed said, still shaking, unable to accept that his entire life had come crashing down around him like this.

"Jed – take a look in the mirror." Leo grabbed Jed's hands, pulled him bodily off the bed, and led him over to the mirror on the dresser. Jed gazed at himself blankly for a long time, before finally registering what Leo wanted him to see; there was a cut just to the side of his eye which must have been caused by his father's ring, and the skin around it was already starting to swell and bruise. "You'll have a black eye by tomorrow but she'd believe you anyway, just because you're you," Leo said. "Come on, Jed. Let's go. I don't want another showdown with your father this evening."

He bundled Jed's clothing into a bag, and then disappeared across the hallway to retrieve his own belongings. He returned and grabbed Jed's arm, propelling him down the hallway. Jed went, in a daze. He still wasn't sure that this was actually happening to him.

"Leo – I need to go back. I need to talk to him," he said, despairingly. This wasn't a price he was sure he wanted to pay – estrangement from his father hadn't been in the equation...he realised that he had wanted an ideal outcome that involved his father listening to him with a new respect and agreeing to stop hitting him. He hadn't prepared himself for this – and yet, subconsciously, what was happening now was the exact reason why he hadn't done this before. He hadn't wanted to know his father thought so little of him that he would tell him to leave. It hurt somewhere deep inside in a way he didn't want to face up to. He pushed

the hurt down – he'd deal with it another time, but not now.

"He won't talk to you right now, Jed – but he might come around if you put some distance between you," Leo told him as they ran out of the house and into the night. Jed knew his friend was right - all he could do right now was to rely on Leo and hope that everything would turn out for the best. Mrs. Landingham didn't live very far away and within ten minutes they arrived panting on her doorstep. A puzzled looking man opened the door to Leo's loud, urgent knock.

"Mr. Landingham?" Leo looked at Jed uncertainly. Mrs. Landingham's husband recognised Jed and his eyes widened in shock - he opened the door, and invited them into the house, calling for his wife.

"What's all the noise about? What's going...?" Mrs. Landingham appeared in the hallway – and then stopped short. She took one look at them and ushered them both into the living room without another word. She wasn't the kind of woman to waste breath on requests for information when there was clearly work to be done, and instead sat them both down on the couch in her living room and disappeared - to return a few moments later with a bowl of warm water, a medicine box, and two cups of hot, sweet tea. She sat down beside Jed, took his face wordlessly in her hands and dabbed at his eye with a cotton ball soaked in the water. Jed knew he was still shaking, but she didn't say a word about that - she just continued bathing his eye until all the crusted blood had gone, and then examined the wound thoughtfully.

"I think you'll need a couple of stitches in that, Jed," she told him. "I'll call the doctor."

"I don't want..." Jed felt himself flushing with shame. "I don't want anyone to know," he muttered.

"Let's leave it – see how it is in the morning, Mrs. Landingham," Leo suggested. "It's been one hell of a night and I think Jed's had enough. Can we stay here for a few days? Would that be okay?"

"I wouldn't hear of you going anywhere else," Mrs Landingham said firmly, glancing at her husband who was standing in the doorway, surveying the scene with a grim look in his eyes. Jed swallowed hard, feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude towards them both.

"Mr. Landingham, I'm sorry..." he began, wondering if the man was resenting their intrusion.

"It's fine, Jed," Mr. Landingham interrupted him. "Dolores speaks for us both. You're welcome here. We have boys of our own and..." An expression of disgust and sadness passed over his face as he surveyed Jed's cut eye. "I'll leave you to talk," he said softly. "I want to check on the twins."

He left the room abruptly, visibly trying to hold his emotions in check. Jed had met the Landingham twins – they were a few years younger than him so they weren't close friends, but they were lively, energetic boys and he liked them. Mr. Landingham was a quiet, softly

spoken man and his wife had clearly told him what was happening in the Bartlet household. Jed felt guilty for crashing in here like this, intruding on this family, but utterly grateful to them for being so kind and understanding.

