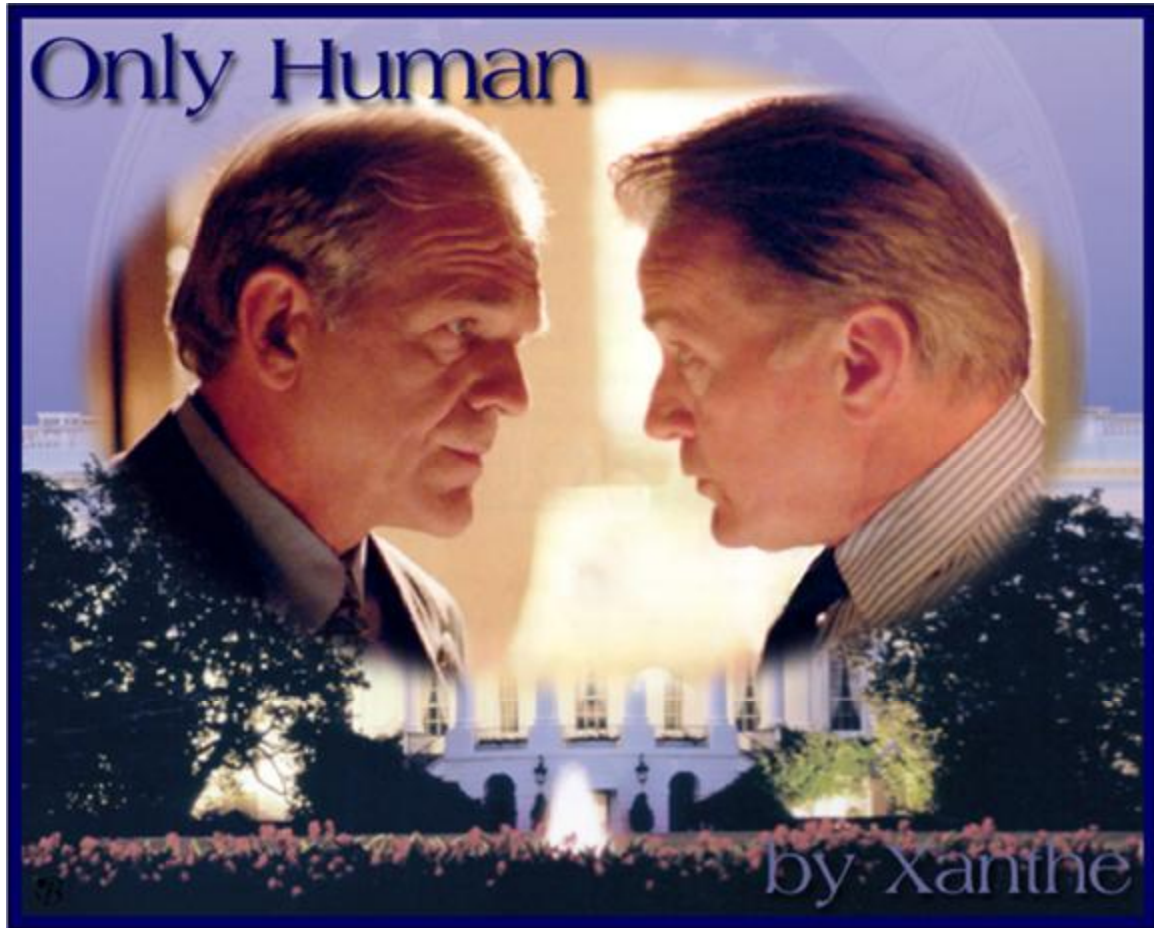


Only Human by Xanthe



www.xanthe.org/only-human/

Story Notes:

Slash. This is a June 17th universe fic. You don't need to have read that fic to understand this one but some events from the other stories in the series are referred to in passing.

There's lots of angst, tons of romance and lashings of hurt/comfort too...oh, and someone walks in on Jed and Leo and catches them 'in flagrante'... And, of course, this being the June 17th universe, there's a flashback scene as well :-)

Posted: 7th May, 2003

Dedications: Many thanks to dot for ongoing advice and support. The usual heartfelt thanks to Phoebe for beta help :-)
Special thanks to Emma for mulling this idea over with me back in March!

Big, fat, wet, sloppy doggy kisses to Bluespirit for making me the most beautiful Jed/Leo pic I've ever seen...Those two boys SO want to kiss!

Back in March I had a fantasy about someone finding out about Jed and Leo's relationship. It was just going to be a nice little short piece and then it grew. And grew. And grew...and now here it is in all its over 35,000 word glory A couple of weeks after I started writing this fic, Priya posted a challenge to the Jed/Leo list to write a fic that included certain elements, one of which was already the main feature of this story so I tried to work the others in too. I'm not sure I *quite* manage to fulfil the terms of the challenge but I've at least mentioned all the element she listed Those were: troop movements, the Federalist papers, someone walking into a door, someone being caught in the act (the 'act' in question not being defined!) and it being a Jed/Leo slash story.

Beautiful romantic pic courtesy of **Bluespirit**.

1. Chapter 1 by Xanthe

2. Chapter 2 by Xanthe

Chapter 1 by Xanthe

"Sir?" Ron Butterfield poked his head around the door to the Oval Office. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Yeah, sure...come in, Ron...I won't be long." Jed waved his hand in Ron's direction while he continued on the phone. "They've got me on hold," he explained to Ron. "I don't know, there was a time when being the leader of the free world actually *meant* something but now I guess I'm just another person to be lured and inveigled into the telephonic abyss that is the options menu."

"Don't you normally have someone to make the call for you, sir?" Ron asked. "So that you're through to whoever you need to talk to at the start of the call?"

"Well, yeah," Jed said with a shrug. "But I didn't want *her* knowing about this call so I made it myself – well, with Charlie's help."

"Her, sir?" Ron frowned.

"Debbie – Rosa Kleb - Fiddler. She's already got me organized every which way and a man has to have *some* freedoms, don't you think?"

"I suppose that depends on who you're calling and how important it is," Ron commented. "Seems to me like it's a huge waste of presidential time if you don't mind me saying so, sir."

"Oh, what the hell. It doesn't matter," Jed sighed, throwing down the phone in disgust. "You're right, Ron. It is a waste of my time and I have a meeting in..." he glanced at his watch, "about 4 minutes so that's how long you've got, my friend."

"I wanted to speak to you on a somewhat delicate matter, sir," Ron said. Jed gazed at him keenly, but Ron didn't so much as flush – his sturdy features remaining perfectly in position, giving nothing away.

"Remind me not to play poker with you, Ron," Jed said, getting up and walking over to the couch. "Do I need a drink before you get started?"

"I don't think it's *that* delicate, sir," Ron deadpanned. Jed gazed at him again – he had never yet been able to tell when Ron was making a joke.

"Okay, fire away." Jed nodded.

"It's about your visits to Leo McGarry's hotel room, sir," Ron said. Jed glanced up sharply – Ron's features still remained completely urbane but Jed was sure as hell that *he* was flushing bright red now. His face felt as if it was lit up like a Neon sign.

"Yeah?" He said, in what he hoped was a non-committal tone, wondering what the hell was coming next and not sure he was ready for it, whatever it was. "Is there a problem?"

"No, sir – just...I know you like to keep it low key, sir, but I've been concerned about it for some time. The level of security we can put in there isn't adequate for your protection."

"Isn't adequate?" Jed raised an eyebrow. "A couple of guys stand outside the door, Ron. How much protection do I need? I'm usually only there for a couple of hours."

"I know – and at first it wasn't so much of a problem, sir, but your trips to visit Mr. McGarry have become more and more frequent and sometimes you stay the entire night." Again, there wasn't so much as a note of innuendo in Ron's voice but Jed felt like a salmon wriggling on a hook all the same. This was, he thought, possibly the most uncomfortable conversation he'd ever had in his entire life and he'd had quite a few.

"I know you like to keep your security informal, and you know I've tried to accommodate you on that, but I don't think we could keep you safe if there was a determined effort on your life, Mr. President," Ron finished. "That's the bottom line. So I was wondering – on those occasions when you need to talk to Mr. McGarry privately, would it be possible for a car to bring him to the White House?"

Jed made a face. "Aw, Ron, you know, I don't like to inconvenience Leo like this. Most of the time I feel bad enough intruding on his privacy at all hours as it is at all – he's kind enough to indulge me but if I were to make him come and see me whenever I wanted to mull something over, well, that'd be an imposition." He wondered whether Ron was buying any of this or whether his agents had overheard some of his more vocal love-making sessions with Leo over the past 4 years. He had no idea whether Ron knew what the nature of his relationship with Leo was, but it was freaking him out.

"I can see that, sir – but, there are plenty of bedrooms in the Residence. Maybe if Mr. McGarry was assigned one he could use on those occasions when you needed his...advice? Maybe he wouldn't mind so much then?"

Jed wondered if Ron hadn't given a split second hesitation before he had said the word 'advice' but suspected it might just have been his own paranoia.

"A bedroom?" He mused.

"Yes, sir. That's if the First Lady wouldn't mind," Ron added diplomatically. Jed gazed at him again, wondering if they were having a conversation on two levels here; if Ron knew, or at least suspected the nature of his relationship with Leo, then he might well be wondering if the First Lady minded – and Jed wasn't about to enlighten him to the fact that not only did Abbey not mind, she hadn't minded for the past 35 or so years.

"I'm sure the First Lady wouldn't have any objections," he murmured, privately thinking it would make everyone's life a good deal easier. The only problem he could foresee would be convincing Leo of the good sense of the arrangement; Leo had some strange and rather firm convictions on certain subjects, and the office of the President of the United States was one of them. Luckily, Jed thought to himself, Leo didn't have any such qualms about the *person* of the President of the United States, or he suspected their sex life would have taken a nose-dive the moment he had been elected the first time around, and that, for someone as tactile as Jed, would have been beyond endurance. Now, with another election under his belt and four years of discreetly intimate meetings with Leo behind him, Jed wondered whether they hadn't grown a little careless. Ron was right – he had been visiting Leo a lot more recently than he had in the beginning. They had been much more worried about being found out to begin with but over time their quick sex sessions in Leo's hotel room had often turned into nightly stopovers – it still wasn't all that frequent but it happened much more often than it once had. Besides, Jed liked the idea of having Leo just down the corridor – they could still keep it discreet, and Leo would only stay over when Abbey was away; it wouldn't be fair to any of them to conduct their relationship in any other way, and they had always striven to be scrupulously fair about their unusual lifestyle choice.

"Thank you for raising this with me, Ron," Jed said, getting up and shaking the other man's hand, relieved that the topic of conversation had only turned out to be half way embarrassing and not completely and utterly mortifying. "I'll think it over, run it by Leo and get back to you."

Thank you, Mr. President, I'd appreciate that." Ron nodded, and left the room. Jed gazed after him, pondering the conversation. If Ron did know about his relationship with Leo then he sure as hell wasn't giving anything away; he had been the soul of discretion, as always.

"No." Leo shook his head vigorously. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?" Jed gazed at his friend, exasperated. It was late, and, apart from Jed's Secret Service agents they were probably the only people left in the West Wing. Leo's office doors were firmly closed and Jed was sitting on his friend's couch with his legs up on the coffee table.

"Because I don't like it, that's why," Leo replied, turning his attention back to the papers he had been reading when Jed had interrupted him.

"Oh come on, Leo; that's in the 'because I said so' league of bad answers. Ron has a good point and, you might note, *I* was the one who had to sit through the exceedingly embarrassing meeting during which he made it. Not you. Me. I had to sit there and wonder what exactly he knows about our relationship and my stopovers at your hotel room."

"What does it matter? He and his agents are paid to be discreet. That's why it's called the *Secret* Service," Leo snapped back irritably. "For god's sake, during JFK's time they were pimping for their president – all we're asking them to do is stand outside a lousy door and they do that anyway."

"They were 'pimping' girls," Jed pointed out. "This is different. On the one hand they've got a happily married president with a beautiful, sexy, loving wife of over 30 years by his side and then on the other hand they've got a grumpy old guy in a hotel room who I seem to prefer spending my nights with on occasion. Go figure – I expect that's what they're trying to do."

"So, it's okay if the president is screwing around with women but not if he's humping his *male* chief of staff?" Leo raised an eyebrow. "We're expecting the Secret Service to make some kind of value judgment on this? Like they'll only guard you and respect your privacy if you do stuff they personally agree with? It doesn't work that way, sir."

"Oh for god's sake don't call me 'sir' when we're having this kind of conversation. It feels ridiculous," Jed snapped.

"I always call you 'sir' in the West Wing," Leo replied, glancing back down at his papers again. He frowned, lifted his glasses as if he was having trouble focusing, and rubbed his eyes wearily.

"Well it's absurd when we're talking about this," Jed groused.

"Why? Surely it's the exact same thing we're talking about in respect of the bedroom," Leo replied. "There are certain contexts wherein our personal relationship feels inappropriate –

and me taking up residence in the White House like the president's rent boy is one of them."

"You won't be taking up residence and you are way too old and ugly to be a rent boy," Jed growled.

"How many more times are you going to insult me in one evening?" Leo growled back. "Not only am I not beautiful, sexy, or loving but I'm also grumpy, old and ugly. You're really selling me on the whole wanting to be closer to you thing."

"You want me to tell you you're beautiful?" Jed grinned.

"No, because that would just be plain ridiculous but...oh for god's sake I think I've forgotten what we were even talking about."

"We were talking about a bedroom. I had no idea it was going to be such a big deal but suddenly you're throwing JFK and rent boys at me and it's all gotten out of hand."

"Hah – I heard a story about JFK, which is very probably apocryphal," Leo said, taking off his glasses and grinning at Jed.

"Well – tell me." Jed sat forward on the couch.

"Nah – I probably shouldn't. It probably **is** apocryphal," Leo replied, putting his glasses back on and picking up his papers again.

"Oh for god's sake, Leo, tell me – and that's a presidential order!" Jed commanded.

"All right." Leo sat back in his chair. "I heard that JFK occasionally liked to be, uh, serviced by a friend of his father's – a male friend."

"I think that **is** apocryphal," Jed said, shaking his head. "The man was a great president but he had so many women – including a very beautiful wife - that..."

"Oh, you think it's not possible for a president to be happily married and also enjoy sex with a trusted male confidant?" Leo raised a dangerous eyebrow.

"We're talking about JFK here not me!" Jed protested. "And I object to your use of the word 'serviced'. You don't know that JFK and this mystery friend of his father weren't in a loving, committed relationship wherein..."

"Oh god give me strength – a minute ago you were saying the whole thing was apocryphal and now you're turning them into a gay love story?" Leo snorted. "What next? They were about to get married in the Rose Garden with JFK wearing flowers in his hair when their forbidden love was tragically cut short in a hail of gunfire in Dallas?"

"You are impossible to talk to this evening," Jed glowered at him.

"You're impossible to talk to most of the time. I'm just getting my own back," Leo snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me I really do have to work. Sir."

Jed sat back on the couch, winded. Leo had always had a grumpy streak and Jed was wondering whether he had just gotten used to his friend being deferential to him these past few years. He didn't think he'd seen Leo this argumentative and plain ornery since he'd been elected the first time around and he *knew* Leo hadn't talked to him like this in years. He sat back and gazed at his friend speculatively, and, for the first time, noticed how incredibly tired Leo was looking. He had dark shadows under his eyes and his firm, jutting jaw looked much more tense and stiff than it usually did. His eyes were red rimmed and his shoulders hunched and defensive.

"Leo," Jed said softly, their former argument completely forgotten in his concern. "When did you last take a vacation?"

"What?" Leo looked at him with a glare that would have felled a lesser man.

"I asked when you last took a vacation. I mean, I know I'm president 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, but I have occasionally had a week off here or there at Manchester or Camp David. When did you last take any time off?"

"I have no idea," Leo snapped. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he said again, in a pointed tone.

"No. I won't," Jed replied, leaning forward and resting his arms on his knees as he surveyed his friend thoughtfully.

"Are you feeling okay, Leo? Because you're looking kind of tired."

"Oh, and I expect any minute now you're going to offer me the use of one of the bedrooms in the Residence," Leo replied. "That way you get to have me on hand to *service* the presidential needs whenever you're in the mood."

Jed winced at Leo's pointed use of the word 'service' but didn't rise to the bait.

"Leo, have you taken any vacation time in the past 4 years?" He asked softly. Leo blinked, brought up short by Jed's lack of response to his argumentative tone.

"I really don't remember," he replied with less bite in his voice.

"Sure you do. You just don't want to tell me," Jed said. "You haven't taken one single vacation day outside of national holidays, have you?"

"Vacations are vastly over-rated," Leo growled.

"You work most weekends and you spend all day and most of the night here," Jed observed.

"No wonder you're such a bad tempered, mean spirited, grumpy old man."

"Again with the insults," Leo said, taking off his glasses and glowering at his friend.

"Well you are! I noticed Josh slinking out of here with a mournful look on his face earlier, so I'm guessing you yelled at him. Margaret's been scuttling around the hallways looking petrified all week, and even Toby looked mildly perturbed after meeting with you yesterday."

"Nobody uses the word 'perturbed' in normal conversation," Leo pointed out.

"Don't change the subject," Jed chided. "Leo – are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," Leo snapped, waving his hands around in an agitated way. "Is all this because I don't want to move in and become your concubine?"

"Nobody uses the word 'concubine' in normal conversation either," Jed replied. "And for the last time, you would **not** be moving in! Ron just thinks it's a security risk for me to keep coming to the hotel. It'd only be when Abbey's away and it'd only be when we're both in the mood. There's no question that I'd keep you down the hallway on standby in case I wanted...a-ha! That nearly worked. You nearly had me then, my friend, but no. We were talking about **you** and the fact that you don't look well. Leo, you don't have the flu that's been going around the building, do you?"

"No," Leo snapped. "I do not have the flu, I do not need a vacation and I do not want a bedroom in the Residence. Is that all, sir?"

"I think you have the flu, Leo," Jed continued, ignoring him. "I think you've had the flu for a few days and it's only your legendary iron willpower that's keeping you upright at the moment. I think that not only do you have the flu but you have a depleted immune system as a result of spending too long in darkened offices reading complex legal documents and..."

"...and handling a difficult, temperamental, and **opinionated** president," Leo continued. "I think you could be right, sir. What? You think you're the only one who can do insults?"

"No," Jed commented mildly. "I just don't think you'd be slinging them around if you weren't trying to distract me from something, my friend. Okay, Leo, have it your own way." He got up with a tired sigh. "I can't make you admit that you're ill and I know from experience that making you admit to any kind of personal frailty is like drawing teeth anyway. Literally," he added for effect, enjoying watching the barb go home as Leo winced. He was referring to the time, several years before, when Leo had knocked out one of his teeth in an argument over his friend's drinking. Leo didn't like being fussed over, didn't like being confronted over his health, and most of all didn't like admitting that he had a problem he couldn't solve – and it seemed to Jed that he did have a problem right now. "I'll be keeping an eye on you," Jed warned. He crossed the room to Leo's side, and put a hand on his shoulder. "You may be a grumpy, cantankerous, grouchy old man, but you're **my** grumpy, cantankerous, grouchy old man."

"You just said three words that mean the same thing," Leo said, but Jed noticed that he didn't jerk away from the hand he had placed on his shoulder.

"A *watchful* eye," Jed repeated meaningfully. He squeezed Leo's shoulder firmly and then returned to the Oval Office.

"Abbey, you wouldn't have any objection to Leo staying over here occasionally would you?" Jed asked, wandering into their en suite bathroom and finding his wife applying face cream an hour or so after his conversation with Leo.

"What? Here?" Abbey asked. "Is the bed big enough for three, sweetie?" She gave him a beatific smile and he rolled his eyes.

"I mean down the hallway in one of the many guest bedrooms this place has," Jed told her, putting his hands on her shoulders and gazing at her in the mirror.

"Ah, shame – I thought you were suggesting a threesome." Abbey grinned at him, and patted his hand. "No, dear. I don't mind if Leo stays over."

"It'd only be when you're not here," Jed told her. "I'm not – I don't want to be insensitive about this, Abbey, so if you're uncomfortable with it please just say so."

"I'm not." She rubbed her hands together to absorb the last of the cream.

"I wouldn't like you to think I was being insensitive. I don't want you to feel left out or as if I'm not as committed to our marriage as I should be," Jed told her. Abbey sighed.

"Jed, you and Leo have been having occasional trysts for over 40 years so I'm kind of used to that whole thing now, honey," she told him sweetly. "And in case you haven't noticed, I've always been fine with it – well, once I realized you were pathologically incapable of cheating on me *or* him with anyone else of either gender I was fine with it. You know I'm happy to share you with Leo – it's a relief being able to offload you onto him every now and again to be honest." She gave him a beaming smile and stood up. He gazed at her, his eyes narrowing.

"Pathologically incapable?" He questioned.

"Ah, I wondered which would annoy you more – that comment or the one about offloading you."

"I was annoyed about that one too – I was just getting around to expressing my outrage," Jed told her.

"Hmm." She patted his jaw with her hand. "You're very sweet to worry about my feelings, Jed, but honestly, I never knew why you made such a big deal about sleeping with Leo in the White House anyway. It's not like it's *never* happened," she pointed out.

"Well that's what I think!" Jed sighed. "But Leo won't have any of it."

"Why not?" Abbey looked surprised.

"I don't know. Something to do with JFK and concubines," Jed said, following her back into the bedroom.

"What?" Abbey frowned, slipping into bed and picking up a medical journal from the nightstand.