"Thank you," he whispered to Mrs. Landingham in a croaky tone, and, much to his surprise, that no-nonsense demeanour of hers cracked for just a moment, and she put her arm around his shoulder and squeezed before releasing him and turning briskly to Leo. She bathed Leo's split lip and bruised knuckles and then sat back and surveyed them both with a slight shake of her head. Her jaw was set in a firm line and she looked like someone you really didn't want to mess with.

"I was worried something like this would happen," she said. "Now you two just stay here. I'll get you some blankets and pillows – and don't worry, Jed," she told him firmly. "We'll figure something out. I promise."

Jed wasn't sure he slept at all that night. He felt sick inside, and his head was pounding in time to the throbbing of his eye. Occasionally he glanced over at Leo, sleeping on the floor beside the couch, and wondered what the hell they had done. A small part of him blamed Leo for this getting so out of control, but, if he was honest with himself, he knew that this had always been the most likely outcome; Leo had just been the catalyst, and probably a very necessary catalyst at that.

Jed tried to pray, but the words were just a jumble in his mind. He wanted to hold onto his religion, but how could he stand before God knowing what he and Leo had done together? Was he being punished somehow for his relationship with Leo? Was that why this had happened? A small, logical voice in his head told him that his father had been hitting him for years before he had even met Leo, but he was too tired and wrung out to listen to logic. He wondered if he became a priest, whether all this inner turmoil would go away. The church seemed like a sanctuary, a refuge, a place to escape from his feelings – but shouldn't it be a place you went to, and embraced, because it was where your heart was, not somewhere you ran to in order to escape from your heart? Jed turned over and gazed at Leo again; could he give him up? Would going into the church somehow 'cure' him of his infatuation with this stocky, blond-haired boy with the firm jaw, sharp blue eyes, quick wit, calm good humour, and impish smile? Jed closed his eyes, longing for sleep as another form of escape from the turmoil of his own mind. He had no answers – everything was too confused.

Mrs. Landingham was her usual organised self the next day – she sent her husband off with the twins and then turned her attention to her unexpected guests. She fed them, washed their blood-stained clothes, and then insisted that a doctor take a look at Jed's eye – as she had suspected, a couple of stitches were required. Jed had the impression that she'd already made some phone calls because she had a very fixed and determined look in her eyes – it was pretty similar to the way Leo looked sometimes and he had the distinct impression that the two of them were managing him in a way that he probably needed right now, however much it annoyed him. It was nearly midday when there was a knock on the door. Jed tensed, and Leo exchanged a glance with Mrs. Landingham. Jed had the distinct feeling that they knew something he didn't. Mrs. Landingham got up and went to answer the door, and Jed froze when he heard his father's cold tones.

"Don't worry about it," Leo said softly.

"Dolores – is my son here?" Jed heard his father ask.

"Yes, sir, he is," came Mrs. Landingham's reply.

"I would like to see him."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

Jed got up and Leo put a warning hand on his arm. Jed shook his head.

"This is my battle. I'm not leaving her to fight it," he said. Leo thought about it for a moment, and then nodded and got to his feet as well.

"How dare you...?" his father was saying as Jed and Leo emerged into the hallway. Mr. Bartlet caught sight of Jed over Mrs. Landingham's shoulder and glared at him. Jed noticed that his father had a distinct bruise on his jaw and glanced sideways at Leo who had a quietly satisfied look on his face. "I'm taking you home. You've caused enough trouble, Josiah," his father snapped.

"I'm not going back with you," Jed said, wishing his father could have looked as if he cared about him, even a little bit - as if this wasn't just a question of his hurt pride and wanting to keep this from getting out and ruining his reputation and that of his school. If his father had just looked as if he was sorry, as if he regretted what he'd done – if he'd just once asked about Jed's eye and if he was okay, then Jed knew he would have returned with him, but that didn't happen, and for the first time in his life Jed faced up to the fact that it never would. He had often fantasised about his father coming to his room after a beating and asking if he was all right. In his fantasy his father asked for forgiveness - which Jed gave all too readily, and then everything was okay between them– but this was reality and it had a different ending.

"You can't stay here," his father snapped.

"Yes, he can," Mrs. Landingham replied.

"You have no idea what these two..." His father shot Leo a vicious glare and Jed held his breath. He didn't know what Mrs. Landingham's reaction would be to learning of his relationship with Leo and he couldn't face her rejection.

"I know you beat your son and I know you've been beating him for a long time and that's all I need to know," Mrs. Landingham said sharply.

There was silence for a moment, and Jed saw his father's face harden.

"If you tell anyone about this..." he hissed.

"Don't threaten me, sir," Mrs. Landingham said firmly. "And don't you dare threaten this boy either. He's been through enough. Now, he's staying here until he goes to college whether you like it or not."

"Fine. Let him stay." His father shot an icy stare at Jed. "But don't bother coming to work on Monday morning, Dolores, because clearly that would be an intolerable situation for both of us. I'll make sure that you receive adequate references, and you'll be paid to the end of the month." And with that, he turned on his heel, and left.

Jed watched him go. He was dimly aware of Leo's hand coming to rest comfortably on the back of his neck but it hurt so much that he could scarcely breathe; his father hadn't even tried to fight for him – but that was nothing compared to what he'd just done to Mrs. Landingham.

"This isn't worth losing your job over," he told her. "I didn't mean to cause this kind of trouble for you. I'll go after him..."

"Don't you dare, Jed Bartlet!" She told him sharply. "You'll stay right here."

"But..." He began, looking towards Leo for help. Leo shook his head. Jed had the feeling that they were two steps ahead of him on this – they had both calculated the possible risks against the desired outcome and come to the same conclusion.

"Jed did you seriously think I could ever work for that man again after what he did to you? I couldn't. He saved me from having to quit – that's all," Mrs. Landingham said. "I talked to my husband about it last night and he was in complete agreement with me so please don't worry about it any more." Jed stared at her, a lump rising in his throat.

"I promise you," he said hoarsely, "that you'll always have a job with me, Mrs. Landingham. I mean it - when I'm older, when I've been to college – I promise you that if you want a job with me then it's yours. I cost you this one after all."

Her face broke into a little smile – he wasn't sure whether she believed him, or whether she thought it was just stupid, youthful, wishful thinking, but Jed made that vow with almost religious solemnity. He meant it and if he was ever in the position to offer her a job when she wanted one, then he would.

"Why thank you, Jed," she said, nodding at him, and, much to his own relief, not laughing out loud at what must have been a ridiculous suggestion coming from a kid his age. "I might take you up on that one day."

"I hope you do," he said fervently.

Leo stayed on for his last week with Mrs. Landingham's blessing. She seemed entirely unperturbed by having them underfoot, and they both helped her by scouring the local papers for any jobs in the area, and assisting her when she was typing up her resume.

It was a troubled Jed who took Leo to the bus station a few days later. Jed struggled with his emotions as he drove. He wasn't sure he wanted to be here without Leo by his side radiating that steady common sense that made Jed believe that he could do anything, and cope with anything, and that everything would turn out okay. On the other hand, he was becoming more and more obsessed with the idea of going into the church as a sanctuary from his current problems. He didn't share any of this with Leo – he thought that his friend would just laugh and suggest, in that pragmatic way of his, that he leave it for awhile, and let the emotions of the past week settle down before coming to any decisions that might affect the rest of his life. So Jed worried away at the problem in silence – a silence that Leo endured with his usual patient fortitude; occasionally he asked Jed some probing questions to see what was at the root of his silence, but he didn't push too hard, for which Jed was grateful.

They arrived at the bus station and Jed turned off the engine and they just sat there quietly for a long time. There was too much to say and Jed suspected that neither of them had the words anyway. Finally, Leo put his hand on Jed's neck and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Write to me," he ordered firmly.

"I will. Ditto." Jed shrugged. "Give my love to your mom and sisters."

"Sure. You'll have to meet them one day. Maybe at Christmas you could come up to Chicago," Leo suggested. Jed glanced up eagerly, his eyes shining. He had been worrying about how he could avoid his father at the Christmas vacation – he couldn't keep trespassing on Mrs. Landingham's goodwill after all.

"I'd like that," he agreed readily.

"And it's only a short drive or bus ride from South Bend to Ann Arbor and vice versa – we could meet during term."

"I'd like that too." Jed smiled.

They were silent again, for a long time, and then Jed gave a shuddering sigh. "Leo..." he began.