"That and me keeping him here as some kind of rent boy so I could impose on him at my convenience," Jed grumbled, sitting down on the bed beside her.

"Well, you know I never interfere in what you two boys get up to," Abbey told him with a smile, perching her glasses on her nose and opening her journal. "Although it sounds to me as if Leo is feeling a little unappreciated and taken for granted."

"What do you mean?" Jed frowned.

"I mean, that you are the President of the United States. He works with you all day, which at least I don't have to do, thank god, and then occasionally you charge over to his hotel room and spend the night with him as well. He must think there's no getting away from you sometimes. Maybe he just wants a break from you – and maybe he doesn't like the thought of you being able to summon him to come over and spend the night with him whenever you want. Maybe he likes having the sanctuary of his hotel room to retreat into. It's his space, his place, where he can be in control. If he came here, he wouldn't be so relaxed – it's your home, not his, and from his point of view he must think you get to have everything your own way. Which you do." She peered at him over the top of her glasses.

"I do?" Jed frowned.

"Honey, Leo puts up with far more from you than I do," Abbey told him. "I'm your wife – I can put you in your place whenever I like – in fact it's my god given duty to do so." She grinned at him wickedly. "He's...well, let's just say that his role isn't so well defined, is it? It's harder for him to turn you down or put you down than it is for me to do it."

"Oh that's ridiculous. I've known the man for 40 years."

"As a friend and as a lover – but not as President and Chief of Staff," Abbey told him gently.

"You make it sound like I'm sexually harassing him or something!" Jed complained.

Abbey shook her head. "Jed, he loves you, but the boundaries have become blurred these past 4 years, haven't they? He used to be the one with the big political career and you were kind of the country cousin – and now all that's changed. He spends every single hour of every single day making sure things run smoothly for you in your capacity as President. I'm just saying that privately he might enjoy having some time for himself. His marriage broke up after all and..."

"And you're going to say that was because of me," Jed interrupted.

"No, honey, it wasn't," Abbey sighed. "But despite the fact you two have had this 'thing' going for 40 years, you both of you still enjoy the company of women. Yes, Leo still has you, but he must miss Jenny. Now he's started dating again and Jordan's a lovely woman and very good for him but it isn't easy starting a new relationship – especially when you've got a very demanding lover already standing in the wings – a lover you also work with every day and who happens to be the President. I'm just saying that it must be pretty complicated for Leo right now. I know you don't mean to be selfish, Jed, but sometimes you don't always put yourself in other people's shoes and think how it must be for them. Leo's given his whole life over to you these past few years – maybe he just needs to have one tiny part of his life that he can call his own. I know it's just a question of semantics – after all what does it really matter if he sleeps over here or you go and sleep over there – but the fact he's arguing the point so vehemently makes me think there's more going on here than just an argument about a bedroom." She smiled at him, and caressed his cheek lightly with her hand.

"You think he feels taken for granted?" Jed asked, dumb-struck.

"Well, you told me he mentioned concubines and rent boys so I'd say he definitely thinks you've got some kind of Droit de Seigneur thing going on," Abbey said with a smile.

"That's ridiculous. I mean...this is *Leo* we're talking about," Jed protested.

"I know. All that quiet good sense and dry humour hidden under that crusty, no-nonsense exterior," Abbey nodded. "Who'd imagine he might actually have feelings too?"

"That's not what I..." Jed trailed off. "Abbey, I'm worried about him," he confided. "Not just about this – he was looking really ill earlier. I'm worried that maybe I *have* been taking him for granted – in so many different ways. Did you know he's never taken a vacation since I was elected – the first time around? That's four years without so much as a day off. He's never had any time off for sickness either." Jed sighed. "I'm worried he's pushed himself too much, Abbey. He takes so much on himself. I have this great life – largely because of him – while his marriage broke up and he's living in a hotel. I wish I could make things up to him somehow."

Abbey put her journal to one side and gazed at him thoughtfully. "Let's give it some thought," she told him. "Come to bed and I promise we'll think about it."

"Really?" Jed could feel himself brightening at her offer of help.

"Sure. Leo means a lot to me too, Jed," she told him softly. "I don't know what our marriage would have been like without him sort of hovering around the edges but what we have has worked very well - and I think that's partly due to the role Leo's played in your life. In both our lives I guess. I feel as if I owe him too – and you know I'm very fond of him."

"Yeah." Jed nodded, smiling at her. "Yeah."

"Another thing..." Abbey mused, peering at him over the top of her glasses. "If we can convince him to have a bedroom here, then it'll look a bit suspicious if he only uses it when I'm away. I'm really fine if occasionally he stays over just when you two have been working late, you know. That should allay anyone's suspicions. Leo's always welcome to stay and always has been anyway. You know that."

Jed leaned forward and kissed her gently on the mouth. "Yes, I do. Thank you, Abbey," he whispered.

"You only love me for my devious mind," she teased mischievously.

Jed grinned a wicked grin. "Ah, that's just one of the *many* things I love you for, my evil little pumpkin," he replied.

Leo still didn't look so good the following day in Jed's opinion – in fact he looked even worse. His face had taken on a grayish hue, and he had a coughing fit during their afternoon meeting with the senior staff. Jed glared at his friend meaningfully as Leo tried his hardest to stifle what sounded like pretty racking coughs to Jed's ears. Leo manfully refused to meet his eye – there was clearly no way he was going to allow Jed to know he had been right in his diagnosis of flu the previous day. Instead, Leo got up and poured himself a glass of water, which he sipped down while concentrating hard on something Josh was saying. Jed glanced at him, distracted from the meeting by his very real concern over his friend's health. It was then that he noticed that Leo was swaying and he got to his feet and was just about to say something when Leo collapsed. In fact, Jed thought, Leo's fall was a hundred times more graceful and less dramatic than his own had been in this office a few years before when he'd broken an expensive crystal pitcher with a resounding crash that had drawn everyone's attention. No, in keeping with his personality Leo succumbed to a combination of illness, stress and exhaustion with the most discreet of collapses. He put his glass down, a glazed, confused look in his eyes, muttered 'excuse me' to the occupants of the room, and then swayed, almost in slow motion, in the general direction of the floor. Jed was by Leo's side almost before Leo hit the ground, overturning a small table and sending a lamp flying in the process. He managed to cradle his friend's head to stop it from hitting the floor, and was shocked by how cold and clammy his skin felt. Leo looked so pale that for a split second Jed was worried he'd had a heart attack and might be dead. In that moment their entire history together flashed before his eyes and he felt the most desolate, overwhelming, mind-numbing sense of loss.

"Is he okay? Is he okay?" He heard someone shouting in a hoarse tone of voice, and a second or two later he realized the voice was his own.

"He's got a pulse," Toby told him, his fingers pressed into Leo's neck. "It's all right, sir – he's still with us."

"Get a doctor!" Jed ordered, pushing Toby's fingers away and checking for Leo's pulse himself, just to make sure. CJ scuttled away to get the doctor, pushing past Josh who just stood there, looking pretty much the same as he had when he'd lost his father a few years before, his face pale and his eyes dark with concern.

"We need to move him onto the couch," Jed said, taking charge as effortlessly as usual, wondering how the hell he could sound so calm when it was the last thing he felt like right now.

"Can you stand back, sir? Josh and I will lift him," Toby told him.

"No - I'll help," Jed said in a peremptory tone. He couldn't explain to them that this was his job, that he couldn't let go of Leo, not now, not when Leo needed him. Leo never behaved as if he needed anyone and Jed wasn't about to screw up the one time he did need someone.

"Okay," Toby said. "We'll lift him together...but you need to let go of him, sir."

Jed realized he was still cradling Leo's head in his lap and he nodded, blearily, and put his hands under Leo's shoulders. Josh took one side and Toby the other and between the three of them they managed to get Leo onto the couch.

"For god's sake where the hell is that doctor?" Jed snapped, kneeling down beside the couch.

"He's on his way, sir," Josh replied nervously. "CJ only just left. He'll be here in a second."

"Okay." Jed nodded to himself, a myriad of thoughts whizzing through his head; logically he knew that Leo probably just had the flu, but he couldn't help wondering whether his collapse might be related to some more serious condition, like a stroke, or a cerebral haemorrhage. Leo interrupted him from that unpleasant train of thought by giving a low moan and Jed reached out and stroked his friend's hair absently, not even aware of what he was doing or what it must look like to the senior staff.

"It's okay, Leo," he murmured, lost in his worries about his friend. Josh went to the door and opened it, looking out anxiously for CJ's return, while Toby hovered at the end of the couch, pulling on his beard fiercely. Leo's eyelids fluttered and he moaned softly.

"You just collapsed but you're going to be okay, Leo," Jed reassured him. Leo's eyes opened and he gazed at Jed for a moment, as if trying to figure out who he was. Jed continued gently stroking Leo's hair and Leo gave a little grimace.

"You know I hate that," he mumbled, moving his head slightly. Jed gave a little guffaw of relieved laughter and then glanced up, realizing that Toby had been close enough to overhear that comment. Toby gave him one of his intense but inscrutable looks and Jed moved his hand away awkwardly, wondering what, if anything, Toby was thinking, both about him stroking Leo's hair and Leo's reaction to the caress.

Leo came to, his blue eyes finally registering where he was.

"Please don't tell me I have MS," he said, with the faintest ghost of a grin. Jed gave another

little laugh.

"No. You have the flu," he said in a firm, scolding tone of voice. "The same flu that you denied you had yesterday, Leo McGarry."

"Yeah." Leo didn't even bother arguing – the evidence was all too clearly in front of them. At that moment CJ returned with the doctor and an EMS crew complete with equipment in tow. Jed saw Leo's eyes flash as he realized that he was the centre of attention and his hand flicked out tersely; Jed knew that it was excruciating for his friend to be seen like this.

"I think you should all leave," he said to the staff. "I'll stay with him. He'll be fine now."

"Okay." Toby nodded, gazing at Jed keenly.

"You'll call us if he needs anything?" Josh asked anxiously. Jed nodded. CJ flashed a worried little smile at Jed and then put her arm around Josh's shoulders and ushered him out of the door. Toby stood there for a second, his dark, intuitive eyes searching as they raked over the President and his stricken Chief of Staff. Jed didn't say anything – he just waited Toby out. Finally, Toby gave a curt little nod, and then he followed the others out of the room.

Leo vaguely recalled being helped to his feet and being half carried, half escorted to the Residence and he was sure that someone injected him with something because he fell fast asleep and next thing he knew he was waking up in the Lincoln Bedroom and it was dark outside and there was a lamp on over the other side of the room. He sat up, feeling unbelievably groggy, with a pounding headache, and within seconds both Jed and Abbey Bartlet were at his side.

"Oh god. I thought I was alone," he grumbled.

"We were sitting over there – reading." Jed pointed at the couch while Abbey plumped up his pillows behind him. Leo levered himself up some more, wishing that his head didn't hurt so much.

"I see you got me into the damn bedroom anyway despite all my protests," Leo growled in Jed's general direction. Jed gave him an annoyingly pleasant smile in response.

"Well, I like to get my own way, Leo. You know that. Even if it did mean infecting you with the influenza virus and then making you collapse in the Oval Office in order to get you here," he commented. Leo began to roll his eyes but that hurt so he stopped. He glanced down.

"I seem to be wearing pyjamas," he commented.

"You are," Abbey told him. "They're Jed's. Luckily you two are a similar size."

"What Abbey is really trying to say is that we're both very short," Jed supplied helpfully.

"She can talk," Leo muttered crabbily. "She's tiny." Abbey gave a little snort.

"See, I said he was especially grumpy and argumentative," Jed told her.

"He's ill, Jed. He's entitled," Abbey replied. "I never take any notice of my patients' bad moods, Leo, and I'm not about to start now."

"You're not my doctor," Leo pointed out.

"Now you're just quibbling," Abbey replied, sitting down on the bed beside him and taking his hand in her own. "Listen, Leo, I've personally nursed the worst patient in the world, so there's nothing you can do that will shock, faze or otherwise upset me. I'm immune to it all." She cast a meaningful glance in Jed's direction.

"There see, you've ruined being a bad patient for the rest of us," Leo chided his friend. Jed gave a snort of laughter and sat down on the other side of the bed beside Leo.

"How are you feeling? You gave us quite a scare back there."

"I'm fine. I can go home now," Leo said, in the certain knowledge that wasn't going to happen.

"Yeah. Good try, Leo," Jed chuckled shaking his head. "Doctor Bartlet – that's her not me because you wouldn't want a medical opinion from someone with a doctorate in economics – says that you have to stay here, in this bed, for at least 2 days."

"Could I have a second opinion?" Leo asked.

"Of course, honey," Abbey smiled, patting his hand cheerfully.

"Really?"

"No. Don't be silly." She shook her head.

"So, I'm trapped here, at the mercy of the Bartlets," Leo sighed.

"You make it sound like an Agatha Christie novel," Jed commented, with another of those absurdly cheerful smiles. Then his smile faded. "Seriously, Leo. We were worried about you. When you went down..." He trailed off and even in the dimly lit room Leo could see the concern in his eyes. "You were so pale that I thought for a split second you'd had a heart attack."

"You didn't do or say anything stupid did you?" Leo asked, gazing at Jed keenly.

"I might have expressed concern," Jed said, with a tight little smile.

"Anything I need worry about?" Leo asked.

"Leo, there's nothing you need to worry about right now except getting better," Abbey put in. Leo didn't take his eyes off his friend.

"Sir?" He asked. Jed shrugged.

"Toby might be in the middle of making one of those creepy intuitive leaps of his, but no, I didn't say anything."

"Okay. We can handle Toby if it happens," Leo sighed. "Although he's not the easiest of people to handle but we can do it. We'll..."

"You won't do anything," Abbey told him sternly. "You're ill, Leo. I don't even want you thinking about any of this until you're better."

"And on that subject..." Jed stood up and looked down at him. "Abbey and I have been talking and she was as shocked as I was to find out that you haven't taken a vacation since I became president. So, we decided that when you're well enough to travel you're going to Manchester."

"Oh god." Leo put his head back on the pillow. "Do I have any say in this?"

"No." Jed smiled cheerfully.

"What the hell am I going to do in Manchester?" Leo demanded. "It's in the middle of nowhere and there are cows."

"You'll take long walks, eat good food, get some fresh air, and generally recharge that depleted immune system of yours," Abbey told him firmly. "What you will not do is take phone calls or work on any kind of official documentation. If you're lucky we'll let you have a newspaper."

"Why Manchester?" Leo grumbled. "You could send me to the coast to do all those things."

"We could, but we decided on Manchester because Ron's guys already know it and can keep it secure," Jed told him.

"And why would it need to be secure?" Leo asked ominously. "I'm not a mental patient – or, I hope, a prisoner – I'm not going to abscond."

"Hmm, well, that's a moot point," Jed said, "but it's got nothing to do with that. We can't just send you off somewhere on your own so I'm going with you."

"Oh, dear god no," Leo sighed. "Sir, this is absurd – I'm going to be well again in a couple of days, and then I'll come back to work. I'll even go to Manchester if you want me to – I'm sure a couple of days sitting on your porch reading won't kill me, but there's no earthly reason why you should come too. One of us should be here."

"You're **not** going alone," Jed said firmly in that tone of voice that Leo knew from experience it was pointless arguing with. "It's either me or Florence Nightingale here," he said, with a nod in his wife's direction. "And since she'll take your temperature every five minutes and insist you get at least 2 hearty walks a day, I think you're better off taking your chances with me."

"You have a schedule!" Leo protested. "You can't possibly clear it to nurse maid me in Manchester."

"It's not a very busy schedule at the moment – I got Debbie to take a look at the feasibility of shifting it all around and she said it could be done very easily. In fact she looked as if she positively relished the prospect of reorganizing everything. If there's one thing she likes more than organizing me, it's **re**organizing me. I'll still be contactable by phone, I'll still be the President, and I'll only be a short flight away from DC if I should be needed for anything really important which I doubt. Josh, Toby, CJ and Hoynes can hold the fort while we're gone. I'm coming with you, Leo, so you'd better get used to the idea."

"No. No. No," Leo said firmly. Jed smiled at him indulgently.

"Yes, yes, yes. It's all been settled. You're stuck with me," he said brightly. "Now, I'll leave you in the capable hands of the doctor here while I go back and reassure Josh that you're going to live. At one point I wasn't sure who was paler – you or him."

"Josh was concerned?" Leo asked, surprised.

"Leo – he hero worships you, of course he was concerned – and you did look pretty ill when you collapsed. You shouldn't have neglected your health for so long you know," he chided. Leo snorted.

"Because you have such a good record on the whole health thing, right?" He growled. Abbey patted his hand.

"That's enough talking, Leo. You're tired. I'm going to get Charlie to bring you some soup and then you should get some more sleep."

"Since when does Charlie bring me soup?" Leo complained. "I'm not the President, Abbey."

"No, but right now you're testing the President's patience severely," Jed told him in a hard, flat voice. "I know you're not very good at being looked after, Leo, but I'm afraid you have absolutely no choice in the matter so you might as well give in. It'll be less painful for all of us that way. Charlie **wants** to help – nobody's making him do anything, and you have a whole legion of adoring fans in the West Wing who feel exactly the same way. If you're good and do as Abbey says then I'll think about letting you have visitors tomorrow, but if not..." He crossed his arms firmly over his chest and shrugged. Leo gazed at him warily; his friend could be difficult, mercurial, dramatic and high strung but Jed had an innate authority about him that he could use with devastating effect when he needed. Leo was used to 'handling' Jed in a myriad of little ways, but they both knew that when Jed came out all guns blazing

like this, he was, most definitely, in charge. Leo had come up against this Jed a few times during their long relationship and he knew from experience that he was outmatched. He glanced at Abbey in mute pleading but she just shook her head and gave a throaty chuckle.

"Oh, Leo, don't look at me like that," she said. "I'm with him on this. I'm afraid you really are going to have to let us take care of you for awhile."

Leo sighed and rested his head back on the pillow.

"All right," he conceded at last. "But only because I'm too tired and too damn ill to argue with both you *and* him at the same time."

"Good." Jed leaned over and bestowed a kiss on his forehead. "Get some rest, Leo," he said softly, his hand smoothing Leo's hair gently. "I really was very worried about you," he added in a quiet little voice. Then he straightened up and left the room. Leo watched him go, glumly, and then turned to Abbey.

"I don't need..." He began. She held up her hand.

"You know, I really think he meant it about the visitors, Leo," she told him. "He doesn't often go all lord and master but when he does..." She shrugged. "I wouldn't want to cross him right now."

"No." Leo sighed again. He recalled Jed, in his mid twenties, taking absolutely no shit from him one June night when he'd been behaving badly whilst on leave from Vietnam; recalled a much older Jed calling him on his drinking and not allowing Leo to leave until he'd confronted the problem. Jed had the strongest personality of anyone he'd ever met, and while he wasn't always clear sighted about his own personal problems, where the people he loved were concerned he could be absolutely resolute – even if it meant kicking ass in the process.

"You're really not very well, Leo," Abbey said, squeezing his hand gently in her own. "Let us care for you, honey."

Leo closed his eyes, feeling utterly weary. "Okay," he said at last, in a low, tired voice. And then, a few seconds later, in a voice so quiet as to be almost a whisper. "Thank you."

As it turned out Leo didn't have any visitors from the West Wing the following day – or, in fact for the next 3 days – not because he hadn't been a good patient, but because he felt so ill he wasn't in any mood to see anyone. As he lay in bed, with a pounding headache, a sensitivity to light and an aching in his joints that set his teeth on edge he began to wonder, for the first time, whether Jed might not have been right about both his illness and his refusal to take a vacation. Not that he intended to let Jed know that he was right of course.

Jed and Abbey hired a nurse to sit with him day and night, on hand to bring him a drink if he

wanted one and to administer medication and the White House doctor visited him once a day to check on his progress as well. Abbey and Charlie both dropped in whenever they had a free moment in their schedules and, of course, Jed visited at regular intervals; ill though he was, Leo noticed how concerned his friend was about his condition. Jed seemed to tone his ebullient personality down several notches the moment he walked through the door. He lowered his voice and kept his movements much slower, for which Leo was grateful; sudden movements and loud noises set his nerves on edge. Jed was a tower of strength; he helped Leo to the bathroom, his sturdy arms keeping Leo upright as he clung onto his friend's solid shoulders when the room swam around him. He was endlessly patient and whenever he had a spare minute he came and sat with Leo. Even if he didn't do more than sit by the bed, Leo found his presence somehow intrinsically comforting; Jed refused to talk about work, despite Leo's repeated enquiries, but Jed, being Jed, always had **something** to talk about, and Leo found he wasn't required to participate in the conversation – it was nice just being able to lie back and listen to Jed's warm, deep, mellifluous tones washing over him, soothing him. He lost count of the number of times he'd be listening to Jed talk, watching from half closed eyes as his friend rambled from one subject to another, and the next thing he knew he was waking up to find that hours had passed and Jed was long since gone.

His illness turned out to be more severe than any of them had anticipated and Leo was dimly aware that he was getting that second opinion after all as the President's official physician, a man in a Naval uniform with white hair whose name Leo couldn't recall in his current befuddled state, took a look at him. There followed a whispered discussion between Abbey, Jed and the doctor, after which the two doctors left the room and Jed came and sat down beside him.

"What's going on?" Leo muttered.

"We were just talking about whether you need to go to the hospital," Jed said gently, taking one of Leo's hands in his.

"Oh god. Maybe I **do** have MS after all," Leo said with a faded grin.