"It's okay." Leo gave his neck another little squeeze, and his fingers caressed the back of his hair lightly. "You'll be okay," Leo told him firmly, his blue eyes radiating a kind of infectious confidence. "This had to happen, Jed. One day you'll look back and know that it had to happen. The next part of your life is just beginning. With that big brain of yours, you can go anywhere you want. Nobody is ever going to hit you again. I promise."

Jed gave a faint smile. "It's been one hell of a vacation," he commented.

"Yeah." Leo grinned that impish grin of his. "I'll see you at Christmas. It's only a few months away – and we'll write," he said.

"Yeah." Jed nodded.

"I wish I could kiss you right now," Leo sighed, glancing around the station parking lot. It was almost deserted, and a wicked gleam appeared in Leo's blue eyes. Before Jed knew what was happening, Leo had ducked his head forward and claimed a swift kiss from Jed's lips. It was so fast it took him by surprise, and then it was over, and Leo was opening the car door, shouldering his bag over one sturdy shoulder. "Don't get out," Leo said, standing with one hand on the car door, the late summer sun blazing around his shoulders, lighting in his short pale hair and giving him what looked almost like a halo. "I hate goodbyes," Leo grunted. He smiled again. "Take care, Jed," he said, and then he slammed the car door shut and walked towards the bus station before disappearing from sight.

"Take care, Leo," Jed murmured, still able to feel the imprint of Leo's lips on his own. He felt empty, and very alone. It was all so different to how he had felt a few weeks ago, when he'd been picking Leo up and they had the whole summer ahead of them.

Jed drove slowly back to Mrs. Landingham's house, remembering the way Leo's hand had felt on the back of his neck, remembering that drive back to the school from the station with Leo in the car, and the way Leo had looked at him and told him he couldn't wait to make love to him. He came up to the road leading to the old mineshaft and found himself turning down it, and bringing the car to a halt. He rested his head on the steering wheel and closed his eyes; he could recall the many hot kisses that had taken place here, could feel Leo's hands as they explored his body. He felt himself shaking as he remembered the shocked look in Leo's eyes as he discovered those bruises on his ribs. He had lived with the aftermath of his father's wrath alone for so long that it had felt almost intrusive at first that someone else knew – and yet comforting at the same time. He might never have known the depth of Leo's feelings for him and loyalty towards him if this hadn't happened. Up until Leo had discovered those bruises, the entire basis of their relationship had been that they enjoyed each other's company and couldn't keep their hands off each other. Everything had changed that day – now he knew that Leo was someone he could trust, someone loyal who would stand by him in the darkest times and that was a comforting thought.

Jed realised that hot tears were running down his cheeks. He wondered how it was possible to miss someone so much when they'd only been absent for a few minutes, but maybe that was when it hurt the most. He let himself cry for a long time, and then finally he sat up and wiped his face with his handkerchief. Leo was right – he had his whole future ahead of him, full of exciting intellectual challenges and new people and places. It had been time to break out of the restrictive emotional straitjacket of his life at the school and his relationship with his father. He felt as if he'd been in a cage and Leo had come along and effortlessly unlocked the door, coaxing him out so that he could fly freely in the blue skies above.

It was easier to cry for Leo's loss than to consider the tumultuous events that had just taken place in his life. When he thought of his father, he felt as if his brain wanted to shut down and he couldn't handle that whole unresolved issue. He would think about it another day – but not now. For now he would just think about the future, about college, and about all the good things that lay ahead of him; if he was lucky, then he might just be able to forget the bad stuff altogether.

Jed took a deep breath and started the car's engine again, and then began to drive slowly back down the road towards his future.

2002

Jed woke slowly, hazily. He lay still for a long time, feeling impossibly warm and relaxed, and then reached out a hand – to find that he was alone in the bed. He got up, pulled on Leo's bathrobe that was lying on a chair beside the bed, and stood in the doorway looking into the living room. Leo was sitting at the table working his way through a pile of paperwork. Jed smiled; this was such a familiar sight. Even on a Sunday Leo always seemed to have piles of work to get through. Jed suspected that some of it was stuff that he should be doing but that Leo had requisitioned because he didn't want him to have to worry about it on top of everything else right now. Not that Leo would ever admit that; Leo preferred to fix things without anyone noticing if he possibly could. His old friend was wearing a pair of stone coloured chinos and a faded blue shirt. It was good to see him dressed casually – Leo had become such a sleek, well-groomed office animal that sometimes it was easy to forget the tough, streetwise, somewhat grizzled old lion underneath. The seasoned political operative was just Leo's latest incarnation but he remained fundamentally the same underneath. Jed could still see in him the courageous, stocky kid who had stood unhesitatingly between himself and his father's fists, and the handsome Air Force officer who had radiated an air of danger.

Jed found himself yawning loudly, and Leo glanced up and gazed at him over the top of his glasses.

"Hey." Leo smiled.

"Hey," Jed stretched and glanced at his watch and then frowned and looked around the room for a clock. "What time is it?" He asked. "I think my watch stopped."

"It's noon." Leo grinned. Jed glanced at his watch again.

"Okay, so it didn't stop. Noon? You're kidding me! I slept 12 hours straight? Oh boy, no wonder I feel this good." Jed stretched again, luxuriating in the way he felt after such a long, refreshing sleep. Then he glanced at his watch a third time, still scarcely able to believe the time, and frowned. "I missed church. You should have woken me," he berated Leo. His friend put down his pen, removed his glasses very slowly, and then raised an extremely dangerous eyebrow.

"And that would be why exactly?" Leo asked. "I mean, we just flew Stanley in from the other side of the country and endured a session of therapy last night that I can only describe as being marginally less painful than having a limb amputated without anaesthesia, and the end result of that seems to be that you're sleeping again so *of course* I should have woken you up at dawn instead of letting you catch up on some of the sleep you missed."

"Had you then!" Jed crowed. Leo shot him a look of pure disgust. "You're grouchy. You

should have slept in too," Jed commented with what he knew to be an infuriating grin. "Oh god I feel good!" He rolled his shoulders experimentally. "I feel like someone's injected me with pure energy."

"Good," Leo commented grumpily picking up his pen again. "So next time you can't sleep will you talk to me about it earlier and *not* wait 4 nights before telling me so that maybe we can avoid it reaching crisis point again."

"Oh, Leo, don't be so tetchy!" Jed scolded. He scooted across the room, slowing down for just long enough to tousle Leo's hair annoyingly as he passed him, and then he began searching through Leo's CD collection. "Where's that Simon and Garfunkel CD, Leo? I feel in need of music."

"Here." Leo tossed him the CD from the table. Jed fumbled the catch and Leo sighed and rolled his eyes, muttering 'klutz' under his breath.

"I heard that," Jed told him.

"You were supposed to," Leo replied, turning back to his work. "Are you going to be very loud and annoying all day because if you are then I'm going to abandon any hope of working right now."

"You work too hard any way," Jed commented, slipping the CD into the stereo.

"I'll take that as 'yes' to the loud and annoying question then," Leo said, putting his pen down once more with a sigh.

"Oh don't stop working on my account. I'll take a shower and head back to the office," Jed said, zooming around the room in time to the music on his way towards the bathroom.

"No you won't," Leo said. Jed stopped and glanced back over his shoulder.

"I won't?"

"No. You missed 4 nights sleep and managed a couple of hours on the 5th. So I calculate that you still have a sleep debt of about 11 hours." Leo crossed his arms over his chest and gazed at his lover sternly.

"You're going to hold me down and force me to sleep, Leo?" Jed raised an eyebrow.

"Doesn't this constitute a coup d'etat or treason or something? What are you going to do? Keep me imprisoned in the bedroom all day?"

"I am indeed intending to do just that," Leo said with a slow smile. "The sleep part is optional but if you have all this energy then I think we should put it to good use."

"A-ha! Now you're talking, my friend!" Jed gave a wide grin.

"But first I'll order breakfast," Leo said reaching for the phone.

"Oh, Leo, that can wait. I'm not hungry." Jed waved a hand in the air and subjected Leo to a lascivious look.

"Sure you are," Leo said calmly.