"Nah – but you're taking longer than you should to shake off the flu," Jed told him. "I personally don't think you should be moved although my opinion counts for nothing of course – I can barely get a word in edgeways when those two are talking. They speak in a kind of code – every other word is some kind of acronym or the name of a drug or a series of numbers that I believe relates to your blood or your lungs or something. Anyway, I think you're better off here, just resting. Abbey is a first rate doctor and you're getting all the medication you need. However..." Jed shook his head. "I should warn you that she isn't impressed by your general state of health. Leo – you were just waiting for something like this to come along and knock you off your feet. You've been neglecting yourself for far too long – that's why this has hit you so hard. I feel..." Jed hesitated and then continued. "I feel I'm partly to blame. No, Leo, don't interrupt me," he said as Leo opened his mouth to refute that statement. "I **am**. You've taken far more on yourself than you should and I've let you do it. I knew how hard you were working but I didn't say anything because I know that's just how you are – and I'm not so different myself. I know we both thrive on hard work, but I made the mistake of not seeing the difference between that and driving yourself into the

ground. I forgot that in the old days you had Jenny to rein you back in when you got all tunnel-visioned and burrowed in workaholic mode. I've got Abbey to do that – and she does - but you don't have anyone and I should have noticed. You may be grumpy, cantankerous and grouchy but you mean far too much to me for me to allow anything to happen to you. I'd be lost without you, Leo." Jed's voice was hoarse as he said that and Leo felt a lump rise in his own throat. He couldn't remember when or even whether he'd last told Jed he loved him – they didn't usually have those kinds of conversations, and maybe they had gotten into a rut of taking each other for granted lately. The last four years of their lives had been so abnormal, so different from anything that had gone before - and they hadn't stopped and taken stock of those changes. Everything had happened so quickly and they'd adjusted remarkably easily in the circumstances, taking to their new roles of President and Chief of Staff like ducks to water, but somewhere along the way maybe it was inevitable that something in their personal lives had to give.

"And I miss you, damnit," Jed said, in a low voice.

"You see me every single day," Leo reminded him.

"Yeah, but I miss just spending time with you outside the job. We don't really do that any more, Leo – not the way I do with Abbey. There are plenty of times when we're not President and First Lady but how often when I'm with you are we just Jed and Leo?" He shook his head. "I know you want to keep the boundaries owing to the office, and I respect your decision to address me as 'Mr. President' or 'sir' in all but the most personal of situations however irritating it is to me on occasion, but this illness is a wake up call, Leo. You need to slow down, and *we* need to have some time out from the job."

"I don't agree," Leo said softly. "We can't make allowances for ourselves, Jed. We chose this way of life and we chose for you to run as President. That's our priority – we have 4 more years to make a difference and if that means putting aspects of our personal lives on hold for that time then we have to." He shrugged.

"Well, I disagree – nothing is so important that it should cost either one of us our health or, worst case scenario, our lives." Jed shook his head.

"I'm not dead yet and neither are you," Leo protested.

"No – but we've had some near misses along the way," Jed reminded him softly.

"What are you suggesting? That you resign and we go and live out our days in a cottage with roses over the door?" Leo growled tiredly.

"No." Jed gave a little chuckle. "No – I don't think that would suit either of us. I'm just saying that you're going to be getting some regularly scheduled breaks from now on and *I* am going to personally make sure that happens. Also...I've only met Jordan in the office – probably out of some misguided notion about giving you some space to get this relationship going - but if she's going to be an important part of your life then I'd like to get to know her better so I think you and she should visit Abbey and me for dinner every so often. Leo..." He

paused, and gave a little sigh before continuing. "Leo, I know you never wanted to make me your entire life – neither of us wanted that and we knew that even when we were 17 years old. You like women as much as I do and we both wanted wives and families. Somehow along the way though, I *did* become your entire life; I let you make that sacrifice for me – and you never called me on it."

"I came to you and asked you to run for President. I pushed to get you here – I was hardly going to turn my back on you once it happened," Leo whispered, feeling way too tired to be having a conversation this intense.

"I know. I know," Jed said softly, reaching out to stroke Leo's hair gently. Leo was too weary and felt too ill to even brush his lover's hand away. Besides, and he wouldn't even admit this to himself, let alone Jed, but he liked it. "I'm sorry – you're not well enough to talk about all this. I just wanted to explain. Things are going to change around here, Leo. We'll start with a week in Manchester – but first you have to get well enough to make the journey."

"A week cooped up with you on that farm in the middle of nowhere? How could I not want to get better for *that*," Leo commented sarcastically. Jed gave a little bark of laughter.

"Hey, you're talking to the guy who just managed to talk the people in white coats *out* of whisking you off to the hospital," he chided. "I think some gratitude is in order."

"Yeah." Leo grinned at him. "Thanks for that. I hate hospitals."

"I told 'em that – I also said you stood a much better chance of getting well here than stuck in some hospital room with a bunch of people you don't know taking care of you so you have to get better, Leo, if only to prove me right."

"You're always right, Jed. You can't stand for it to be any other way," Leo pointed out. Jed chuckled again.

"Yeah. So, do we have a deal? You get better and then we decamp to Manchester to recharge your batteries? Just you and me. None of this Mr. President stuff either - just Jed and Leo again?"

"Okay." Leo sighed. In truth, he had started to come around to the idea. He was a little shocked himself by how ill he'd been and it was impossible not to concede that Jed was talking a lot of sense – at least about going to Manchester and recuperating there. Leo really didn't feel as if he'd make a good political decision now if he tried. His head started to hurt again even thinking about politics.

"Good." Jed leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "We'll have a minimum of staff – nobody in the house except the necessary people. I'll do all the cooking."

"Oh god. Now he tells me," Leo grouched, but he was grinning all the same. Jed laughed.

"There will be long, restorative walks, and, if you're in the mood, more, uh, recreational

activities – but that's up to you." He gave a bashful smile. "Abbey thinks you're under the impression I have some kind of Droit de Seigneur thing going."

Leo frowned. "As I recall Droit de Seigneur was some 13th century thing where the Lord of the Manor got to deflower girls on the wedding nights before their new husbands slept with them. I'm really not sure what Abbey is getting at there but I'm not a virgin and you are not a 13th century Lord of the Manor – although I'm suspecting that's the kind of job title that appeals to you, my megalomaniacal history buff."

"You know me far too well," Jed replied with a wide grin, waving his hand around airily. Leo winced at the sudden movement. "And I've kept you far too long," Jed said gently, pausing to drop another kiss on Leo's forehead. "Get some rest, old friend."

Leo turned a corner later that day and by the following day his temperature was down and he was feeling much better – if completely weak and washed out. He was well enough the day after that to have visitors – and Josh arrived first, with that worried, distant look in his eyes that Leo was familiar with. He slunk around the walls of the room, as if not entirely sure he should be there.

"You look...weird," Josh commented.

"I've been ill," Leo snapped.

"I know. That's what I mean," Josh replied. "I've never seen you ill before, Leo. It's weird."

"Well, I've seen you on an operating table with your chest cut open so I guess we're even now," Leo commented grumpily. Josh gave a wry grin and suddenly his long body relaxed.

"I'd forgotten about that," he said, sitting down and helping himself to a handful of Leo's grapes from the fruit bowl on the nightstand. "We were all pretty worried about you, you know," he said.

"I do know that, yes, because everyone keeps telling me - as if I collapsed deliberately for the very purpose of worrying you," Leo said.

"It's just because you're the guy who's always there," Josh said with a shrug. "You're the one who's always okay, Leo. You're always at your desk and you're always just available in case anything goes wrong. Even if you're at a function or something you're always at the other end of the phone."

Leo sighed. "That, apparently, is the problem," he said obliquely. Josh frowned at him.

"It's been pretty strange handling things without you," he said. "I've, you know...kind of missed you."

Leo rolled his eyes slightly, but Josh was already looking embarrassed enough without him adding to it. "So what's going on?" He asked, to cover the awkward moment. "What's happening down there?"

"Uh-uh." Josh wagged his finger. "No, Leo. The President told me that I was not, under any circumstances, to discuss work with you."

"Oh for heaven's sake! I'm fine. He's fussing. What's going on?" Leo asked again. Josh gazed at him thoughtfully, as if weighing it up, and then shook his head. "Josh!" Leo ground out in exasperated tones.

"It's no use, Leo – the way he insisted I wasn't to talk shop – well, he was kinda loud about it, and, not to put too fine a point on it, scary. I think there was talk of decapitation at the very least as a penalty for telling you anything about what's going on in the West Wing."

"Josh," Leo said in a low, dangerous tone. "In a few days I'm going to be fine and then I'm going to be coming back to the office and, trust me, I'm gonna remember this conversation."

Josh gave an apologetic smile. "Sorry, Leo," he said, finishing the last of the grapes. "But he was way scarier than you."

"You're kidding!" Leo said, in disbelief.

"No. Really – and he has the whole, you know, being President thing going for him too which makes a direct order from him pretty hard to disobey."

"Okay," Leo sighed, somewhat impressed despite himself. Whatever it was Jed had said to Josh had clearly put the fear of god into his deputy. "So what the hell *am* I supposed to talk to you about?" He grumbled, suddenly realizing that so much of his life was centred around politics that he really didn't have many other topics of conversation.

"I don't know," Josh mused, glancing around the room as if looking for inspiration. "Gardening?" He suggested brightly. Leo sighed.

Toby wasn't a much better visitor. He munched his way through two of the apples in Leo's fruit bowl while making comments about the weather and he kept giving Leo speculative sideways glances that made Leo profoundly uncomfortable. He wanted to cut to the chase and ask Toby what he knew – or thought he knew – about the nature of his relationship with the President but he didn't do that because he knew that even broaching the subject would be as good as admitting it. They discussed sports for half an hour and then, thankfully, Toby left.

CJ was a much more amenable visitor. She didn't touch his fruit and she had a relaxed, easy-going air to her. She also didn't seem to find the sight of Leo in his pyjamas an awkward

proposition at all, and kissed him firmly on the cheek by way of greeting – which took him slightly by surprise. She had plenty to talk about, and Leo found himself genuinely enjoying her company to the point of being disappointed when she finally took her leave.

Mallory dropped by and was her usual affectionate, feisty self. She rattled on about her latest boyfriend and her job and gave him an update on what Jenny was up to which Leo couldn't help but be interested in, despite himself. He still carried a little flame for Jenny in his heart and he thought he always would. Their marriage had ended sadly rather than badly and he was grateful to her for giving him Mallory if nothing else. His daughter was the apple of his eye and he adored her – a feeling that was, luckily, entirely mutual. He'd always gotten along well with Mallory, even when she'd been going through her awkward teenage years. She and Jenny had gone head to head with each other on just about every aspect of Mallory's teenage life, but she had always seen Leo as an ally and to a certain extent he had been – when Jenny wasn't looking at least.

"I'm glad you're going to be okay, Dad," Mallory said, squeezing his hand. "I've never seen Uncle Jed look so worried – and Aunt Abbey wouldn't even let me see you until today."

"I know. I was just – to be honest, Mall, I was just too ill to want to see anyone," Leo sighed. "Abbey was doing the right thing in the circumstances."

Jordan was away on business, for which fact Leo was grateful. It was hard enough having to endure the sympathetic attentions of all his colleagues but the last thing he wanted was for the woman he had spent the past few months trying to, for want of a better word, woo, seeing him looking so pathetic.

By the day after that he was well enough to get out of bed and join Jed and Abbey in the dining room, and the next day he was able to get dressed and wander around the Rose Garden and the White House lawns with Mallory – and the day after that, Abbey decreed that he was well enough to travel. Leo wished he could share Jed's enthusiasm for their 'vacation' but he didn't. As the President's Chief of Staff he felt the whole event was a mistake, and as Leo he found all this fussing over him almost unbearable. He wasn't a man who enjoyed being the centre of attention, unlike Jed; he just wanted to get back to the office and start working again but that, it seemed, was not an option, so he resigned himself to a week of fresh air, strange smells, farm animals and Jed's seemingly relentless good humour. Jed sent for some of his clothes from the hotel and then they set off for Manchester on Marine One.

"It'll be like that film," Jed said to him excitedly as they took off.

"What film?" Leo frowned.

"That film with the silly name - Ellie used to go on about it all the time a few years back – 'John or Frank or Bill or someone and Ted's Excellent Adventure' - or something. Only this will be 'Leo and Jed's Excellent Adventure'."

"Okay – but could it be without the adventure bit?" Leo commented grumpily. "Because

we're going to Manchester so the only adventure I can possibly see happening would involve a cow or a horse or something and I don't see how that kind of adventure could possibly be excellent."

"Leo! Don't sulk," Jed admonished.

"I wasn't. You said this was supposed to be a Jed and Leo vacation and I'm being myself. You've just forgotten how incredibly dull and irritable I can be."

"I've known you for 40 years and I haven't forgotten anything, my friend," Jed told him, his annoyingly good spirits still sounding in his voice.

"Yeah, you have. I've been nice to you for 4 years because of the job," Leo muttered, looking out of the window.

"You'd have more fun if you took your Chief of Staff on vacation but no, you won't let me be in work mode, so you'll have to put up with just *me*."

"Nice try, Leo, but we're still going to Manchester," Jed said. Leo sighed. Jed smiled at him indulgently, then leaned forward and patted his knee. "You know what, old friend? I think you're just scared."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Of all those horses and snakes? You're right," he agreed. "Offices are much safer and I prefer them. It's not too late to turn the helicopter around."

"No, Leo, you're scared of not having politics or your job to distract you. You're an addict, Leo – you're addicted to the adrenalin rush of your job. You have absolutely no idea how you'll function without having politics to hide behind. You've forgotten how to just *be*."

"You've been spending too much time with Stanley," Leo commented sourly. "Now you think you're a shrink."

"I remember a time when we used to talk about books and life and I dunno - just stuff," Jed told him, with that same insufferably smug air. "We can do that again. I have faith in you, Leo."

"Oh god give me strength," Leo sighed, leaning back in his seat and gazing glumly out of the window again.

They arrived at Manchester far too quickly for Leo's liking. He was surprised by how much the journey tired him and he felt so weak that he almost fell over getting out of the helicopter. Jed put a hand under his arm and Leo was grateful to be able to lean on his friend for the short walk up to the house.

The house was pretty much deserted – the security staff took their stations and Jed checked that the fridge had been fully stocked with all the items he'd requested; judging by his

beaming smile Leo assumed it had. Then Jed escorted him up the stairs and opened the door to a bright, airy bedroom with a large double bed.

"This one has the best view in the house," Jed told him, waving his hand in the direction of the window. "It's South East facing and if you get up early you can see the sun rising over the farm. It's beautiful." He dumped Leo's case on the bed, and then went to the door. "I'll be sleeping down the hallway," he said. "Why don't you unpack and then take a nap and I'll cook us some dinner when you get up?"

Leo gazed at him in surprise. "You're not sleeping in here?" He asked.

"Nope." Jed shook his head. "I'll wait for an invite, Leo. If it doesn't come that's fine; this is your vacation." He smiled, and then left the room. Leo stood there for a moment, mulling this over. In truth, he enjoyed sleeping beside Jed, and the idea of having his friend beside him all night was an appealing one as it didn't happen very often. However, he also felt extremely weary right now and it was a relief to know that he had his own space in which to just slump. Nobody was relying on him for anything, and Leo was surprised to find just how good that felt. He was so tired that he pushed his bag onto the floor, got into the bed, and fell instantly asleep.

Jed was busy cooking dinner by the time Leo emerged three hours later. He glanced up at his friend with a welcoming smile; Leo was wearing a pair of jeans and a blue plaid shirt over a tee shirt – and there were boots on his feet. He still looked tired and pale but his appearance had improved from before he had taken his nap, when his skin had been positively grayish in hue.

"Hey, you're looking a bit better than you did earlier," Jed commented, pleased.

"Yeah. I was feeling better too until I looked at the clothes you packed for me," Leo grumbled. "Would it have killed you to have gotten them to pack anything for me that wasn't jeans and plaid shirts or sweats?" He asked with a glare.

"Yes, I do believe it would," Jed replied sweetly. "You're off duty, Leo. Get used to it."

"Like I have a choice," Leo muttered under his breath. "And another thing – my cell phone."

"Aw – did I forget to pack that?" Jed asked in a tone of feigned surprise, smacking his forehead dramatically.

Leo sighed. "So, I'm trapped out here in the middle of nowhere with a President who is trying to pretend it's even remotely possible to have a quiet vacation alone with his Chief of Staff, and he's taken away my cell phone so I can't even make a call to the nearest lunatic asylum to ask them to come and cart either you or me off depending on which of us cracks first," he lamented.

"I'm enjoying myself too," Jed said brightly, ignoring Leo's litany of complaints. "I have a fully stocked fridge and a ton of new recipes to try out – the chef refuses to let me cook at the

Residence unless I kick up the most vocal of protests so I've had to save up all these recipes." He pointed at a scrapbook that was positively bursting with recipes that looked as if they'd been cut out of women's magazines, as they had, although Jed wasn't going to draw attention to that fact.

"You're insane, you know that?" Leo said, with a look of disbelief on his face.

"I like cooking. That's not insane. It's not insane to have a hobby, Leo. You should have a hobby – it would make you less cantankerous," Jed told him briskly.

"I did have a hobby once," Leo shot back. "It was called bicycling and then I don't know what happened...no, wait, I do...some klutz borrowed my \$4000 state of the art titanium touring bike and rode it into a tree."

"Ouch." Jed made a face. "I did say I was sorry about that – I swear that tree *moved*, and that bike was weird anyway, Leo. It was so light it felt like I was sitting on air – it was impossible to get a feel for the thing."

"\$4000." Leo shook his head sadly.

"I would have bought you another one!" Jed told him heatedly. "I offered to but you wouldn't choose a replacement and then..." He sighed. "And then we were both so busy and time just passed and cycling was one more thing you used to enjoy that got swallowed up by my presidency."

They were silent for a moment – Leo stood there, just staring at him, and then, after a few seconds, he sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh.

"What the hell did you say to them?"

"Who?" Jed enquired, measuring some butter into a pan and turning on the stove.

"The staff, the Secret Service, the entire nation." Leo waved his hand. "What possible excuse could you give for taking a vacation with me that doesn't sound like...well, exactly like it *is* because I'm betting that you didn't tell them *that*."

"What? That my old friend Leo, who, by the way, I've been sleeping with for 40 years, got taken very ill and needed some time away from the stresses of his job and I was so worried about him and so concerned not only for his physical but also for his mental wellbeing that I moved heaven and earth to be able to spend a few quiet days with him in the country?" Jed said, all in one continuous stream of words.

"Yeah. Right. You told them that did you? No wonder you aren't letting me see the news then," Leo muttered.

"I took care of it, Leo. It's nothing you need to worry about. I swung it," Jed told him firmly.

"We can't afford to be this careless, Jed!" Leo snapped. Jed turned sharply.

"This wasn't being careless, Leo," he said in a hard tone of voice. "This took a great deal of care – most of it for you, so don't throw it back at me like this. Do you think people really care if the President and his Chief of Staff decamp to Manchester to talk over the direction of their administration and the policy issues they want to concentrate on for the next 4 years? We just won an election for god's sake – a bit of taking stock isn't so very surprising right now."

"And the staff? They didn't buy that," Leo grunted.

"No – they didn't need to. They saw how ill you were and they know what a workaholic you are. I told them that this was the only way I could get you to rest and personally make sure you didn't return to the office too soon – and they understood. They know we're friends, Leo – they know we're close friends. They didn't think it was strange."

"And Toby?" Leo asked quietly. "Did he understand or did he put 2 and 2 together and make a perfectly accurate 4?"

"I don't care about Toby," Jed snapped. "Whatever he's thinking or whatever he imagines he knows, it's unlikely that he's ever going to call us on it."

"He's called you on other personal stuff before," Leo pointed out. "He called you on the thing with your Dad and that was pretty close to home too. He called you on your MS."

"Well, it'd take more nerve than I suspect even Toby possesses to come knocking on the door of the Oval Office and say; 'Mr. President, are you and Leo having sex?'" Jed pointed out, throwing the pan with the butter onto the stove with a resounding crash. Leo winced and Jed paused, and got control of his temper. "Leo, I took care of it," he said softly.

"There's no need for you to worry about it. I'm completely in contact – it's just you who isn't. I'll be taking calls every morning and I can be reached day or night if anything big happens. It's a simple matter to get Marine One to take me back to DC if anything should blow up. I'm often away from the Oval Office and the country doesn't grind to a halt – there's no reason it will this time. I might be important but I'm not *that* important – and neither, my friend, are you." He sat down across the table from Leo and looked at him with a wry smile. "Can't you at least try and enjoy this week?" He asked softly. "It's been years since we got to spend any time alone like this."

Leo looked at him and Jed thought he detected a softening of his friend's features.

"Jed." Leo leaned forward conspiratorially.

"Mmm?" he replied, leaning forward himself so their foreheads were almost touching.

"Your butter's burning."

"Damnit!" Jed got up and raced over to the stove where the butter was sizzling explosively

in the pan. He threw the pan and its contents into the sink, burning his thumb in the process, and then hopped around the kitchen for a couple of seconds with his thumb in his mouth. When he looked at Leo he found his friend grinning at him and he decided that it had been worth the minor burn to have coaxed the first thing approaching a proper smile out of Leo that he had seen in weeks – maybe even months. He grinned back, in between some determined cursing, and Leo laughed out loud - and it was only then that Jed relaxed, and thought that maybe, just maybe, this vacation might actually work out okay after all.