"I am n..." Jed began expansively, and then he paused. "You know you're right. I'm famished. Order breakfast, Leo!" He commanded, turning back into the bedroom but not before he had caught some distinct eye-rolling on Leo's part. Jed threw himself down on the bed while he waited for breakfast to be delivered – he thought it best if he didn't freak out the room service waiter by being in the living room when the food arrived. He noticed a book on Leo's nightstand and picked it up idly and then gave a wistful smile when he saw the title: The Illustrated Man. He turned it over carefully in his hands. The book was very old, and had clearly been lovingly mended a few times. Jed opened it, noting that some of the pages were very well thumbed and were thus presumably Leo's favourite sections of the book.

Leo pushed open the door a few minutes later with a food trolley.

"Hey, Leo," Jed said softly, holding up the book. "Is this the original?"

"Yeah." Leo shrugged.

"The one I gave you – what – 40 years ago?"

"Yeah." Leo shrugged again.

"Oh boy this brings back memories," Jed sighed happily, flicking through the book.

"Good ones this time I hope," Leo said, sitting on the bed and passing his friend a slice of hot, buttered toast.

"Very good ones." Jed smiled. "D'you remember that place in the country where we went to read every afternoon after we'd done the chores around the school? You'd always play with my hair – which is a habit you never seem to have grown out of," he complained amiably.

"It's nice hair." Leo shrugged.

"And you're like some big old cat, addicted to sensory experiences," Jed grinned. "If only people knew that under that grumpy, grizzled exterior, Leo McGarry is such a sensory connoisseur – all fingers and tongues and..."

"I only have one tongue!" Leo protested.

"And you make very good use of it," Jed said with an extremely lewd smile.

"Thank you." Leo inclined his head. "It's great seeing you in this kind of good mood again,

Jed, but you know you're not quite there yet, right?" Leo said softly. "I mean, you're sleeping again – but you know you still have to see Stanley a few more times, right?"

"Yeah," Jed sighed.

"Okay. And..." Leo hesitated.

"Oh go on. I know what you're going to say. Abbey." Jed sighed again.

"Yeah. You have to tell her about this, Jed."

"She and my father had this little mutual admiration society going with each other. He adored her," Jed grimaced. "Although it's quite possible that he'd have adored anyone I brought home who wasn't you."

"I'd imagine so," Leo said with a wry shake of his head. "He must have been relieved that you turned out to be straight after all – even if he probably couldn't figure out why I was best man at your wedding."

"Nobody could ever figure out our relationship, Leo. We're pretty unique after all," Jed commented. "But I never told her he used to beat me. I don't know how she's going to react to that."

"Well she's going to believe you – and it wasn't your fault. She might give you a hard time for keeping it a secret for 40 years but you deserve that so I have no sympathy for you there," Leo said in a deadpan voice, a flash of relish in his eyes.

"Hmm." Jed made a face at him.

"Will you talk to Toby?" Leo asked carefully. Jed gave a huge sigh.

"Leo, first you insist I talk to Abbey and now you're making me to talk to Toby. I've just spent hours talking to both you and Stanley. Are you trying to make me lose my voice?"

"It's an attractive thought," Leo mused. Jed poked him in the shoulder and Leo grinned. "Jed - I'm not making you do anything," Leo continued in a more serious tone of voice. "I'm just trying to fix this so you don't have to worry about it any more. You need to talk to Abbey because this is too important not to tell her and you have to talk to Toby because – well, you aren't going to win the next election if you don't spend at least some time in the same room as your Communications Director."

Jed nodded thoughtfully. "It's okay, Leo. I know I need to talk to Toby. He was just..." he winced, "doing his job, I guess. I live in fear and trembling of what other insights into my soul he's going to throw at me, but I suppose I need to have this out with him. After India."

"Jed..." Leo began warningly.

"After India, Leo. I need some time to process all this and I don't want to speak to Toby while I'm not sure of myself. He might sense weakness and go in for the kill."

"Toby isn't going to kill you," Leo commented pragmatically.