Jed rescued the dinner and proceeded to cook a delicious meal for them both, which Leo enjoyed to the extent of actually managing to finish it all – he'd been picking at his food since he got ill and at the worst of his illness had been unable to keep anything down at all, so Jed judged that his meal must have appealed to Leo's jaded palate. Afterwards Jed surveyed the empty plates with a satisfied smile and gestured with his head towards the lounge.

"Why don't you go and rest in the other room. I'll do the clearing away," he said. Leo gave him a look of surprise and then broke into a wry smile. "What?" Jed demanded, getting up and taking both their plates over to the sink.

"Nothing – it's just...when did you - or I - last wash up anything?" Leo asked with a chuckle. "I live in a hotel and you don't even have to ring for room service – everything is done for you."

"It *is* kind of weird," Jed acknowledged, filling the sink with water. "But never let it be said that the leader of the free world doesn't mind getting his hands dir...uh, clean," he grinned as he plunged his hands into the water. Leo crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the fridge, a ridiculously amused smirk on his face, and then proceeded to watch Jed washing up as if it were a spectator sport. Jed endured it for the duration of the two plates he was washing and then snapped.

"Oh for god's sake – you're enjoying this far too much. And if you're not going to sit down and rest then I don't think it'll tax you too much to dry up." And so saying, he grabbed a cloth from the counter and flung it at his friend, hitting him square on the chest. Leo burst out laughing, but readily picked up a plate and began drying.

There was something oddly domesticated about the scenario Jed thought to himself as he washed the saucepans he had used during cooking. The strangest thing of all was that this had never been part of his relationship with Leo – cosy domestication hadn't featured in their lives. They'd never lived together in the relationship sense of the word; their relationship had been conducted, over the years, in a series of hotel rooms and the occasional weekend spent at the house of one or other of them when their respective wives had been away. He found himself wondering whether their relationship could have withstood this kind of humdrum, every day kind of existence, and had no answer to that question – but he did know that as a once in a blue moon vacation it was very nice.

"You're humming," Leo said in an accusing tone of voice.

"I am!" Jed agreed happily. "I'm feeling...content." He turned and grinned at Leo. "There, see, Leo – we should take vacations together more often. We shouldn't wait until you're at death's door in order to grab a few days' away together."

"I wasn't at death's door," Leo objected. "I just had the flu."

"Did you know that the great influenza pandemic of 1918 killed more people than were killed in the whole of the First World War?" Jed said, revelling in being able to brandish one of the pieces of trivia that had been lying around uselessly in his brain waiting for this very moment. "So, it isn't *just* the flu, Leo. It can be serious. And fatal. No, my friend, you had a lucky escape from the clutches of the grim reaper."

"Yeah. Whatever." Leo rolled his eyes. "Tell me, will your tendency to over-dramatise get better or worse whilst on vacation? I'm thinking worse, because normally we're able to distract you with international crises and problems with Congress but out here, in the middle of nowhere, you'll have to make up your own dramas." He glanced out of the window at the dark, alien world outside mournfully. "Why is it so *dark* in the country?" He lamented.

"Leo!" Jed protested. "My god – you don't have any idea how all that light pollution in the city has been destroying your view of this galaxy we live in, do you? Come with me." He withdrew his hands from the soapy water, dried them, and grabbed Leo by the arm, drawing him towards the kitchen door. He opened it, led Leo outside, marched him around the porch to get the best view, and then pointed up. "See, Leo!" He said in an awe-struck voice. Leo glanced up at the night sky, and Jed could see the look of grudging appreciation in his eyes as he did so. The stars covered the blackness of the sky like a sparkling, twinkling net, far brighter than anything that would have been visible in Washington. "Sometimes," Jed breathed softly, "I come out here, wrap myself up in a blanket, and just sit, gazing at the sky. The stars seem so *close* and I feel...kind of connected to them, to the planet...and I'm overwhelmed by my sheer unimportance in the grand scheme of things."

Leo turned his head and gave Jed a little grin. "It is very beautiful, Jed – I can see why you find it so humbling," he murmured and then he gave a little shiver.

"I'm sorry – you're not well and it's cold out here." Jed began walking back inside and it wasn't until he got there that it occurred to him that Leo's shiver might have had more to do with the awesome beauty of the night sky and the sentiments it evoked than the chill in the air.

"So...what do we do now?" Leo asked when they returned to the house, glancing around a little helplessly. Jed grinned.

"Now, we chill out, Leo. My god it's been far too long since you took a vacation, old friend."

Leo gave a little chuckle and shook his head wryly. "To be honest, old friend, I'm not sure I

was ever that good at vacations," he sighed. "What *do* we do? Talk? Read?"

"Sure." Jed nodded. "Or - how about we play a game?"

"Hmm." Leo looked dubious. "What kind of game? Not chess – my eyes hurt at the thought."

"Okay, not chess. How about Scrabble? Or Trivial Pursuit?"

"Oh no – you are not getting me on that one, Jed," Leo snorted. "I might be ill but I'm not completely addled."

"What did I say?" Jed spread his arms out and adopted a look of innocence.

"Trivial Pursuit – if a bunch of people had sat around a table with the specific aim of inventing *the* perfect game for Jed Bartlet, they'd have come up with Trivial Pursuit," Leo told him. "As you well know. You might be able to inveigle unsuspecting members of your senior staff or innocent visitors who don't *know* you that well into playing with you, but I have no intention of putting myself through what I'm sure would be a ritual humiliation. Are there *any* questions in the damn game that you don't know the answers to?"

"Possibly." Jed shrugged. "One or two anyway." He gave a broad grin. "Okay, Leo, Scrabble it is then – although I could point out that as you're the crossword buff Scrabble is to you what Trivial Pursuit is to me but I'll let that pass."

They played Scrabble for a couple of hours, amid many accusations of making up words and a minor squabble over a triple word score. Jed won, but Leo reminded him that was simply because he wasn't in good health, and he demanded a rematch when he was well. It had actually been a very tight match and Jed felt himself relaxing even more and just enjoying Leo's company – there were few people who could give him a good run for his money at Scrabble, and Leo, even when ill, was definitely one of them which was exhilarating to Jed – although Leo was starting to look a little worn out by the events of the evening.

"Want to go to bed?" Jed offered as he cleared away the game.

"No...I spent most of the afternoon sleeping," Leo replied.

"Why don't we watch some TV then?" Jed suggested, turning on the TV and sitting down on the sofa. Leo sat down beside him with a sigh.

"I can't remember the last time I actually sat down and watched anything other than the news," he commented with a little grin. "Jenny used to watch these drama shows – not the soaps, but other stuff, better stuff - at least I think it was better - all about people with complicated professional lives and suppressed workplace attraction...hmm, maybe they *were* soaps after all," he pondered.

Jed shook his head. "Nah – in the soaps the workplace attraction isn't suppressed. They

have sex all over the place, invariably get caught, get divorced every week and marry someone else just as unnaturally perfect looking the week after."

"How do you know?" Leo raised an eyebrow.

"I saw one once when I was ill a few years back. I figure they're all the same." Jed waved his hand around airily.

"I miss those shows," Leo said suddenly. "Jenny's shows. I miss them. I used to make fun of 'em all the time when she was watching them but you know...I really do think I miss them."

"Yeah." Jed shook his head. "Leo, we never really talked that much about your divorce. I was thinking...y'know – and don't tell anyone this because my reputation as Commander in Chief is at stake – but Abbey sometimes cuts out these recipes from magazines that she thinks I'll enjoy and stuffs them all into a folder for me to look at when I have the time. It's the stupid little stuff like that that I'd miss if she wasn't in my life. Stuff like Jenny's shows...after all those years of living with someone you kind of get to know the shorthand."

"Yeah." Leo nodded.

"Leo - you and I – we have shorthand. Maybe it's a different kind, but we have that," Jed said softly. "I know what you're thinking sometimes before you say it. I know how you're feeling just by the way you move your head. I don't think I could have done this job without you sitting in that office next door."

"Yeah. You could." Leo shrugged.

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to." Jed gave his friend a little smile.

"Yeah." Leo returned it. "Jed, we don't have to talk about my divorce, do we? I mean, it was a couple of years ago now and..."

"I don't think we ever talked enough about the personal stuff. We should have," Jed said. "We just assumed everything was going to carry on the way it has for 40 years but things changed. I became President for god's sake! You got divorced! These past 4 years have been a rollercoaster ride, Leo. Nothing that went before could ever have prepared us for it. I guess we were just lucky that the foundations of our admittedly unconventional relationship were so strong – and we just got on with it and coped."

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "I guess...but can we do this another time?" He was looking pale again, and Jed knew he was more tired than he was letting on. His blue eyes had sunk into his skin and there were weary lines etched around them.

"Okay." Jed nodded. "Sure. Hey let me see if I can find one of Jenny's shows..." He flicked the remote control at the TV a few times until he found something that looked like the kind of thing Leo had been talking about...only to find, when he glanced back at his friend, that Leo had fallen asleep. Jed grinned, and, reaching out, put an arm around Leo's shoulders and

pulled him close. Leo came, mumbling something as he did so, and settled happily in the crook of Jed's arm, his head on Jed's shoulder. This wasn't something they ever did either, Jed thought to himself, which was a shame, because he was really enjoying it. His lips brushed Leo's hair and he gazed, absently, at the TV. Leo so rarely allowed himself to be vulnerable – he was always the one taking care of everyone else, in that low key, capable way he had. It felt good being able to do the taking care for a change.

Leo woke an hour later, and blinked, looking around blearily.

"Hey." Jed grinned at him.

"I fell asleep?" Leo asked in a bemused tone of voice.

"Yeah. You're still pretty ill, Leo. It'll take awhile before you can get through the day without taking a nap or two along the way. Why don't I help you up to bed?"

"I can do it." Leo sat forward, started to get up, and then sat back down again. "Jed, the room is moving," he muttered.

"Yeah," Jed chuckled. "So let me help you and get used to the idea, Leo. You're ill. You can lean on me – that's what I'm here for." Leo turned to look at him for a second, and then he gave a sigh, and, Jed thought, he looked as if he was finally accepting the inevitability of needing that help.

"Okay," he said at last. Jed got up and helped his friend to stand and then escorted the gently swaying Leo up to his bedroom.

"Guess it's just been a long day," Leo grumbled, although Jed could see that he was shaken by how feeble he was right now. It was as if he had decided in his head that he was better and he couldn't understand why his body didn't seem to agree.

"You just get tired easily. Abbey said it would be like this," Jed told him, fishing out Leo's pyjamas and handing them to him.

"Yeah, but I thought she was just saying that to scare me into taking it easy," Leo growled. "I didn't know she meant it. I don't need your help getting undressed, thank you!" He batted Jed's hands away.

"Okay." Jed stood back and watched, a resigned expression on his face, as Leo made a determined effort to unbutton his shirt; his friend's hands had a tendency to shake when he was under stress – a legacy, Jed supposed, of Leo's long battle with alcoholism and the valium he had been prescribed to help him deal with the pain of the back injury he'd sustained in Vietnam. Now Leo was so tired he wasn't able to control the shaking and his hands let him down. Finally, he gave up the struggle to undo his shirt with a growl of frustration.

"Oh for god's sake – all right," he muttered, putting his hands back on the bed and glaring at

Jed.

"Hey." Jed knelt down in front of his friend and undid Leo's shirt. "Why can't you just enjoy being taken care, Leo? It won't be for long. Why can't you give in gracefully? I always do."

Leo snorted. "Hmm, well that must be some new definition of 'giving in gracefully' of which I'm not aware," he muttered.

"Leo – I've bawled in your arms like a kid and not so long ago either," Jed reminded him. "It's *you* so I don't feel embarrassed about it. You shouldn't either. It's just me."

"You don't mind being..." Leo paused and struggled for the words. "I don't know...you don't mind being the object of someone else's focus, Jed - the centre of attention. I...I'm uncomfortable with it."

"Yeah. I know." Jed shook his head, chuckling, as he helped Leo remove his shirt and the tee shirt underneath it. "I guess that you'll just have to tolerate it for now though." He helped Leo out of the rest of his clothes and into his pyjamas and then Leo slid into bed.

"Don't tell me you're going to tuck me in as well," Leo sighed.

"Yup. Hey, don't knock it," Jed grinned. "Not everyone gets to enjoy the personal nursemaid services of the President of the United States."

"I'll consider myself honoured," Leo commented grumpily. Jed grinned and bent over to deposit a kiss on Leo's forehead. Leo grunted by way of goodnight and Jed couldn't resist stroking his friend's hair softly.

"You do know that when I get better that has to stop don't you?" Leo told him. "I'm only putting up with it because I'm too tired to stop you."

"I know – and I'm taking advantage of you shamelessly," Jed grinned. "Hell, you've been stroking my hair for 40 years, Leo – it's about time I got my own back. Payback is such a bitch isn't it?"

He wasn't sure he heard Leo's reply correctly, which was a good thing as he suspected it hadn't been very polite.

Jed emerged from his study the following day after taking presidential phone calls for most of the morning, to find Leo sitting in the lounge with a blanket over his legs, flicking through a book.

"Reading anything good?" Jed plunked himself down beside his friend and gazed at him.

"It depends on your definition of 'good'." Leo held up the book. "I appear to be thumbing my way through a selection of ancient Greek plays. It was either that or a whole series of books about the adventures of a teenage nurse." He gestured with his head in the direction of the bookcase.

"Ah!" Jed grinned. "Ellie and I are the big readers in the family, so that would explain the, uh, somewhat specialised range of book titles."

"Ellie's 27," Leo pointed out reproachfully.

"I know – but these are left over from when she was growing up. I made her read the classics as well of course but she'd sneak in those godawful nurse books when I wasn't looking." Jed grinned. "I'm not surprised you opted for the Greek tragedies."

"I didn't," Leo said. "I read an entire nurse novel in one sitting this morning and then moved on to this for a change of pace. That nurse was amazingly resourceful. I had no idea nurses were required to winch down mountainsides and rescue dogs stuck on ledges. The ancient Greek people seem to be mainly obsessed with killing their loved ones so they're easier to empathise with." He smiled sweetly at Jed.

"You're feeling better. I can tell," Jed said, gazing at his friend with an assessing look.

"I am. I do have to admit to feeling very relaxed," Leo replied in a slightly stunned tone of voice. "I had no idea this whole leisure thing could be so good. I may have to resign as your Chief of Staff just so I can have the time to read through the other 176 novels in the nurse series."

"Okay, okay." Jed shook his head. "I'm sure we can find you *some* other kind of reading material around the place."

"How about a newspaper?" Leo said, a note of longing in his voice. "Or maybe you could fill me in on what's going on back at the West Wing? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." Jed got up, and ruffled Leo's hair casually as he passed him, ignoring Leo's click of annoyance and enjoying the fact that he had Leo at his mercy and could muss up his hair with impunity right now.

"You'd tell me if it wasn't, right?" Leo asked.

"Of course." Jed nodded.

"You're lying aren't you?" Leo sighed.

"Yes I am." Jed treated his friend to his most annoyingly smug smile. "Leo, the West Wing doesn't fall apart when you're not there. It doesn't even fall apart when *I'm* not there."

"Well it wouldn't," Leo snorted.

"I'll ignore that," Jed said with a wave of his hand. "Leo, it's a sunny day – do you feel up to a walk?"

"Oh god yes. Anything to get away from plucky nurses and patricidal Greek kings," Leo said in heartfelt tones.

Chapter 2 by Xanthe

It was a beautiful spring day and Jed felt light hearted and relaxed as they wandered slowly around the farm.

"This reminds me of the old days," he said to Leo as they ambled up to the paddock to look at the horses.

"Which old days?" Leo asked, stopping for a moment to catch his breath. "They're all the old days now, Jed. We have 40 years of old days behind us." He sounded a little wistful but the smile he shot at Jed was a softer one than Jed had seen on his friend's lips for quite some time, his sharp blue eyes twinkling with memories.

"There was that time when we were 18 and you came to visit – we used to go out walking then, and there were all those times we met up when we were at college – we'd meet half way between South Bend and Ann Arbor and find a quiet country lane to wander along."

"And neck in," Leo reminded him with a slightly wolfish smile.

"Yeah." Jed chuckled. He glanced around and spied two of his agents sitting by the house, watching him, and caught a glimpse of Ron sitting in the old sugaring house that had been converted to a place for the agents to stay when they were at Manchester. "I guess necking is out of the question right now," he sighed.

"Definitely," Leo said firmly.

"Sorry, that wasn't a come on." Jed said, reaching the paddock and putting his arms on the fence.

"Jed – it's okay," Leo said quietly, coming to rest beside him. "You don't need to tiptoe around this subject like it's gonna upset me."

"I don't know what you're thinking that's all," Jed said with a shrug. "Abbey made me stop for a moment and consider the past few years from your viewpoint. We can't pretend nothing changed – and the last thing I'd want is for you to feel --- I don't know. Cornered? We never used to see this much of each other, Leo – I think having you around all the time for the past 4 years with the availability of sex pretty much on demand might have gone to my head. What I'm trying to say – admittedly not very well – is that I'm sorry if I didn't give you any space or if you felt that taking care of me in the bedroom was just an extension of

what you do for me in the office." Jed said all that very quickly, and then paused to catch his breath.

Leo gave him a sideways glance. "Are you done now?"

Jed scowled. "Well, no, I think I could say all that much better with some practice but..."

"My god these horses are *big*," Leo interrupted as a large, chestnut stallion stopped right in front of them and shook his mane almost casually at them.

"Are you trying to distract me from talking about this?" Jed frowned.

"Why would I do that? You know that the one thing I love more than anything in the world is intense personal conversations about relationships and stuff," Leo shrugged.

"Leo, I think we have to sort this out. I need to know if there's something I can do better, something I've got wrong, some way of handling us and the job and keeping us both happy and sane – relatively speaking anyway." Jed gave a wry smile. "I need to know what you're thinking, Leo!"

"I'm thinking," Leo said slowly, as if pondering every word, "That it's probably time for lunch."

He tapped Jed lightly on the arm and then turned and began walking back to the house. Jed gazed after him for a moment, sighing to himself. He knew Leo was the most stubborn, obdurate person in the world and that once he dug his heels in it was almost impossible to shift him. All the same, Jed couldn't help worrying about whether Leo's refusal to talk about this was, at least in part, because he didn't want to hurt his friend with his honesty. Maybe, even in this, Leo was still protecting him. That bothered Jed and he followed Leo into the house with a heavy heart. He knew better than to keep pushing away at this topic – they had come out here as Jed and Leo after all. He had *insisted* that they be Jed and Leo and not bring any of the presidential baggage with them. He couldn't now order Leo to open up just to ease *his* fears. He didn't want Leo to just tell him what he wanted to hear and the fact that Leo wasn't saying anything at all merely confirmed Jed's belief that he had been right in his assessment of the problem they were having – or even that it was something worse, something so bad that Leo couldn't face telling him. He tried to put himself in Leo's shoes; Leo had always been the politically savvy one. Even back when they were 17 years old it had been Leo who the kids at the debate camp had voted for as President and Jed who he had appointed as his Chief of Staff. Jed didn't kid himself for a moment that he'd have become President without Leo's considerable help. It had always been a joint effort – Jed Bartlet *and* Leo McGarry - only Jed got to be the figurehead and have all the glory of the title while Leo had to do a lot of the behind the scenes hard work; not that he ever gave the impression that bothered him, and Jed knew that Leo didn't enjoy the limelight the way he did so maybe it had worked out for the best after all...and yet now that he had started worrying about their relationship, something he had always taken so much for granted, Jed wasn't sure where to stop.

Leo remained enigmatic for the next two days and while Jed was delighted to see his friend becoming visibly stronger and more relaxed as time passed, his own fears got much worse. He didn't say anything to Leo, but they gnawed away at him in private. Suddenly the bed seemed very empty and it seemed ironic that they finally had some time alone together, to be Jed and Leo again, and yet conversely, they were as chaste as if President and Chief of Staff was all they were to each other. Jed knew he'd been lucky – he had always had either Abbey or Leo to share both his bed and his private thoughts and the idea of being without either one of them upset him. They'd both been part of his life for too long – without them he knew he would be missing a vital part of himself.

His fears weren't made any better by the fact that Leo hadn't yet invited him to spend the night in his bed; Jed had made a decision that he wouldn't make any sexual overtures towards Leo and he intended to stick to it. He'd wait until Leo came to him – and if Leo didn't, either for the duration of his presidency or for the rest of their lives, then Jed would respect that decision. He wasn't entirely sure how he'd handle it but he would do his best to make sure that it was with good grace. He knew he'd been lucky enough to be blessed with not one but two people in his life who he had been intimate with on so many levels and that was more than most people had. All the same, he hoped that wasn't a decision Leo would come to. Their friendship spanned 40 years and while Jed knew he'd never lose that, because it was simply inconceivable that he and Leo might not be close, he knew that he didn't want to lose the physical side of their relationship either. He was a tactile man and he liked both giving and receiving affection – even after all these years his skin still occasionally tingled and buzzed when Leo touched him.

"Here." Jed wandered into the lounge where Leo was sitting reading the following evening after dinner, and handed his friend his own cell phone.

"What's this? Is the prison warder finally allowing me to talk to my colleagues back in the West Wing?" Leo asked, with a raised eyebrow, accepting the phone eagerly.

"Nope. I'm meddling incorrigibly in your romantic affairs in the way you hate," Jed told him with a smile. "It's Jordan."

"Jordan?" Leo sat up quickly, and put the phone to his ear. "Jordan?" Jed watched for a moment, smiling happily at the delighted expression on Leo's face and trying to ignore the little stab of jealousy he felt in his heart. He was used to his own jealousy – and he did his best never to give any inkling of it to Leo. Abbey was another matter – she knew all about his jealousy and teased him about it regularly, sometimes flirting outrageously with other men for, as far as Jed could see, the express purpose of upsetting him, although she always maintained that she was just being her usual charming self. Leo was different though; their relationship had thrived on neither of them making unreasonable claims or demands on each other. There had been times when Jed had *wanted* to, god knows, but he had always sensed that even Leo's calm good humour might be frayed away into nothing if he showed just how jealous he felt of the other people in Leo's life. Besides, Jed knew it wasn't fair – he had Abbey and Leo had never expressed the slightest jealousy over his relationship with his

wife – the least Jed could do was to repay the favour. Now, Jed was doing his best to be a good friend to Leo, and if that meant setting up a call between him and the woman he was dating, then he was happy to do it.

Jed tore himself away from Leo, another doubt creeping into his mind as he saw how genuinely happy Leo was to be talking to Jordan. For so many years there had been a status quo between them – they were both married, both had families, both had their own careers...yet at the same time they were important to each other and there for each other; they had met up at hotels and occasionally at each other's houses and their friendship had remained as strong as ever – and then all that changed. Jed became President and Leo's marriage to Jenny had fallen apart. It had been a long time since Jed had had to deal with the jealousy of watching Leo fall in love with someone else – it had hurt badly enough first time around, with Jenny, but things had settled down, and it had become clear that she wouldn't be a threat to his relationship with his friend; Jed had even come to like Jenny a lot once he had conquered his own jealousy. Now though...now maybe Leo wanted something different in his life, Jed thought, wandering slowly out into the paddock, lighting a cigarette as he went. Maybe he wanted to be with Jordan without having his relationship with Jed hanging around his neck. Not that Jed thought for a moment that Leo's devotion to him had wavered but Abbey was right – Leo had other things going on in his life right now and maybe it was time for Jed to take a back seat – at least as far as their relationship went.

Jed finished his cigarette, and gazed, thoughtfully, at the horses prancing around in the field. He wished he wasn't feeling like this but he couldn't help it – his feelings for Leo had always been so strong – too strong for him to do anything other than just go along with them no matter how hard he had sometimes tried to fight them.

"Penny for 'em," a voice said behind him and Jed turned with a jerk of surprise.

"They aren't worth that much," Jed said gruffly.

"Hey – thanks for that." Leo handed him the cell phone, and Jed gazed at his friend, knowing he had done the right thing by the relaxed, beaming smile that Leo gave him. "You'll note that I didn't use the opportunity to sneak a call to Josh after talking to Jordan," Leo pointed out as Jed stuck the phone into the pocket of his jeans.

"I knew I could trust you," Jed grinned in reply. "So, how was Jordan?"

"Great – she wants to know when I'm coming home. She has some special meal for two planned at her place."

"She can cook?" Jed asked, trying hard to ignore another of those little stabs of jealousy that comment had engendered.

"I dunno." Leo shrugged.

"Maybe she'll get caterers," Jed commented sourly. Leo gazed at him quizzically for a moment.

"Maybe she will...although, let's face it, it's gonna be pretty tough for even the best caterers to beat the cuisine of Chez President that you've been spoiling me with these past few days," Leo said with a smile. Jed couldn't help giving an ear to ear grin despite himself – and then he wondered whether he was as good at hiding his jealousy as he had always imagined. Leo's expertly diplomatic answer had soothed his ruffled feathers with a finesse that Jed realized his friend was adept at. Maybe he was an open book to Leo after all – Jed glanced up sharply, straight into Leo's watchful blue eyes, and realized, with some dismay, that Leo didn't miss a thing.

"Leo," he began.

"I miss Jenny," Leo interrupted him. "I do miss her, Jed. Jordan...she's funny, she's bright...she's kind of quirky. I haven't felt like this about a woman since Jenny left and that's been over 3 years."

"I know. I'm pleased for you, Leo. I guess there's something we need to discuss: have you told her about us?"

"No." Leo shook his head.

"Don't you think you should?" Jed asked quietly. Maybe, he thought to himself, Leo hadn't told Jordan because he intended to finally bring at least the sexual side of his relationship with his old friend to an end. Jed thought he could bear that as long as they didn't have to lose the intimacy of their friendship too; the conversations, the smiles, the little touches and gestures – they were all just as important.

"If it gets serious then I will...until then, we can't afford to take that risk, can we?" Leo said quietly. "If you weren't the President then maybe I wouldn't be so cautious – but it's a hell of a lot to lay on any woman and I have no idea how Jordan will react."

Jed nodded, absently. "I want this for you, Leo," he said, burying his jealousy as far down as he could. "I want for you to be happy. I don't want to get in the way. If you need for me to be a..." He chose his words carefully, "less intrusive presence in your life then I'll respect that."

"You're gonna stop being President then?" Leo quirked an eyebrow at him.

Jed gave an exasperated sigh. "That wasn't what I meant by less intrusive."

"Jenny and I broke up because I spent too many hours at the office – not because of you; she lived with our relationship very gracefully for a very long time. It's the workload that's the killer, Jed," Leo murmured.

"That's because you're a workaholic, Leo." Jed snapped. It seemed to him that every time he tried to broach this subject Leo took them off on a tangent and they never really resolved anything and he was getting tired of the whole thing. "Damn it, that's partly why we're out

here now because you worked yourself into the ground. Jenny loved you – your marriage wouldn't have ended if you'd only made some time for her every now and again."

"Oh god – just bring all this up again, why don't you!" Leo growled. "You couldn't leave it alone at the time and I knew you'd never be able to let it drop. This was between Jenny and me – it didn't involve you. It still doesn't! Being President has clearly gone to your head – you think that you can order people to stay married the same way you can order troop movements!"

"That's not what I meant," Jed said angrily.

"No, what you *meant* was – 'why did you have to go and screw everything up, Leo? We had a status quo – why did you have to go and fuck that up by getting divorced? Why did you have to go and make *my* life more difficult by doing that, Leo, and why did you have to go and possibly find someone new to complicate both our lives?' That's what you damn well meant," Leo finished, just as angrily.

"Well, that's some low opinion you have of me, Leo. I hope I can live down to it." Jed threw his cigarette on the ground and stamped on it.

"I'm not having this conversation with you," Leo told him sharply. "This is the reason why I *never* want to have these goddamn conversations with you, Jed!" And so saying, he turned on his heel and walked back to the house. Jed watched him go, his anger simmering resentfully.

"Damnit," he muttered, slamming his hand against the paddock fence, annoyed with himself for having dealt with the whole issue so incredibly badly. He glanced up at the house and saw the light go on in Leo's room. It stayed on for a few minutes and then went off again. Jed sighed – there was clearly no hope of any kind of rapprochement this evening and Leo's bedroom door remained as closed to him as it had been since they had arrived. He smoked another cigarette and then walked back to the house, his dark mood settling around his shoulders like a cloud. Maybe Leo had a point, he thought to himself as he walked wearily up the stairs. Maybe he had gotten too used to being President, able to make people jump to his bidding with a wave of his hand. Maybe he had started to take the same approach in his personal life and was driving away the people he loved in the process. What was it Abbey had said? 'Leo must think you get to have everything your own way. Which you do.'

Jed paused for a moment outside Leo's closed door. He raised his hand and considered knocking, then hesitated. What else had Abbey said? 'He must think there's no getting away from you sometimes...' Jed lowered his hand, and then carried on walking along the hallway to his own bedroom. He got undressed glumly, and then threw himself into bed but sleep was impossible. He hated being on bad terms with Leo – because the truth was that he never *was* on bad terms with Leo. They sometimes had heated intellectual arguments but those never spilled over into the way they felt about each other or their friendship.

Jed was prone to insomnia at the best of times and this, most definitely, was not the best of times; he dozed, fitfully, his dreams bizarre and disturbing, and woke frequently, churning

his problems around in his overactive brain until he thought they'd drive him nuts. Finally he got up, pulled on some sweats, grabbed a blanket from the bed and wandered downstairs. This was an old routine and it was one that gave him some degree of comfort. He loved sitting on the big swing bench on the porch, just gazing up at the stars, wrapped in a blanket. One of his security detail was stationed at the bottom of the stairs and he could see several others outside the house. He'd argued with Ron long and loud about their presence inside the house and Ron had, finally, agreed on the compromise that as the entire farm was pretty much a prison camp with a completely secure perimeter, Jed wouldn't have to be trailed by an agent from room to room when he was inside the house although one would be stationed inside at all times.

Jed pushed open the kitchen door, stepped out onto the porch, making for the swing bench...and then stopped. The swing bench already had an occupant; he could just about make out Leo's huddled form and could hear the creak of the hinges as the bench swung slowly back and forth. He hesitated, but Leo glanced up and saw him so it was too late to slip quietly back into the house.

"Hey," he said softly. "Great minds think alike." He held up the blanket he was carrying. "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd come out here and do some star gazing. I wasn't following you," he said defensively. Leo gave him a conciliatory little smile.

"I know," he said softly.

"I'll go if you want," Jed offered.

"No. Stay." Leo scooted along a little and patted the bench. "There's room for two."

"Okay." Jed sat down and then gave Leo a reproving glance. "You didn't bring a blanket? Abbey would have us both for breakfast if she knew you were sitting out here in the cold so soon after being so ill."

"I didn't think. I just remembered what you said about how good it was to sit out here so I thought I'd give it a try," Leo said with a shrug. Jed opened up the blanket he had brought and laid it over their laps, tucking it in around Leo despite his friend's half hearted protest.

"Leo, I want to apologise," Jed said when they were both safely tucked in. "I don't want to argue and I won't talk about anything that's gonna get you riled up, but I wanted to say 'sorry'."

"It's okay." Leo shrugged. "It's an old argument, Jed – one we've had on and off at various times in our relationship. I guess I just didn't want to do it again and got defensive about it."

"It's an old argument?" Jed frowned, confused. "It is?" He tried to figure out what Leo was getting at, and failed. "I thought it was a new one. I mean – I thought it was about Jenny and Jordan and me being President and you getting pissed off with me and..."

"No," Leo said quietly. "It isn't about any of those things. Not really."

"What is it about then?" Jed asked, glancing at his friend, wondering if he should really start to worry now.

"It's about sex," Leo said firmly. Jed thought about that for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No, I'm still not getting it," he sighed. Leo grinned at him.

"It's about us, thinking we can ever not be as close in the bedroom as we are in other areas of our lives," Leo told him. Jed settled back in the bench and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Nope, you're going to have to explain it all to me, Leo," he said.

"Okay." Leo grinned at him again and then was silent for a long time.

"Anytime in the next couple of hours would be fine, Leo," Jed prompted.

"Okay, I'm getting to it. I'm trying to find the best way of explaining it in simple terms for the feeble minded," Leo told him, digging him in the ribs with his elbow by way of rebuke for his impatience. "Saying it's about sex has clearly confused you - it's about a lot of other stuff too – guilt and jealousy for starters."

"Ah." Jed shifted uncomfortably, wondering whether the jealousy Leo was referring to was his own.

"I know you feel threatened by Jordan," Leo told him, giving him a sideways glance.

"That's not true! I want you to be happy, Leo..." Jed began heatedly. Leo held up a hand.

"I know that too," he said softly. "It's okay, Jed. I know all about the green eyed monster you try so hard to conceal."

"Damn," Jed groused. "I thought I did a pretty good job of it hiding it as well."

"You do – but hell, I've known you for 40 years!" Leo grinned. "And you haven't changed all that much. Every time we met up when we were kids you'd ask me all about the girls I'd been seeing and you'd get this look in your eyes. You'd ask anyway because you liked to torment yourself but it used to drive you nuts."

"Okay. I admit that," Jed sighed. "I've always been jealous, Leo – of the other people in your life and in Abbey's. I know it's unreasonable and that's why I never said anything but yeah, I've always been jealous."

"I know." Leo shrugged. "And I've always been kind of envious of what you have with Abbey so I guess we're even in the whole negative emotion department."

"Okay." Jed nodded, pleased that there was at least some trade off to having had to admit his jealousy. "Leo – it's okay if you want to be free to get close to Jordan. What we have, you and I, is...well, we both know it's a little out of the ordinary." He gave a wry smile. "But if you're just skirting around ending what we have then I wish you'd just come out and say it. I won't like it but I'll respect it – I'd just rather you put me out of my misery and said it than..."

"Jed, shut up," Leo said firmly. Jed stopped in mid-speech, glanced at Leo, and then closed his mouth with a snap. "You're right," Leo told him softly. "I have thought about ending our relationship – the bedroom side of it anyway."

Jed nodded, but he felt as if his stomach was doing handstands inside his body – it looked as if Leo was about to confirm all his worst fears and although he knew, logically, that he'd rather **know** than keep on guessing, now that the moment was upon him, he wasn't sure he was going to handle it very well.

"Jed, when you got elected the first time around I knew it would be wiser, more prudent, to keep things between us platonic for the duration of your presidency," Leo continued.

"You were thinking that?" Jed looked up, surprised. "You never said anything."

"No – because I couldn't do it – not to you and not to me either." Leo gave a wry smile. "I struggled with it but in the end I thought that if we could manage to be as discreet as we always had been then we might get away with it – and we did. Nobody really thought that you and I were meeting up in private to have sex – or even just to be together as lovers, not President and Chief of Staff. Nobody would want to go **there**," he grinned. "And there were plenty of legitimate work reasons why we'd want to have some privacy. It was fine. Then the whole MS thing came up and I thought – this is just a drop in the ocean compared to what would happen if they found out about us because if **that** ever got out, we'd be crucified, Jed. I think – we're so used to what we have that we forget what a huge deal it would be if the papers got hold of it."

"I know." Jed shook his head. "I suppose I just preferred not to think about it."

"Then maybe we got complacent," Leo sighed. "We were just jogging along, in our own little world, and then Ron came along with his bombshell about the bedrooms and it freaked me out. I mean how naïve were we – someone was going to find out sooner or later and the MS thing was a walk in the park compared to this."

Jed nodded, glumly. He knew that everything Leo was saying made perfect sense, even if he didn't want to hear it.

"First Ron, then this thing with Toby..." Leo sighed. "So yes. The wise thing would be to put our relationship on hold for the next four years, Jed – until your Presidency is over and we can return to some degree of anonymity."

Jed nodded again, his heart coming to rest somewhere in the vicinity of the soles of his slippers.

"That would be the wisest thing to do – it's also completely and utterly impossible, to say nothing of impractical," Leo finished. Jed looked up, completely surprised.

"What?" He frowned.

"Not without me resigning anyway," Leo told him. "And don't think I haven't thought about doing just that."

"I don't believe you," Jed said, utterly flabbergasted. "Leo – I can't do this job without you."

"Well, I think you could. You've gotten pretty good at it these past four years." Leo smiled at him.

"No, we both know I couldn't – the same way you couldn't be Chief of Staff for any other President," Jed chided him. "It's Bartlet *and* McGarry for America, remember," he said, referring to the campaign button he'd defaced and given to his lover during the first election campaign.

"Well, that's partly the problem," Leo told him. "If I went to live in Europe or somewhere a long way away, then I'm sure we could probably get through four years without..." He glanced around - the Secret Service agents were all well out of earshot but he left the sentence trailing anyway. "But as it is – seeing each other the whole time, and with some of the stuff that comes up in this job...sometimes we just need that side of our relationship too much. I've tried these past few days and so have you – we both tried to pretend that we can just be friends, nothing more, nothing less, but the same thing happened that always happens."

Jed raised an eyebrow, and Leo gave a wry grin.

"Arguments, misunderstandings, jealousy, rejection, guilt...let's face it - we're just not very good at splitting up, Jed."

June 17th, 1968

"Hey. I was staring to wonder whether you'd stood me up," Leo said, getting to his feet and smiling at his friend as Jed entered the hotel restaurant. Jed gave a strange, strained little smile in return, but Leo noticed that he didn't make eye contact and he didn't seem to be his usual ebullient self either. His dark hair was tousled and he looked utterly miserable. "Is everything okay?" Leo asked in a whisper as they both took their seats.

"Yeah. Fine." Jed glanced up at him but there was an almost guilty look in his eyes.

"Because you look like crap," Leo added.

"I'm fine," Jed snapped, picking up the menu.

"Okay." Leo was silent for awhile. "So, how's school?" He asked at last.

"Fine. How's the Air Force?" Jed shot back.

"Fine." Leo shrugged. "I've missed you though. It's been far too long." He placed his fingers gently on Jed's hand and rested them there for a moment. Jed looked up, and Leo was alarmed to see that his friend's blue eyes were shining with tears.

"Leo, I've met someone," he said, in a choked kind of voice. Leo gazed at him for a moment, unsure what he felt about this news. "Her name's Abbey," Jed continued. "She's at med school...we met at a party..."

"Well that's great!" Leo said, meaning it. He'd had plenty of girlfriends during the time he'd known his friend and he didn't begrudge Jed the same kind of experiences.

"No...I mean, yes it's great but..." Jed sighed. "Leo – this is serious. I mean...she blew me away and we've been inseparable ever since we met."

"Uh huh." Leo nodded. "So..." He leaned forward. "Did you finally hit a home run with a girl, Jed?" Jed coloured and Leo could see by his friend's face that he had.

"She's special, Leo," he whispered.

"Well that's good isn't it?" Leo replied, puzzled. "I mean – there's no need to say it in such an agonized voice, unless she has some horrible life threatening disease or something."

Jed gave a little grunt of amusement, despite himself, and Leo was relieved – he had been starting to wonder what the hell Jed's problem was.

"No, she's fine...but...Leo, I came here tonight to end this. To end us," Jed said, his eyes never leaving Leo's face. Leo took a deep breath – that one had come out of the left field and yet he supposed he should have seen it coming. Jed always took these things so much to heart.

"Okay," Leo said slowly, still trying to get his head around this.

"No, it's not okay. Leo, I'm sorry – I don't want to hurt you, but I want Abbey --- I want to marry her and have kids with her. I've always wanted that kind of life, Leo. You know that. You've always wanted that too. We both talked about having families as if it's one of those things that's definitely going to happen to us one day...but we never talked about the how and why and what it would mean to us, to you and me. Well, now it's happened, Leo. Now it's here," Jed said, in a tone of abject misery. Leo's hand was still resting on his friend's and he found himself stroking Jed's fingers gently, trying to calm his friend.

"Hey, I'm the one being dumped here," he said, trying to sound cheerful about it. "You shouldn't be the one crying."

"I'm not crying!" Jed protested but his eyes were suspiciously glassy all the same.

"Jed, it's okay. I guess...I never thought too much about what would happen if we ever met someone we wanted to marry – either of us," Leo sighed. "I suppose this day was inevitable. You had to get laid at some point after all," he grinned. "'Cause god knows you shouldn't still be a virgin at your age."

"I'm not sure I've considered myself a virgin since the age of 18," Jed said pointedly.

"Ah." Leo grinned.

"So you're okay with this?" Jed asked, his forehead creased with concern.

"Sure." Leo nodded, pretty sure that he **wasn't** okay with it but he didn't want to lay that on Jed.

"Good." Jed nodded back at him. "Because I'm not," he muttered.

"Okay, so it was never going to be easy," Leo sighed. "But it's happened so we'll just have to get used to the idea."

"We can still be friends, can't we?" Jed asked.

"Sure!" Leo replied.

"Okay." Jed nodded.

"This was just one of those adolescent things that kind of went on waaaay too long," Leo drawled, wondering who he was trying to convince most – himself or Jed.

"Yeah," Jed said uncertainly.

"You know, loads of kids experiment in their teens – we just forgot to stop," Leo grinned. "You've always liked girls and so have I. Sooner or later..."

"Oh shut up, Leo," Jed interrupted. "That's not how it ever felt to me. I'm still tingling all over just because you have your hand on mine. I thought that having been with Abbey I'd...I dunno, that I wouldn't find you attractive, but I still feel exactly the same way I always felt about you. D'you think it's possible to be in love with two people at the same time, Leo?"

"I don't see why not." Leo shrugged. "But it doesn't do you any good, does it?" He gazed at his friend sympathetically. "You still have to choose – and you have to choose Abbey if you want the life you want for yourself, so there's no contest really." He removed his hand from Jed's with a resigned little smile. Jed's eyes darkened again and the glassy look returned to them.

"Did you take a room here?" He asked, glancing around the hotel dining room.

"Yeah. I'll stay tonight and then head back tomorrow. Why don't you go now," Leo

suggested, more for his own benefit than Jed's. He felt on edge, and desperately needed to be alone. "You go, and we should probably not see each other for awhile – that way, when he next meet up, it'll be easier."

"It will?" Jed murmured dubiously.

"Sure. Much easier." Leo nodded authoritatively.

"We will meet up again though won't we?" Jed asked suspiciously.

"Sure!" Leo said brightly.

"Really?" Jed's blue eyes were doubtful.

Leo sighed. "I dunno. I dunno that I can see you and not be close to you, Jed. I dunno that I can do that. I don't think I can."

"Leo...I can't lose you," Jed said in a panicked voice.

"Maybe it needs to be a clean break – so that we can both move on," Leo continued in a determined tone.

"No...we have a friendship...we've shared too many things..." Jed said in a low, intense tone.