"Well no, obviously, because he'd have to get past you first and we both know that's never going to happen." Jed gave Leo an affectionate smile and his friend gave a wry shake of his head by way of reply – but they both knew the truth of that statement; Leo McGarry was always going to put himself between Jed and anyone intending his friend any harm if it was humanly possible, just as he had done years ago with Jed's father. To ask him to behave any differently was to ask him not to be Leo McGarry. "Still...I'd rather concentrate on this visit to India first and then I'll turn my attention to Toby Ziegler when I get back. Hopefully India will go well and I'll feel in a good mood and ready to tackle Toby."

"Okay." Leo nodded. "You feel up to India?"

"Are you kidding? I'm looking **forward** to India! Hell, India will be a walk in the park compared to Abbey and Toby," Jed said half incoherently between mouthfuls of toast.

Leo was silent for awhile, gazing at Jed thoughtfully.

"What?" Jed asked.

"I think your father loved you, Jed," Leo said unexpectedly. "I know that's been on your mind and I gave it a lot of thought while you were sleeping. I'm sorry for giving you a hard time about letting him back into your life. No, in many ways he didn't like you but I do think he loved you – or he certainly **wanted** to but he was completely unable to show it - by asking your forgiveness for beating you for example. I guess that, just like you, he wasn't very good at doing anything which would make him appear weak." He gave a wry smile.

"So maybe I'm more like my father than I ever thought, huh?" Jed shook his head. He remembered what Stanley had said about them being able to discuss his father honestly and without recriminations, and realised that Leo was trying to do just that.

"Leo – I've never allowed you to talk about what happened that night and I'm sorry. I know you tried on a few occasions but I wouldn't listen," he sighed.

"It was a big event in both our lives," Leo said, leaning back on the bed and resting his head on his hand.

"Yeah - and so damn painful," Jed murmured with a wince. "I'd like to think you're right about him loving me, Leo, because I can remember lots of good times too and I never stopped loving him. It occurred to me during all this talking with Stanley, that maybe he favoured Jon because he thought I overshadowed my brother, the way he was always overshadowed by his own brothers: I was the talkative one, and Jon was the quiet one after all."

"That makes sense," Leo said slowly.

Jed felt as if they were making real progress here. He wished now that he'd been able to talk to Leo about this a long time ago. He always valued his friend's counsel, and this was a subject that, while painful, he felt he needed to resolve in his own mind.

"Also your father always struck me as one of those men whose love is conditional on obedience and respect – and let's face it, you were always far too outspoken for that," Leo said with a grin. "I think you tried your best to please him but you know what you're like – even back then you liked to talk and examine and debate and I think he saw that as insubordination, which he found threatening. That doesn't mean he didn't love you – just that simply by virtue of being *you*, you challenged him beyond what he was able to accept."

Jed nodded. He was fascinated by his friend's insights – and surprised by how good it felt being able to discuss all this without the tensions that usually arose between them when they touched on this subject.

"Thank you, Leo," he murmured. Leo gave him a little smile in return.

"About time we managed to talk about this like adults, huh?" He grinned.

"Yeah!" Jed finished his last piece of toast with a sigh and lay back on the bed.

"You want to sleep again?" Leo said, clearing the plates back onto the trolley.

"No I do not want to sleep again as you well know, Leo!" Jed replied. "I want to do something else entirely." He gave his friend a lascivious grin.

"Good – because we're taking the rest of the day off and you aren't leaving this suite until tomorrow morning," Leo told him sitting down on the side of the bed again. "So we have plenty of time to read and talk."

"And?" Jed raised an eyebrow.

"And what?" Leo raised an eyebrow back at him.

"Don't play hard to get, Leo!" Jed berated him, reaching out and grabbing Leo around the back of the neck and pulling him down on top of him. Leo came with a little laugh and a second later his hard lips made firm contact with Jed's – familiar, warm and reassuring. Jed sighed and felt his entire body relax. He stretched out and let Leo unwrap him like a present, luxuriating in Leo's usual expert caresses. Sometimes he felt as if his body was a musical instrument that Leo had learned to play to exquisite perfection. He was glad that Leo's interest in him had never waned with familiarity – his friend seemed to find as much to fascinate and revel in now as he had when they had been young men, exploring each other's bodies eagerly for the first time, experimenting and learning about each other. "Did you ever guess we'd still be doing this in 40 years time all those years ago?" Jed asked, as Leo

eased him out of his robe and then turned his attention to his boxer shorts.