"Well...we'll make new friends," Leo said brightly, needing not to be having this conversation, wanting very much to be on his own so that he could nurse his hurt in private. He couldn't turn to Jed any more, of that he was certain; Leo wasn't jealous that Jed had found someone else, but he was envious that Jed's life was moving on in such a happy way. "I'm gonna...I've gotta go now. Bye." Leo got to his feet, and couldn't resist putting his hand in Jed's hair one last time, savouring the feel of it under his fingers, hardly able to believe that this was a pleasure that was going to be denied him from now on. "Take care," he whispered, brushing his lips briefly against Jed's forehead, and then he left the dining room as quickly as he could, without looking back.

Leo went straight out of the hotel, needing to put as much distance between himself and Jed as possible. He passed a bar, paused, and then headed in. A drink was what he needed right now – a drink or two to help dull the pain and then he could go back to his hotel room and pass out and he wouldn't need to think about this again until tomorrow.

He stayed in the bar for the next couple of hours, until he felt numb enough to handle going back to that empty hotel room, and then he staggered back. He found his room, let himself inside, and then threw himself on the bed, longing for the peaceful oblivion of sleep. He knew he'd said all the right things – he even believed them. They *did* both want wives and families - he just hadn't thought it would happen so soon...and maybe he had even hoped that he'd be the one to settle down first. It was much easier being the one with someone

else to go to than being the one left on his own. Leo was glad it had been this way around though – he didn't think he could have dumped Jed, however hard he'd tried or however much he was in love with a woman. Just one look at Jed's floppy hair and distraught blue eyes would have had him changing his mind, and telling his friend that it had all been a joke and he hadn't meant it. No, this was by far the better way for it to have happened. He was interrupted in this train of thought by a knock on the door, and he got up slowly, feeling dizzy and nauseous. He staggered over to the door and opened it – to find a red-eyed Jed standing there, looking completely and utterly pathetic.

"Whaddyouwant?" Leo muttered, swaying slightly.

"You've been drinking," Jed commented.

"Yeah. You've been crying," Leo replied.

"Yeah." Jed gave a wry smile, and pushed his way past Leo and into the bedroom. He stood there, just gazing at Leo, his cheeks muddy with tear stains.

"You look ridiculous," Leo told him.

"I don't care." Jed shrugged. "Hold me, Leo."

"Can't." Leo rested one arm against the wall in order to stay upright. "You b'long to her now...Amy...Anna...Anita..."

"Abbey," Jed supplied with a rolling of his eyes.

"Yeah. Her. Not me. Go and cry on her."

"I love you just as much as I love her," Jed said softly.

"Yeah." Leo sighed. "You tell her about us?"

"A bit – not the bit about us sleeping together though." Jed grimaced.

"No. Well...that's the toughest bit." Leo grinned.

"I was waiting across the street until you got back. I didn't know where you'd gone. I needed to talk some more. I can't do this, Leo," Jed whispered.

"Well, you have to." Leo shrugged. He took a step forward, waving his arm to illustrate the point some more and staggered. Jed leaped forward and caught him before he fell. He dragged Leo over to the bed and they both collapsed on it together. Jed put his head on Leo's shoulder and Leo found his arm somehow going, automatically, around Jed's body.

"This is the lamest attempt at a break up I've ever seen," Leo muttered.

"Yeah." Jed gave a little chuckle. They were both silent for a long time and then Jed shifted against him. "Leo..." he said, in a very uncertain voice. Leo looked at him blurrily.

"Yeah?"

"Do you believe in destiny?" Jed ventured, and then he cringed visibly, waiting for Leo's reaction.

"I dunno – what do you mean?" Leo frowned, still too drunk to follow what was happening. "It's just...for the longest time I've had this weird sensation about you," Jed murmured.

"'bout me?" Leo managed to haul himself up so he was looking his friend directly in the eye.

"Yeah – I first had it years ago, and every now and then it hits me again. I felt it tonight, downstairs in the hotel restaurant. I...promise me you won't laugh."

"I can't," Leo said solemnly. "This sounds as if it's going to make me roll around on the floor giggling hysterically."

"It might." Jed winced. "Okay, I'll tell you anyway – we could both do with the laugh after tonight. I think God maybe...hey, stay with me," he said as Leo gave a loud, deep groan. "I know your own faith is a little hazy these days but mine isn't," he chided.

"Okay," Leo said, with a heartfelt sigh. "Go ahead and tell me what God is saying to you."

"I don't know that He is saying anything – it might just be me but sometimes, when I'm with you, I have this feeling that there's something important we're supposed to do together," Jed said slowly. "I have a sense of some kind of destiny – and it's related to you."

"D'you get the same feeling with Arlene?" Leo asked.

"Abbey," Jed corrected automatically, and then he frowned. "No – I get a different feeling with Abbey. I can see us together, her and me, having a life together, raising a family, arguing quite a bit." He grinned at Leo. "She has one hell of a temper."

"Oh god. You must make a horribly loud couple to be around then," Leo groused amiably. Jed dug him in the ribs, grinning.

"What are you trying to say, Leo McGarry?"

"That you're not exactly calm and even tempered yourself," Leo pointed out. "Anyway, go on – what was this destiny thing?"

"There isn't any more to say...except, when I saw you in the restaurant earlier...I just had this feeling that what I was doing was wrong."

"And breaking up with Abbey? Does that feel right?" Leo asked softly. He might not believe

in the God part of what Jed was saying but he did know his friend to have a kind of intuition, or gut instinct, that often took both of them by surprise by being unerringly accurate.

"No," Jed sighed. "That doesn't feel right either."

"So you have a problem on your hands then," Leo pointed out, wondering whether he was sobering up or whether all this was so surreal it was just slotting into his drunken state and making the kind of sense it shouldn't. "Unless you can persuade Abbey to let you keep seeing me," he murmured.

"I'll speak to her," Jed said softly. Leo leaned on his elbow and gazed at his friend quizzically.

"Really?" He frowned. "She must be something else if you think she'd be okay with that."

"I don't think she'll be okay with it," Jed sighed, "but I want to tell her about you. I think she should know."

"Okay," Leo said doubtfully. They were quiet again for a long time. Leo thought how good Jed felt under his arm and he wondered whether he was too drunk to make love to his friend...or even whether that was on Jed's agenda after what had happened. "So, does this mean we're not breaking up?" Leo asked, trying to clarify that point.

"I dunno," Jed replied.

"Okay," Leo said. "Just let me know when I need to go through this whole having my heart ripped out thing again so I can buy the whisky beforehand."

"Sure." Jed gave a little grin and snaked forward. His lips caught Leo's and before long Leo found himself in the middle of a deep, necessary kiss. They kissed until they were both breathless and then came up for air.

"You taste of liquor," Jed said in an accusing tone.

"You taste of tobacco but d'you hear me complaining?" Leo shot back at him.

"I was chain smoking out there," Jed grinned. "I don't want to go through this again, Leo. Not ever."

"Me neither," Leo sighed, pulling Jed close and wrapping his friend tightly in his arms. He nuzzled Jed's hair with his mouth, enjoying the feel of it and the scent of it, savouring being able to do this when a few short hours ago he thought he'd never get the chance ever again. "Me neither," he repeated softly.

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Jed sat in silence for a long time, trying to figure out what Leo had been telling him.

"So...we're not splitting up?" He frowned.

"I dunno." Leo gave him a mischievous sideways glance and Jed thumped him lightly with his fist under the blanket. "What? I waited over 30 years to be able to throw that back at ya," he grinned.

"And the whole sex thing? What Abbey said...?" Jed floundered.

"Yeah. I don't know where Abbey was coming from on that," Leo replied with a shrug. "I was just freaked out about us sharing a bedroom in the White House on a regular basis and then mainly I felt too ill to think about sex. Then...then I worried about Ron knowing, about Toby knowing – about it getting out and hitting the headlines and I wondered how long we'd last if we did the whole splitting up thing again – at least for the duration of your Presidency. I needed some time to think about that."

"That was it? You weren't resenting me for...imposing on you?" Jed grimaced.

"Nope." Leo grinned. "That overactive brain of yours just leapt to all kind of wrong conclusions I think. I jump your bones just as often as you do mine." He gave Jed a somewhat lascivious grin and Jed felt a wave of the most intense relief flood through his body.

"Well thank god for that!" He exclaimed.

"We *should* split up though, Jed," Leo said quietly. "It's too much of a risk. We should."

"Yeah. I know." Jed sighed. "We've been here before haven't we?"

"Yeah."

They both sat there in silence for a long time, swinging aimlessly on the bench.

"It's a *huge* risk. You'd lose the presidency for sure – and the publicity would kill us both pretty much, in whatever area we tried to go into," Leo sighed.

"Well, not if we wanted to become spokesmen for gay rights or alternative lifestyles or something," Jed said, waving his hand around airily. "Presumably we'd be a godsend to those folks."

"Yeah."

"Leo – we're both getting older, we're both independently wealthy...we don't need jobs – we like our work but we don't need it to exist. If it comes out at some point in the next four years...well, gruesome though it'd be, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing," Jed said. Leo frowned.

"How d'you work that out?"

"Tolerance, acceptance, fighting bigotry...those aren't just abstract notions, Leo. Yes, the publicity would be horrific, but we'd be raising a lot of awareness."

"Oh god. You're going to say something about destiny now, aren't you?" Leo sighed.

"Nah – I think we already fulfilled the big destiny thing," Jed grinned. "You gotta admit that I was right about that, Leo! If we'd split up back when I met Abbey then I wouldn't be President right now."

"You might." Leo shrugged.

"No – you came to me and put the idea in my head. You organized my election campaign, got me the finance and all the right contacts. You were with me all the way on this and you still are. If we'd split up back in the 60's then none of this would have happened."

"Okay. Maybe," Leo conceded grudgingly, "but the other thing, the thing about us not needing our jobs - you're talking crap there and you know it. We both love our jobs. Take them away from us in haze of the most unpleasant publicity imaginable and it would be a huge deal – for both of us. I'm not sure either of us would bounce back."

"We've managed for four years," Jed murmured. "We're worrying about something that might never happen."

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "I just think we should both acknowledge how great the risk is."

"And then?" Jed asked, gazing up at the night sky, his whole world hinging on Leo's reply.

"And then..." Leo's hand came to rest caressingly on Jed's thigh under the blanket. "I think we should go to bed."

Jed turned to Leo, smiling broadly despite the sobering effect of the conversation they'd just had. "I thought you'd never ask," he said.

Jed felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders as they walked back into the house and up the stairs. He knew he should be reflecting on what they had discussed, but the truth was that he was mainly just relieved that everything was okay between him and Leo again and that his fears had been unfounded. He followed Leo into the bedroom, shut the door behind them, and then took his friend's face in his hands and kissed him, deeply and thoroughly. Leo's hands came to rest, automatically, on his ass, the way they had for so many years.

"Oh god that felt good," Jed said, when the kiss ended.

"It hasn't been **that** long," Leo pointed out. "We used to go for much longer when we were doing the whole raising a family and forging a career thing."

"I know, but then we didn't get to see each other every day so it was easier," Jed replied, taking Leo by the arm and leading him over to the bed.

"Which is why I should resign and go and live in Timbuktu," Leo pointed out.

"Yeah, but we both know you're not gonna, so why don't you come here and..." Jed sat down on the bed, drew Leo between his open legs, and undid his friend's bathrobe. He smoothed it off Leo's shoulders, and then began undoing his friend's pyjama top. He got rid of that easily too, and then placed his hands on Leo's body, and frowned as he caressed his friend.

"What?" Leo asked, gazing down at him.

"You – you lost a lot of weight while you were ill and you weren't exactly fat to begin with. I thought all these high calorie meals I've been shovelling down your throat these past few days would have at least put some flesh back on you," Jed grouched.

"I'm fine. C'mere." Leo tipped Jed's head back and bent over to kiss his friend again. Jed sighed as he opened up to the kiss, his hands wandering hungrily over Leo's body as they kissed. Even after all this time he still tingled when Leo gave him this kind of kiss. Leo swayed a bit as they disengaged and Jed frowned, and pulled his friend down on the bed.

"You sure you're well enough, Leo?" He asked.

"Yeah. Just tired...and of course one should never underestimate the full power of those presidential kisses," Leo replied with a wolfish smile.

"Flatterer." Jed grinned, pushing Leo back on the bed and divesting him of his pyjama bottoms, rendering his friend naked. "I think," he said, musingly, as his hands caressed Leo's skin, "that as you've been ill, you should lie back and let me do all the work."

"Mmm...I kinda like doing the work," Leo pointed out. Jed dropped his mouth to Leo's chest and began kissing and licking him, his tongue swirling on a nipple, and pausing to nibble suggestively at one of Leo's earlobes. "Then again," Leo murmured, "sometimes it's nice to just..." he gave a sigh as Jed's mouth closed on his nipple again.

"Mmm," he finished hazily.

It was true that Leo did like to be the more active participant in their lovemaking sessions – he was a very sensual man and enjoyed exploring Jed's body in a way that turned them both on, but tonight it felt right for Jed to be the one moving and stroking and kissing and sucking and they both surrendered to it. Jed enjoyed having the chance to show his friend how much he loved him and how much he wanted him. It occurred to them that, like a lot of couples who'd been together for a long time, they'd kind of got into a bedroom routine that worked for both of them – but sometimes it felt good to change around and remind each other of all the other things that worked for them too. Jed took his time over his exploration of Leo's body. He was still concerned by how thin Leo was – Jed knew he had big, meaty

hands, but even so, he didn't like how easily they covered Leo's ribs.

"When we get back, things are gonna change," he said severely, in between kissing and caressing his friend.

"Mmm," Leo agreed easily, lying there, abandoned to the whole process.

"You're not going to work as hard – even if I have to kick your sorry ass out of the office to get you to go home and relax," Jed said.

"But....ahhhhh...okay..." Leo replied, as Jed turned his amorous attentions to a place lower down on Leo's body.

"You're gonna spend more time with Jordan. This relationship isn't going to go the same way as your marriage," Jed told him firmly.

"No, Jed," Leo sighed.

"And you and I – we're going to spend more time together outside the office – just having dinner with Abbey and Jordan or something but more social time. Remember how you and Jenny used to come over and bring Mallory? We'd have those big family barbecues. It was fun."

"Yeah," Leo sighed, although Jed wasn't entirely sure he was listening at this point. Jed positioned himself between Leo's legs and entered his friend easily, and then paused, the blood pounding in his ears. He was so used to being on the bottom – which he loved – that he'd forgotten how good this could be. He looked down on his friend and Leo gazed back at him from hazy, aroused blue eyes. Jed lowered his weight carefully into Leo and kissed his friend firmly on the lips. They lay there for a long time, just savouring the feeling of connection, before Jed started moving slowly, tenderly, inside his friend's body. It wasn't one of those love-making sessions that ended in starbursts and white lights – it was gentle and slow, connecting and cherishing - and it was just what they both needed right now. Afterwards Jed took Leo in his arms and they both watched as the sun's early morning rays started to filter through the window.

"That whole splitting up thing. We're never gonna be able to do it, are we?" Leo said with a sigh.

"No." Jed nuzzled Leo's neck with his lips. "I guess we're stuck with each other, for better or worse."

Leo chuckled. "For richer for poorer?" He teased. Jed gave a wry chuckle.

"In sickness and in health," he said softly, moving his big hands gently over his friend's too thin body.

"Yeah," Leo murmured. "Thanks, Jed – for being here this week and being so incredibly, annoyingly irritating on the whole not working, taking bracing walks, and eating until I'm

stuffed thing. Much as I hate to admit it, I feel a lot better."

"A-ha. I knew it was working!" Jed said triumphantly. "So, you'll admit I know best then?"

"On a very few minor things I will," Leo sniffed, clearly unwilling to completely cede the principle.

"Good." Jed held his friend for a long time, and at some point Leo fell asleep in his arms. Jed thought how much he enjoyed having Leo to himself in this way. It wasn't often that anyone got to see Leo's vulnerable side – his friend was always so calm and capable, and Jed knew that he and he alone was the one person Leo would allow to take care of him in this way. He doubted Leo would trust anyone else to even see him like this, let alone look after him. Jed wrapped his arms even tighter around Leo, remembering the long days of his friend's illness, and his own very real fears that Leo might not make it. His imagination had run riot and once Abbey had started talking about Leo being taken to the hospital he had worried obsessively that he might lose his friend. Then, since they'd been at Manchester, he'd faced that fear again, in a totally different way. Jed stroked Leo's hair gently; sometimes he didn't even see the lines on their faces or the way their bodies were aging. Sometimes, all he saw was the long history they shared and the smiling face of the 17 year old boy he'd fallen in love with and could never bring himself to fully part from. "I love you, Leo McGarry," he muttered softly. Leo didn't even stir and Jed smiled to himself, closing his own eyes, and was soon fast asleep.

Leo woke as the sun flooded through the window late the next morning, to find his hands threaded through Jed's hair and his friend's cheek resting on his shoulder. Leo gave a lazy smile, thinking how good it was to actually wake up with Jed – they so rarely got to spend a whole night together and it was nice not to have to always be rushing to get somewhere or to send Jed back to the Residence before his security agents or anyone else got suspicious. He gazed at Jed, noting the relaxed, happy look on his friend's slumbering face. He knew, looking at Jed's face, that he had made the right decision; no matter how many obstacles they faced, or how much they risked being found out, he knew that Jed just couldn't function without him in his life. That first time they had tried splitting up hadn't been the last – at various points in their long relationship there had been times when they had questioned it. Neither of them had been comfortable with the sheer unconventionality of their lifestyle and when Leo had married he had wondered, in the first flush of his love for Jenny, whether Jed still had the same place in his life. Whenever they faced this question they always ended up coming to the same conclusion though and Leo knew that as much as the idea of splitting up upset him, it affected Jed even more. His friend crumpled at the thought of it – as these past few days had shown all too graphically; Jed was someone who felt very deeply – a fact which most people weren't aware of. His emotions were more volatile than Leo's; his love wasn't given easily, but once offered it went very deep, and was staunch and steadfast. Leo knew that he and Abbey were the foundation stones of Jed's very existence. Much as he loved his children and his friends, it was Leo and Abbey he trusted and needed and them and them alone he allowed to share his thoughts and feelings. Without them to balance him, to trust, love and share his life with, Jed was unhappy, and when Jed was unhappy he was unable to think clearly or do his job properly. No, this was a risk worth taking, Leo thought to himself, because the alternative was simply

unacceptable; the past few days had merely been the tip of what he was sure was a very considerable iceberg. Leo shifted slightly, and stroked Jed's hair with his fingertips, very lightly, too gently to wake his friend. Jed murmured something and even in his sleep he smiled. Leo smiled back at him; much as Jed protested, he loved being stroked – if he was a cat he would be purring right now. Jed was an incredibly tactile man, and he needed to be loved in every single way possible. It was part of what he was, and Leo wasn't going to deny him that; not when it brought him such pleasure too.

He lowered his face and brushed a kiss along Jed's slightly stubbled cheek. He felt much better today than he had for some time; fighting off the flu had wearied him to the point where, when Jed had come to talk to him about Ron's suggestion, he had freaked out rather than considering the matter rationally. He always put Jed first, and the idea that Ron, Toby, or anyone else might know about their relationship had reminded him of what they all stood to lose, but Jed most of all, if knowledge of their love affair ever became public. These past few days he'd tried to think more clearly, to weigh up the risks against the possible consequences, but he'd only ended up coming to the same conclusion he always came to whenever this topic had come up during the past 40 years; he and Jed were too important to each other for either of them to be physically capable of splitting up. That was just the plain truth, no matter what the consequences of that truth might be. Leo felt happy just from having made that decision; it was the right one, of that he was sure, and mainly he was just glad that he had Jed back in his arms, where he belonged.

Leo closed his eyes and dozed off again and the next time he awoke it was to the sound of Jed pushing the bedroom door open with his foot, bearing a huge tray from which Leo could detect the smell of freshly made coffee, hot bacon and various other tempting scents. He sat up in bed and grinned at his friend.

"Another high calorie meal?"

"Yup; you'll probably go home just as skinny but they'll need a winch to get me into the Oval Office," Jed joked, patting his own stomach ruefully. Jed put the tray on the bed, sat down beside Leo, and handed him a plate of food. Leo suddenly felt very spoiled and he gave a grimace.

"Jed, thanks for this," he said softly. "I know I've been...a grumpy, cantankerous and grouchy old man..." he grinned at his friend as he repeated his words back to him, "but I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Jed said, smiling one of those special smiles that very few people ever saw. "I knew if I just kept on at you that eventually you'd give in and enjoy yourself."

"Hmmm...well I certainly enjoyed myself last night," Leo said with a lascivious grin. "It's been a long time since we did that – we should do it more often."

"It would be my pleasure," Jed replied. "We can have breakfast first though, right?" He grinned. Leo rolled his eyes at him, but he was grinning too. "Thank god things are back to normal between us, Leo," Jed told him. "Let's not even consider the splitting up thing again."

It's always a disaster."

"Okay," Leo agreed simply. "I'll remind you that you said that when the newspapers are screeching 'President in Gay Sex Scandal with Top Aide' but okay."

"On that subject..." Jed sighed. "I took some calls earlier while you were getting your beauty sleep and I'm afraid we're going to have a visitor later today."

Leo raised an eyebrow, waiting for his friend to continue.

"Toby," Jed told him. "He wants to come up here."

"Why? Is something going on? Is there a problem back at the West Wing?" Leo asked, alarmed.

"No, no...nothing like that...he was just mumbling on about needing to go through some detail of the Federalist Papers with me. In person." Jed made a face.

"The Federalist Papers?" Leo frowned. "Why the hell would he need to come all the way here to discuss those with you now?"

"I don't know. He said it was something to do with the speech he's working on and he wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Which means you didn't say it very firmly," Leo pointed out; he didn't know anyone on the Senior Staff, himself included, who would dare argue with Jed when he really put his foot down about something.

"No...I had the feeling something else was going on," Jed said slowly.

"Ah." Leo sighed. "You think this is about us?"

"I'm not sure." Jed shook his head. "Leo, I have to tell you something...I didn't say anything before because you weren't well and I didn't want you to worry about it...but Toby may have some grounds for his suspicions."

"I knew it!" Leo exclaimed. "What did you say when I collapsed in the Oval Office, Jed?" he demanded. Jed made a face.

"Leo, it wasn't me," he said gently. "It was you."

Leo gazed at him, horrified. "Tell me," he insisted in a low, anxious tone. Somehow, he'd always thought that it would be Jed who would slip up and somehow unwittingly reveal their relationship but he had never imagined it would be him.

"When you were coming to...you were on the couch and I was stroking your hair – I didn't even realise I was doing it. I don't think they thought anything of *that* - they know we're

close and they could see I was worried about you...but as you came around, you told me to stop – you said something like 'you know I hate it when you do that'. Toby was close enough to hear and of course what you said implied a lot more than me stroking your hair as a one off because you had just collapsed."

"I see." Leo nodded thoughtfully.

"So...I think Toby gave it a few days for you to recuperate, and, knowing Toby, he's been brooding on this for those few days as well...and now..."

"Now he wants to lay his cards on the table?" Leo suggested.

"Yeah. Something like that. Maybe he wants to sniff around to find out if he was right – or maybe he wants to have some kind of big showdown with us. I don't know." Jed shrugged. "Either way, I thought it was better that he came and did it out here than that it all blew up back home."

"Yes." Leo nodded again. "Well, whatever it is, we'll deal with it, Jed. The way we always do."

"Sure." Jed finished his breakfast and put his plate back on the tray. "Are you done, Leo? Because if you are..." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

"I can't believe you're horny after we just had this whole Toby conversation!" Leo berated him.

"Well, I'm not gonna be horny for much longer if you keep mentioning Toby in the same sentence as sex!" Jed protested. Leo grinned.

"Toby," he said maliciously, replacing his own plate back on the tray and then leaning back on the bed and giving Jed a grin of pure evil. "Toby, Toby, Toby..." He shut up a few seconds later as a heavy mound of Presidential outrage descended upon him and kissed him into silence.

Despite the circumstances, Leo was really rather pleased to see Toby when the bearded Communications Director showed up a few hours later. Toby was dressed in a suit, and Leo found himself appreciating the sweaters and numerous pairs of jeans that Jed had packed for him. Toby looked uncomfortable and out of place in the Manchester house that he and Jed had shared for the past few days. It was amazing, Leo thought, how quickly he had adapted to this slower pace of life, to the point where he had actually been enjoying himself, arguments with Jed notwithstanding. He was slowly coming around to the point of view that his mercurial lover was right in his insistence that Leo take more leisure time and he hoped he could find a way to balance his life better when he returned to work. To be honest, his illness had shocked him – he had no wish to ever feel so lousy again, and if that meant taking some time out occasionally to do Bartlet type things like going on bracing

walks and reading then Leo thought he might give it a try.

"Leo..." Toby nodded to him as Leo ushered him into the living room – Jed was taking a phone call in the next door room. "You're looking a lot better." Toby's dark eyed gaze raked over him and Leo felt himself being thoroughly scrutinised. "For awhile back there I wasn't sure it was possible for someone to look like you did and still actually be breathing."

"I'm feeling much better." Leo replied with a little grin. "Although I'm missing the West Wing. The President seems to think I'll have a relapse if I hear the slightest mention of work but I'm really not *that* frail, trust me, so I'm pleased to see you, Toby. I'm hoping you can fill me in on everything that's been going on."

"Well..." Toby scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Nothing much has been going on, Leo," he said.

"Is that the truth or is that what he told you to say?" Leo asked perceptively. Toby gave one of his short barks of laughter.

"We've all been sworn to keep you unstressed," he said confidentially.

"I'm fine," Leo smiled broadly. "And he isn't here so..."

"He is now!" Jed burst into the room, full of that restless kind of energy that he always had when he sensed he might be under attack of some kind or another. "Don't tell him a thing, Toby!"

Toby got to his feet, and shot an apologetic, if slightly amused glance in Leo's direction. "Sorry," he mumbled to Leo, and then Jed ushered him quickly out of the room and into his study. Leo watched them go with a sigh. Outside, the skies were dark and a storm was clearly brewing – Leo hoped the same wasn't the case inside too.

The storm had taken a firm hold and it was raining torrentially by the time the President and Toby emerged from Jed's study a couple of hours later. Leo looked at Jed searchingly but Jed shook his head behind Toby's back, making it clear that the prickly Communications Director hadn't said a word about what was troubling them both.

"I think..." Jed glanced at the dark, storm-lashed world outside, "that you're stuck here, Toby. It's late and you can't go back in this anyway."

Toby glanced out of the window and then gave a curt nod.

"Stay for dinner – you can sleep over in one of the spare rooms and leave tomorrow," Jed said.

"Thank you, sir," Toby replied. "I'm sorry to have intruded on your vacation."

"Well, it's really Leo's vacation and I suspect he's more than happy to have you intrude," Jed said, glancing at Leo who couldn't hide the eagerness in his expression at the thought of being able to finally find out what was going on in the West Wing.

They ate a leisurely dinner, during which Leo guessed that Jed had eased up on his injunctions against talking about work because Toby was quite forthcoming on that subject and the conversation flowed easily. Leo noted that they didn't exactly get into any contentious areas but all the same it felt good to be back in the loop once more. It was a pleasant, convivial meal and he felt both himself and Jed starting to relax. Maybe Toby's visit had been entirely innocent after all, Leo thought to himself.

"How's Will working out?" He asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

"He's okay." Toby nodded, pulling on his beard thoughtfully. "Josh and I threw him a curve ball a couple of days ago to further initiate him into the joys of working in the West Wing." He gave a slightly malicious grin and Leo chuckled.

"What kind of a curve ball?" Jed asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Gays in the military." Toby leaned back in his own chair and Leo felt the level of tension in the room rise exponentially. "I asked him to look into it again and do some work on it."

"Uh-huh..." Jed nodded casually. "What's his position on that?"

"Well, he's from a military background so he understands the issues pretty well. I was surprised by his vehemence though; he's against any kind of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation as he made very clear. He even quoted Homer at me." Toby gave a delighted little laugh.

"Homer?" Leo frowned.

"Patroclus and Achilles. Two warrior lovers – well according to Will anyway. I'm not all that well versed in the finer plot points of The Iliad." Toby looked to Jed for confirmation and the President nodded slowly.

"Achilles and Patroclus fought side by side at Troy and, incidentally, shared a tent as well. Achilles was absolutely distraught when Patroclus was slain by Hector – he was so upset that when he rejoined the battle he not only killed Hector but dragged his body around the walls of Troy behind his chariot and refused to allow him to be buried until Hector's father came to his tent and begged him for his son's body. Sparta's another example," Jed continued, clearly warming to his classical theme. "They made homosexuality a key part of their military culture in the belief that men fought harder in battle if they were fighting side by side with a lover – someone they'd protect at any cost."

"An interesting concept." Toby's gaze swept swiftly over both Jed and Leo, who were seated opposite him. "I wonder if that's one I should tell Will to run by Fitz when he sees him." Toby

gave another malicious grin.

"Oh god – you didn't send him to talk to Fitz about this did you?" Leo asked with a snort. "Poor Will."

"I know." Toby shook his head regretfully, still grinning.

"It's something that we **should** revisit periodically though," Jed commented. "Even if we don't get any closer to an answer."

"Or at least an answer we feel comfortable with," Toby said. "For what it's worth, I told Will that there are some occasions, when 'don't ask, don't tell' seems to be a very good strategy for dealing with this issue." He sat back firmly in his chair and Leo had the distinct impression that he had just delivered the message he had come here for.

"So long as people are discreet, and nobody finds out..." Toby left that hanging.

"Or one could make the case that this is something nobody should have to hide for fear of losing their job," Jed murmured, his fingers caressing the stem of his wine glass.

"And equally we could argue that people aren't ready for that kind of honesty," Toby replied.

"And sometimes we have to be leaders and not followers," Jed said, "and take the people with us, kicking and screaming if need be. You know where I stand on this one, Toby. I haven't changed on this subject since we last looked at it."

"No." Toby stroked his beard musingly.

"I believe," Leo said slowly, "that it was Fitz himself who pointed out that there was a time when black people weren't fully welcome in the armed forces either. Times change." He shrugged.

"Yes, but not that fast," Toby replied in a warning tone. "I don't think we're ready for this yet...but I don't think it'll do Will any harm to trot this one around the block and see what he comes up against."

"Yeah." Leo gave a wry little chuckle. "So, what else is going on?" He asked, changing the subject deftly. They talked for another half hour or so and then Toby retired to bed. Leo and Jed remained sitting among the detritus of their meal; neither of them spoke for several minutes and then Jed shifted and cleared his throat.

"Yeah," Leo said.

"Mmm." Jed nodded.

"He knows," Leo shrugged.

"Yup." Jed gave Leo a tight little smile. "He knows and he's not telling. That's what all this was about."

"That and a warning to us to keep it discreet," Leo said, shaking his head.

"Yeah. I felt like pointing to 40 long years of discretion! We could give a class in discretion," Jed growled.

"Yes - and on this occasion, discretion was the better part of valour, my friend," Leo said, getting up and putting a hand on Jed's shoulder as he passed him. "I loved the point about the Spartans though." He grinned. "Lovers fighting side by side do battle more ferociously to protect each other, huh?"

"Yes." Jed glanced up at his friend. "Don't they?"

Leo dropped a kiss on Jed's hair. "Yeah," he said softly. "Now, perhaps the Commander in Chief would like to come to bed...?"

"Hmm, I think you just have a thing for men with titles," Jed commented. "Although bearing in mind what Toby just said about discretion, perhaps I should sleep in my own room tonight?"

Leo sighed. "Maybe you're right. I'll see you in the morning." He ran his hand through Jed's hair by way of goodnight, an indignity that his lover bore with his usual good grace, accustomed to having his hair liberally tousled after years of enduring it, and then turned and left the room.

The sun woke Leo the next morning as it had every morning since his arrival – while Leo appreciated Jed giving him the best bedroom in the house, the early morning wake up call was something he could have done without. He got up and went to see if he could close the tiny chink in the drapes that was flooding the room with sunlight, and in the process caught sight of a familiar figure walking through the grass in the paddock below, smoking a cigarette. Leo glanced at his watch, frowning – it was only just 6am, far too early an hour to be up, dressed and about on a vacation day, but he knew Jed didn't sleep well and he suspected that his friend was worrying about their conversation with Toby the previous evening. Leo decided to join his friend – he washed, got dressed quickly in the Manchester uniform of jeans and a plaid shirt, pulled his boots on and then jogged down the stairs. He was amazed by how much better he felt – just a few days ago all he had been able to manage was a slow walk down these stairs, hanging onto the banisters, but now he felt full of energy and life. He walked out into the paddock, loving the feel of the bright sunshine on his head, although the ground was still soggy and squelchy underfoot as a result of the previous night's storm.

"Hey." He caught up with Jed halfway across a field.

"Leo." Jed turned in surprise. "What the hell are you doing up?"

"I could ask you the same question," Leo pointed out.

"I couldn't sleep." Jed shrugged.

"Toby?"

"Yeah." Jed sighed. "That and the irony of the fact that despite having an entire week alone together we've only spent one night in the same room so far. What a waste of a goddamn vacation!"

"Yeah." Leo chuckled.

"We hardly ever get a whole night together, Leo, and then when we finally *do* get the opportunity it all goes wrong." Jed stomped on his cigarette tersely.

"Toby will be gone today. We still have a couple more days." Leo shrugged, recognising the signs that Jed was working himself up into a mood.

"Well...I hope he wakes up and gets going soon," Jed commented, glancing at the skies. "There's going to be another storm."

"Another one? I'm starting to think you're some kind of storm magnet," Leo grumbled. "Even back in Washington we seem to have had more than our fair share of torrential storms since you became President."

"I don't have any control over the weather, Leo," Jed pointed out.

"I know – but I bet you'd like to," Leo grinned.

"I'm not a power crazed megalomaniac!" Jed complained.

"Sure you are," Leo told him.

"Damn – I thought I hid it so well." Jed sneaked a grin at Leo and they both laughed. Leo hoped he'd done enough to head off the impending Presidential storm even if he couldn't do anything about the real weather.

"Seriously though – it's going to rain?" Leo glanced up at the blue skies. "Really?" He questioned sceptically.

"Yup. The horses know." Jed pointed to them but Leo thought they just seemed to be doing normal, horse type things and there was nothing about their behaviour that suggested they knew anything more about the weather than he did so he decided Jed was just making that up. They continued walking slowly across the fields. There was a little footpath and Leo had

come to enjoy daily strolls out here in the fresh air. Jed's security agents were lurking some way off in the distance, and the farm house was almost out of sight behind a bank of trees. "I like this – feels like it's just the two of us," Jed murmured, looking wistful. "Don't get me wrong – I love being President, Leo. As you've pointed out, I like being the centre of attention so that side of it doesn't bother me...but just occasionally it feels good to get away from everything and everyone like this."

"Yeah," Leo agreed softly as they passed a small barn. "I wonder what those agents would do if I pinned you up against the side of the barn and kissed you?" He murmured, playing the fantasy idly in his head.

"They'd probably kill you," Jed commented, but there was a pleased little grin on his face anyway. Leo knew that Jed loved it when he talked about making love to him – he always got that goofy look in his eyes.

"Then we probably shouldn't risk it," Leo sighed tragically. "More's the pity."

"Hah – you're *frisky*, Leo!" Jed said in a delighted voice. "Thank god! I was starting to think you'd never be frisky again."

"I was ready, able and willing a couple of nights ago!" Leo retorted.

"Yeah – but you weren't like this," Jed grinned. "Y'know, I think you might actually, finally, be better, Leo."

"I am." Leo took a deep breath of the cool spring air and exhaled it forcefully. "I felt it the moment I woke up – I even jogged down the stairs. I feel...fantastic!" He gave his lover a broad, happy grin. "And you're standing there looking goddamn edible, and we're in the middle of the most beautiful countryside...and being trailed by a bunch of men with guns," he finished with a sigh. "Which is a shame, because otherwise I'd have you right here, right now, Jed Bartlet."

"You think?" Jed gave another of those ridiculously excited grins, his blue eyes flashing happily. He was wearing a blue plaid shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes and complemented the warm, golden hue of his skin

"Yeah. I think," Leo said in what he knew to be a shamelessly husky voice. Jed shivered and then suddenly grabbed hold of Leo's arm, and began dragging him towards the barn.

"Jed?" Leo protested.

"Hah, you shouldn't tease if you can't see it through, Leo," Jed told him, opening the barn door and shoving Leo inside.

"Who said I can't go see it through?" Leo growled, pouncing on Jed as his friend closed the door. He pinned him against the barn wall and kissed him thoroughly, and Jed melted against him, his hands going around Leo's body, warm and possessive, claiming him.

Leo kissed his friend hard, passionately, and they were both shocked by their vehemence when they came up for air a few moments later.

"What now?" Jed asked, gazing at Leo with a dare in his eyes. Leo glanced around the barn – it was full of hay bales and the only light was that filtering through in strips around the overhead beams.

"It's deserted...and your agents won't come in..." Leo mused. Jed's sparkling blue eyes told him that his friend was up for it – and he suspected they were both aroused by the illicit sensation of the encounter. Jed was grinning as Leo grabbed him and pushed him onto a stack of hay bales. Jed opened his legs and Leo stood between them. He leaned over his friend and kissed Jed again, feeling Jed's warm hands slide down the back of his pants as he did so. Outside, they heard a distant crack of thunder and Jed pulled back and flashed an 'I told you so' grin at his friend.

"Shut up!" Leo said, leaning in for another kiss. He fumbled with the buttons on Jed's shirt while the barn turned dark as the storm started in earnest outside.

"Looks like we came in here just in time," Jed murmured as the rain started to crash down on the barn. Leo didn't reply – he was too busy unbuttoning Jed's shirt. He smoothed it off Jed's shoulders and at that point an almighty streak of lightning flashed around the barn, lighting them momentarily. Leo lowered his head and kissed his way down Jed's neck and along his collarbone. Jed gave a low, abandoned moan, and pulled Leo closer to him, wrapping his legs tightly around his friend's body, trapping him within their circle. Leo leaned in again for another kiss, his hands stroking Jed's naked chest. He felt almost unbearably aroused by the moment – the lightning flashes overhead cast Jed's body into stark relief every couple of seconds, and Jed's skin felt so good under his fingertips. It had been a long time since he'd been able to feast on Jed's body like this and it felt so good. He felt as if he had been bad tempered and ill for weeks on end, and now he was liberated and felt alive and vibrant again. He tangled his fingers in Jed's chest hair, just enjoying the sensory experience of having Jed here, under his exploring hands, the hay scenting the air and the storm outside lending a sense of exotic drama to the proceedings. Jed's lips were soft and questing against his own and they kissed again, entwined in each other.

Leo didn't think he'd ever forget that moment – the lightning flashing around the barn, illuminating Jed, his shirt open to the waist, revealing his solid body with its deceptively soft skin, bathing them both in its ghostly white glow, while around them the thunder reverberated, crashing loudly with a rolling, drum like sound, reaching crescendo after crescendo...and the flurry of movement as the barn door opened, and someone ran inside, soaking wet...wiping water out of his beard...and, catching sight of them, stopped, his mouth open in shock. No, Leo didn't think he'd ever forget the strange accumulation of events and sensory experiences that made up that particular tableaux – the sights and sounds of the storm, the scent of the barn, the touch of Jed under his fingers and mouth, his lips poised on his lover's neck, Jed's legs wrapped around his body as he stood between them - and Toby

standing in the doorway, a wet cigar in his hand and a look of total horror on his face.

"Oh shit." Leo reacted first. He pushed away from a startled Jed just in time to see Toby turning to walk straight back out into the storm again. The lightning flashed overhead once more and Leo's call to Toby was lost as another peal of thunder rang out. Toby paused in mid-stride, clearly confused both by the pyrotechnics going on around them and the sight he had just witnessed and then walked straight into the door instead of out of it, bumping his head in the process, before collecting himself and scooting out into the rain again as fast as his legs could carry him. Leo thanked everything he believed in that at least Toby hadn't walked in on them in more of a state of undress – apart from Jed's open shirt they were both fully clothed, but even so, that was a small enough thing to be thankful for – the rest was pretty bad.

"Leo," Jed said in a strangled tone. "Tell me that wasn't Toby."

"It was Toby," Leo replied in a low growl.

"Shit!" Jed half jumped, half fell off the hay bale, gathering his shirt and his presidential dignity around him as he did so. He began striding towards the door but Leo grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Where are you going?" He hissed.

"To talk to him!" Jed yelled.

"No. I'll go. You'll just get mad at him."

"I won't! Why the hell d'you think I'll get mad at him?!" Jed demanded.

"Two words: Multiple Sclerosis. When he found out about that the two of you went head to head over it," Leo snapped. "You hate it when any of the staff challenge you about anything personal – especially Toby."

"Well you'll just get sarcastic!" Jed protested.

"I won't!" Leo retorted.

"Two more words: Alcohol. Pills," Jed said. "You don't like it when anyone gets personal either."

"No I don't but I can force myself to stay calm and that, my friend, is a skill you don't possess," Leo told him. "If you go after him you'll probably end up coming to blows!" Jed hesitated, his fingers still fumbling at his still open shirt. Outside, the sounds of the storm abated slightly, and the rain became a shade less torrential.

"Okay," Jed muttered. "You go first but I'm following you the moment my hands stop shaking for long enough to button my damn shirt."

"Okay – but give me enough time to calm him down."

Leo ran back towards the house, following Toby's hunched, bedraggled figure. Ron came running out of the converted sugaring house as he passed it, a worried look on his face.

"Leo...?" He began.

"Later, Ron," Leo said brusquely, brushing past him. He strode into the house, and found Toby standing in the living room in a puddle of water, fidgeting as he scratched his head almost obsessively.

"Toby." Leo closed the door behind them and ran a hand through his hair to divest it of water and stop it plastering itself to his forehead.

"Uh..." Was Toby's only reply as he continued his fidgety pacing.

"Toby!" Leo's voice cracked out, reaching the Communications Director. "Get a grip for god's sake," Leo told him firmly.

"I have a grip," Toby said, standing up straight with enormous dignity. "I'm just composing myself."

"Well do it quickly. He'll be here in a moment and I need to talk to you before then. Sit down," Leo said in a peremptory tone. He didn't have the time or inclination to do this the sensitive way. There were things that needed to be said. "I'm sorry," Leo said first as Toby took his seat. "It goes without saying that we had no idea you were out there."

"I was..." Toby waved his cigar. "I was...the First Lady doesn't like smoking in the house...I remember that from the last time I was here...I was walking...thinking...it started to rain..."

"Yeah. Okay. I figure you didn't follow us on purpose," Leo snapped. Toby looked up sharply.

"I didn't," he said firmly.

"I believe you." Leo shrugged. "And again I'm sorry – that must have been a shock."

"You have no idea," Toby murmured, scratching his head again. "I knew something like this would happen one day," he muttered, more to himself than to Leo.

"What?" Leo frowned.

"I knew...I thought, after the whole MS thing, that you'd...I don't know...put things on ice for the duration of...then when you collapsed I knew you hadn't and..."