"I'm not sure I ever thought about it," Leo said, throwing Jed's shorts onto the floor. "I never saw it ending though. I didn't see how it could. Even back then it always seemed so special and different to anything else I'd ever experienced."

"If Abbey had made me choose...or if Jenny had stood in our way..." Jed mused.

"Yeah, but the thing is, I don't think we'd have been able to stop ourselves," Leo told him, his lips finding the spot behind Jed's ear that always made Jed arch his back and purr like a cat. Leo was right, he thought to himself as he felt that familiar Leo tingle buzz through his veins. It wasn't a perfect relationship – they were both too human, too flawed, too proud, obstinate and occasionally downright ornery for that, but it was, as Leo had said, very unusual and very special, and somehow they had made it work and were still making it work after all these years.

Jed reached out and unbuttoned Leo's shirt while Leo removed his pants. Soon Leo was also naked and he resumed stroking Jed's bare skin with his fingertips. "I thought, as we have some time, we'd go real slow..." Leo commented, his lips nuzzling Jed's neck.

"Sounds good to me," Jed panted as Leo's hand trailed down between his legs. Leo was true to his word – it was rare that they had a good, long period of uninterrupted time together and Leo seemed to be of the opinion that this was an excuse for a thorough exploration of Jed's body which Jed had no objection to whatsoever. He felt incredibly spoiled and pampered as Leo worked his way over his body, going back for frequent kisses from Jed who was only too happy to oblige. The tension of the past few days slipped away as Leo made such assiduous, attentive, sensuous love to him.

Jed closed his eyes and allowed the music still playing next door to wash over him. He felt lost halfway between the past and the present. There had been so many memories these past few days, some of the most painful but by no means all. He looked at Leo's face and remembered the fear, trepidation and excitement of the first time his friend had entered his body and made love to him. Jed gave a mewling cry as Leo took one of his nipples in his mouth and sucked gently and then abandoned himself to the sensations in his body, distracted and aroused beyond belief as Leo's tongue trailed down his belly, and over his erect cock. He gladly allowed Leo to part his legs and lap between them with his tongue, sending Jed into a flight of erotic ecstasy. Time stood still when he was with Leo like this and Jed found himself moving and sighing and crying and panting in a dream, responding, as he always did, totally uninhibited under Leo's ministrations. Leo arranged his legs on his shoulders, and then his friend slipped inside his body with the ease of long familiarity. Jed felt a buzzing in his nerve endings, and then he was transported onto that starburst plane of pure pleasure. He reached up and touched Leo's face and Leo moved his head sideways and kissed Jed's hand. Jed smiled.

"I love you, old friend," he murmured. Leo smiled back at him, needing no words – his gentle, thorough love-making saying exactly the same thing.

The past ebbed and flowed like a wave on the seashore, coming and going in and out of focus, a gently humming backdrop to their lovemaking which grew to a climax in a burst of white light. Jed was dimly aware of Leo sinking down on top of him, and he wrapped his arms around his friend's shoulders and held him there, still lodged deep inside him, as close as it was possible for two people to be.

"You know what, Jed?" Leo said conversationally.

"Mmm?" Jed glanced at him blearily.

"I'm really glad you didn't become a priest."

Jed laughed out loud. "Ah, me too, Leo. Me too."

And the past flowed away again, just out of reach, and there was just the two of them, naked and entwined, and this, Jed thought to himself peacefully, was a very good place to be.

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly Feedback much appreciated at
Xanthe@xanthe.org

Simon and Garfunkel lyrics to *Old Friends* and
Bookends below:

Old Friends

Old friends, old friends,
Sat on their parkbench like bookends
A newspaper blown through the grass
Falls on the round toes
of the high shoes of the old friends

Old friends, winter companions, the old men
Lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sunset
The sounds of the city sifting through trees

Settles like dust on the shoulders of the old friends

Can you imagine us years from today,

Sharing a parkbench quietly

How terribly strange to be seventy

Old friends, memory brushes the same years,

Silently sharing the same fears

Bookends

Time it was and what a time it was it was,

A time of innocence a time of confidences.

Long ago it must be, I have a photograph

Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you

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