"Toby!" Leo interrupted him, getting to his feet, reeling from pretty much the same kind of shock that he imagined Toby was feeling right now as well. "Toby...I thought...how long have you known?" Leo asked, completely astounded. Toby shook his head and gave one of his barking little laughs.

"I've known both of you longer than the others...I was with you at the beginning...I picked up...at first it was just a strange vibe that I didn't understand but then I started to. It didn't matter – we weren't going to win anyway so what the hell did it matter?" Toby raised his voice fractionally.

"When, Toby?" Leo insisted in a steely voice. "When did you find out – and how?"

"There was a pattern." Toby shrugged. "In Nashua – he was angry...he was angry a lot during that campaign...and the same thing happened every time. He got mad, he walked out...and then you followed him. Whenever I saw him next after that...he was like a different person. In Nashua – you said something to him and next time he was calm, relaxed, laughing – happy. Then again that night we won the Illinois primary, the night Josh's father died; you took him aside and the next day...poof!" Toby made a gesture with his hands. "Like magic. Every time. I used to wonder what your trick was and then I noticed the way you watched him...you could read his moods like...like..." He broke off and gazed at his own hands. "At first I dismissed that as my imagination – he was married and so were you at the time...but the thought didn't go away. And then it happened again – that time Charlie joined us...the President was preparing for a broadcast and he was in an unbelievably shitty mood...you took him aside and closed the doors...I remember turning to CJ and wondering what went on behind those closed doors. Not just that time. Often. Now I guess I know."

"No...not in the West Wing," Leo said quickly. "Nothing happened there. Christ, how stupid do you think we are?"

"I'm beginning to ask myself just that question," Toby told him, looking him directly in the eye for the first time since their conversation had began. "I didn't figure it all out until Rosslyn – it's one thing for your President to get shot, another if it's your best friend...but if it's your..." He paused, his eyes uncertain. "Lover?" He finished hazily, as if that was a word that he really didn't want to say. "Whenever you weren't at the West Wing you were by his side at the hospital. Nobody could have levered you away, and Abbey seemed fine with that. I remember watching the two of you going to visit Josh and that's when I had to stop denying what I knew. There was just something about you...an intimacy and concern that...I didn't understand how it worked. I still don't. How does it work? Does Jordan know? Abbey must...I don't...did Jenny know?" He shook his head, as if there were too many questions for him.

"Toby, you've got to understand..." Leo began and then hesitated, unsure how much of this story he wanted to tell. "This is a sudden thing for you, yes, but it isn't a sudden thing or even a recent thing for us – for me and him," Leo said quietly. "I've known him for 40 years."

"Yes. I know that." Toby nodded, his eyes still distracted. "But..." He looked up, realisation suddenly flooding into them. Leo gave a little nod.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"I don't...I don't think I'm capable of understanding that," Toby said in a strangled tone. "You both got married...had kids...and all the time?" His voice went up a fraction as he contemplated that.

"Yes – Toby, we didn't deceive anyone," Leo told him firmly. "Abbey knew from the beginning and so did Jenny. They gave us their blessing. We were very fortunate in that."

"This is insane," Toby said, getting to his feet and doing an almost comical dance of confusion as he paced around the room some more.

"No...Toby...didn't you ever...experiment when you were a kid?" Leo said, flushing to the tips of his ears and wishing he was anywhere other than here, having this conversation.

"I..." Toby gave him an outraged look.

"It's normal enough – a lot of kids do," Leo said, trying to move swiftly on. "That's what it was for me and him...we were 17 when we met and...it's complicated but we hit it off so well that when we got older...we just didn't want to stop I guess."

"You're saying that this was just...between you and him? That there weren't any other men for either of you?" Toby asked, still looking completely confused.

"Not for him." Leo shrugged. "I had a few lost years when I was in 'Nam when all kinds of stuff happened, but he's always been completely faithful to me and Abbey. That's what he's like. He's the best man I ever knew, Toby. He still deserves your loyalty...I hope this hasn't shattered that for you."

"What?" Toby gave him a pained look. "What are you asking me, Leo?"

"I need to know what you intend to do, Toby," Leo said quietly. "After what you saw. There are implications..."

"Yes...implications...but not from me knowing!" Toby snapped. "I've known for years, Leo. Admittedly I didn't enjoy having it so graphically demonstrated but I've known for years. Damn it. I came up here to...I thought maybe you were forgetting to be discreet, especially lately. When you were ill...I thought someone would guess for sure. I've never seen him look like that. Just suppose it had been one of the others who overheard you in the Oval Office after your collapse? Hmm?"

"I was ill." Leo sighed. "I didn't know what I was saying. I didn't even know I'd said it until the President told me a couple of days ago."

"The President." Toby raised his eyes heavenward. "My god. I can't believe you – either of you. You call him 'Mr. President'. You call him 'sir'. Knowing what I know...that just seems bizarre, Leo."

"It's who he is," Leo said firmly. "Okay, you deserved an explanation Toby but I'm not telling you everything about us. You don't have the right to know everything."

"I don't have the right?" Toby looked disgusted. He was about to say something else when the door opened and Jed walked in. He was soaked through, his dark hair sleek with rainwater, and he had that wary look in his eyes that made all Leo's alarm bells go off. Jed was at his most mercurial when he was cornered – he always hit back when he was on the defensive and he sure as hell was on the defensive right now.

"I don't have the right?" Toby said again, for the benefit of them both. "Have you forgotten what happened when we told the press he had MS? Are you both so naïve that you think the same thing won't happen again only a million times worse if this comes out?"

"Is it going to?" Jed asked quietly, glancing at Leo and then back at Toby.

"You know, that's twice my loyalty has been questioned in the past few minutes," Toby murmured absently. "I don't appreciate that."

"I'm sorry," Leo told him. "Honestly, Toby – we're in as big a state of shock about this as you are. We're just feeling our way here."

"I may...I may give you a hard time about the things that matter – the things I think are important," Toby said, glaring at Jed now and directing his comments to him. "But I have never gone to the press with them. I have never stood up and made a speech about them in public. This...matters. It does. I wish we didn't have to be having this conversation right now but we do. If you two are careless at any point in the next few years...if you're indiscreet..."

"We've been pretty discreet for the past 40 years," Leo pointed out quietly.

"What about today! Just suppose it hadn't been me who..." Toby shook his head.

"There was nobody else here! The security agents are on strict instructions not to walk in on us and the perimeter of the property is guarded. Nobody else could have walked in on us and hell, nobody damn well should have walked in on us!" Jed snapped, making Leo wince. "Look, Toby, I'm not going to apologise for being who we are when who we are hurts nobody and never has. Yes, it's unconventional – but it's not illegal and it's not wrong."

"You're a Catholic. I always admired you for your faith...does your faith say it's not wrong?" Toby asked quietly. Leo winced again, seeing the savage look that crossed Jed's face. He had known this would happen – Toby always knew Jed's sore points and he never backed away from pressing them, with unerring accuracy.

"I made my peace with that a long time ago," Jed replied. "Not that it's any of your damn business!"

"I'm a democrat," Toby said suddenly, taking them by surprise. "I don't judge what you do,

sir...I don't have any problem with homosexuality..." Leo heard Jed take a sharp intake of breath. He knew Jed didn't view himself as homosexual any more than Leo viewed himself that way. Neither of them cruised other men or lived a stereotypical gay lifestyle – their relationship was just a peculiarity that they had both had to come to terms with in their own way over the years. Even so, because of their relationship they had both always had a sympathy with gay issues that they might otherwise not have done. Leo, for his part, simply wasn't interested in anything anyone did in the privacy of their own bedroom, as long as it was consensual. He knew Jed's position to be more complex and deeply thought out than his own but Jed had his religion to grapple with and that had always rendered his deliberations on the subject more intense and problematic for him.

"Or bisexuality..." Toby continued, clearly floundering with his definitions.

"But?" Jed asked, in a dangerous tone.

"But, you're deceiving the entire nation – again," Toby pointed out quietly.

"You think there's any way in hell I'd have been elected if I'd told them about Leo?" Jed asked angrily. "They aren't ready for that kind of honesty, Toby, and frankly, I don't think it's any of their business. Other presidents have had liaisons with people who aren't their wives and they've stayed in office. You and I both know that the only difference here is Leo's gender."

"The personal and the political aren't separate entities insofar as they relate to the office of President of the United States," Toby said, in a low, intense voice.

"I've always guarded my own privacy and that of my family," Jed snapped. "You're telling me we're not entitled to that privacy? All of us? And I include Leo in my definition of family. Hell, I even include you and CJ and Josh and all the others too. We're all entitled to privacy. We're human beings at the end of the day – we haven't hurt anyone or committed a felony. All we've done is choose who we want to love. That should not **ever** be a crime and it should not **ever** prohibit someone from holding high office."

"I agree," Toby said quietly. Jed's expression might almost have been comical in other circumstances as he reacted to that. Leo gave a wry grunt.

"What?" Jed said, rounding on his Communications Director.

"I said...I agree. I don't think it matters either. This isn't like the MS; this doesn't potentially affect your judgement, your health, or your ability to do a good job as President. People don't have the right to know. Why do you think I've never said anything about it before?" Toby demanded.

"Toby's known for a long time," Leo told Jed quietly. "Since Rosslyn," he added, as Jed turned to him with a look of total surprise on his face. Jed sat down with a thump.

"Christ," he muttered. "Since Rosslyn?" He looked to Toby for confirmation. Toby nodded.

"I've had my suspicions for much longer – since Nashua," he informed the President.

"Then why the hell...?" Jed began.

"Didn't I say anything?" Toby shrugged. "It's not an easy subject to broach, sir."

"You did pretty well last night with that whole gays in the military thing," Jed pointed out. Toby gave a tiny glimmer of a smile and stroked his beard.

"Yes...well, I thought a long time about that. After Leo's collapse in the Oval Office I knew I had to say something. That's why I came up here." Toby shrugged. "I thought we dealt with it well last night...and then this morning had to happen."

Jed sat back with a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry," he said, for the first time. "Honestly, Toby. I really am. These past couple of weeks, with Leo being so ill – they haven't been easy. They woke me up to a lot of stuff I've been taking for granted." Jed glanced at Leo meaningfully and Leo gave him a brief, faded smile in return. Toby looked from one to the other of them and then shook his head.

"I might agree that you haven't done anything wrong and whatever is between you shouldn't prohibit you from holding high office but we both know the truth is that this will ruin you both if it ever gets out. Can't you put things on ice until..."

"No," Jed said quietly. "I'm sorry, Toby. This isn't up for discussion."

"For god's sake you're not teenagers!" Toby remonstrated. "How hard can it be to...?"

"I said I'm not discussing this," Jed interjected angrily. "That's between Leo and me and trust me, we **have** talked about it. There are various reasons why it's not going to happen."

"What – it's not possible for you to exercise some self control for 3 and a half years?"

"Toby," Leo said quietly, noting Jed's rapidly darkening expression. "Drop it."

"No...I don't think I'm saying anything unreasonable here. Do I need to remind you that if you two go down then we **all** go down. For god's sake I don't care how long you've been together, this is absurd!" He shook his head vigorously.

"Toby – you're on very thin ice here," Jed said in a dangerous tone. "There are some things you can't say to me and some things that do not concern you."

"This **does** concern me!" Toby objected.

"If you were that 'concerned' why didn't you say something years ago?" Jed yelled.

"Because it's one thing to guess something...to be pretty sure of it...and another to walk in

and have it thrown in your face," Toby growled back. "It brought home to me the realities of the situation we could face if this ever got out, sir."

"I don't think there's anything to be gained by discussing this further right now," Leo interrupted in a calm voice, recognising that Jed was on the verge of one of his explosions – which wouldn't do any of them any good. "We're all soaked through and overwrought. Mr. President I think you should go and get some air; and Toby – you should get changed. You're dripping wet."

"I don't think we've resolved anything here," Jed objected standing up and pacing the room. "I don't think we can just leave this hanging like this!"

Leo put a hand on Jed's shoulder – he could feel the tension in his lover's hard muscles through the wet fabric of his shirt and he knew that there wasn't any point to continuing this; if they did, then both Toby and Jed would simply become more entrenched in their positions. They both needed time to cool off and think.

"Go," Leo said to Jed in a soft voice, conveying as much meaning as possible via his eyes. Jed gazed at him steadily for a long time. "It'll be okay. Go on," Leo said, gesturing with his head in the direction of the door. Leo could feel Jed's explosion, so near to the surface, simmering back down again as he calmed his friend. He squeezed Jed's shoulder and nodded again and Jed exhaled a deep breath and then nodded back, visibly getting control of himself.

"Toby," he said curtly, and then he left the room. Leo watched him go, his hands in the pockets of his very damp jeans. When Jed was safely out of the room, Leo turned and gazed at Toby thoughtfully.

"Wow," Toby commented. "So that's how it works...that's a superb technique you have there, Leo. I thought I was going to have to go 10 rounds with him but you stepped in and brought him back from the edge."

"Well, like I said, I've known him for a very long time," Leo murmured wearily. "Toby – I'm sorry this got so heated. I think we're all wound up after what happened. Why don't you get changed and go back to DC. We'll finish up our vacation and see you privately in the Residence when we get home. That will give me time to talk this through with him. Would that be okay?"

"That's fine." Toby nodded. "Leo...I meant what I said. I won't talk to anyone about this."

"Thank you," Leo said in a heartfelt tone of voice. "I know this has been uncomfortable for all concerned but thank you for your understanding and discretion, Toby."

Toby nodded at him, and began walking slowly towards the door.

"Toby..." Leo called him back. "Even if he ever agreed to what you're suggesting *I* would oppose it," he said quietly. Toby turned back, his eyes flashing with surprise. Leo knew that Toby had imagined that he was the calm voice of reason, the one who would bring Jed

around to Toby's way of thinking - and Leo wanted to make it quite clear that there was no way that was going to happen. "Trust me, Toby, when I tell you that we come as a team. We've tried doing things differently and it invariably goes wrong. If you want him to be as magnificent a president as we both know he can be – as we've both seen him being - then you have to accept that his genius comes with a price tag. He has a balance in his life – he's had it for decades and it isn't an understatement to say that he needs it. This is how he works best, and if you take it away from him, he'll flounder, and that, my friend, could bring him down just as surely as if the newspapers ever found out about us. You have to believe me on this, Toby, because this isn't a decision I made lightly, or one I didn't consider from every single angle. What you have, at the moment, is the best of both of us. Change us, and you'll find things fall apart more quickly and decisively than you could ever have envisaged. It's just the way it is, Toby. It isn't perfect but it is..." Leo's lips twisted slightly, "...very human," he finished.

Toby stood there, unmoving, throughout this speech, and, when Leo finished, he thought he saw a light of understanding in Toby's eyes.

"Okay." He nodded. "That's making some sense to me. I'll think about that."

"We'd never ask you to lie for us," Leo said, in a low, intense tone. "You know that, right? That's not what this is about."

"Sure." Toby nodded. "Of course."

"Good." Leo smiled. Toby nodded to him again, but he looked much calmer and happier now than he had at any point during their long conversation. Leo watched him go and then sat down with a sigh, suddenly feeling very tired.

Leo saw Toby off, and then took a shower, got changed and ate brunch. He hadn't seen Jed since the big showdown and he knew better than to go looking for him; Jed needed some time to brood and get his anger out of his system. Leo spent the day quietly, reading and watching the news, waiting for his friend to return. Finally, when it was starting to get dark outside, he decided it was time to go and find him.

He wandered out onto the porch and gazed out at the farm. His eyes lit on a hunched figure sitting on the paddock fence smoking a cigarette.

"Oh god. Tell me he hasn't been sitting there all day," he sighed, speaking out loud.

"He hasn't," a voice said and Leo looked around sharply to find Ron walking up the porch steps towards him. "He went for a long walk – he's been gone for most of the day," Ron told him.

"Okay." Leo nodded. He could imagine Jed walking his anger and shock at their discovery into the ground out there on the farm. It was what he'd hoped Jed had done so he was relieved to hear it. They were both very private men – nobody had **ever** seen them so much as kiss on the lips before, let alone walk in on them in such an intimate moment and

he knew his friend had to be hurting badly about that right now. The argument they'd had with Toby afterwards wouldn't have helped either. Leo sat down wearily on the porch step and gazed at his friend's hunched form, wondering what the best approach would be.

"Leo...I wanted to talk to you," Ron said, sitting down on the steps beside him. Leo glanced at him, remembering earlier how Ron had come running up to him when he had pursued Toby back to the house.

"Yeah?" He said absently, still mulling over the Jed problem.

"I'm sorry about what happened with Toby," Ron told him quietly. "I wasn't on duty this morning – if I had been then I can assure you that I wouldn't have permitted Toby to intrude on the President's privacy."

Leo looked around, amazed, and found Ron gazing at him steadily from those earnest eyes of his. The realisation kicked in that Toby clearly wasn't the only person who knew about his relationship with Jed, as Ron was making obliquely clear.

"Oh god. Is there anyone who doesn't know?" he muttered under his breath.

"Sir?" Ron raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing. Ron..." Leo took a deep breath. "Ron, your job is to protect the President's safety – not his embarrassment." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "What happened this morning wasn't your fault – it was ours."

"Thank you, Leo, but all the same – I just wanted you to know that if I'd been on duty I would have taken steps to have avoided this morning's unfortunate events."

"Okay." Leo gave a wry grunt. "Thank you, Ron. I think that's probably more than we deserve but thanks. Covering our asses isn't in your job description though."

"No." Ron's face was thoughtful and serious. "Leo...I've worked in this job for many years and I try never to let it get personal...I always do my job, to the highest standards of professionalism that I can, and I know I do it well."

"My god, you do!" Leo said in a heartfelt tone. "I haven't forgotten Rosslyn, Ron, and neither has the President. You took a bullet for him there."

"That's my job." Ron shrugged. "I'd have taken a bullet for any of the important people I've served, Leo," he said, in a slow, serious tone. Leo turned to look at him, and found Ron's gaze fixed on the hunched figure sitting out on the paddock face. "I didn't step in front of that bullet because he was anything special, or because I like him," Ron said. "That's what I'm paid to do." He shifted slightly and then turned back to look at Leo again. "Saving him embarrassment, or easing his life in some small way – *that's* what I'd do because I like him, and because he *is* something special."

Leo gazed at Ron in surprise for several long seconds; Ron's face was as calm and composed as ever.

"I've worked for a lot of important people, but none of them ever treated me as well as he has," Ron said quietly. "Usually I'm just part of the wallpaper and that's fine – I like to be as unobtrusive as possible. It isn't necessary for people to notice me. He's different though – when he got shot he was more concerned for me than he was for himself. He's just one of those people that you can't help liking." Ron shrugged. "If I tell you I wish I could have headed off that trouble you had this morning it's because I mean it. I can't say the same for the other protection agents because I'd never jeopardise the President's privacy by asking them unless the President himself requested it. I just wanted you to know that if I'm the one on duty you can be sure of my complete discretion at all times."

Leo shook his head. "Today has been a day of many revelations, Ron," he murmured quietly. "I'm feeling a little shell shocked by it all."

Ron gave a little laugh. "I can understand that. Toby didn't look very happy this morning."

"No. I think that's probably an understatement," Leo sighed. "I think he went away feeling a bit better though. Now I just have to find a way to work a similar magic on him." He nodded his head in the President's direction. Ron gave a wry little laugh.

"Well, I don't envy you that task, Leo, but if anyone can make it happen it's you."

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "I'm just working up to it." He leaned back on his hands and gazed out on the farm; the storm clouds had cleared and now a beautiful red and gold sunset was streaking the sky. "So, how long have you known?" He asked, almost conversationally, wondering if this was actually happening to him – the events of the day seemed totally surreal.

"Awhile." Ron shrugged.

"That thing about me having a bedroom at the Residence..." Leo began.

"It'd make my job easier – protecting him," Ron told him. "I'd be grateful if you'd consider it, Leo."

"It's a protection issue?" Leo queried slowly. "I mean, he kind of said it was in passing but I think I might have missed that – I wasn't feeling so good when we had that conversation."

"Yes, it's a protection issue." Ron nodded. "I wouldn't have asked him to consider it otherwise."

"Okay." Leo nodded. "I'm fine with it, Ron. I wouldn't risk his life over something like this. It's a no-brainer. Of course we'll change our routine a little to accommodate you on this."

"Thank you, Leo." Ron nodded. They were silent for a long time and then Ron shifted. Leo

thought he was about to go, so he was surprised when instead Ron started to speak again.

"I have a kid brother - a few years younger than me," Ron said. Leo glanced at him, waiting for him to continue and wondering where on earth this was going. "He was one of those kids that you couldn't help liking. He just had a way with him, y'know? He was kinda cheeky - always getting into trouble - and I was always bailing him out." Ron gave a slow smile, full of memories. "He was a skinny little thing and sometimes he got bullied because of that. I was his big brother so I used to wade in there and knock aside anyone who was teasing him."

Leo grinned. "Sounds like you picked up that protecting habit young, Ron," he commented. Ron grinned back at him.

"I often think that Justin had a lot to do with my eventual career path," he agreed. "He could twist me around his little finger but I knew he was doing it and I never minded. You couldn't mind with someone like Justin; he had a truckload of charm. I was always proud of him though, no matter what anybody said about him." Leo noticed Ron's big hands curling into fists and frowned, wondering what that was about. "I never knew a better person or someone I'd be more proud to call brother," Ron said firmly.

"I'll bet he's proud of you too," Leo commented. "What's he doing now?"

"There are some things you can't protect people against. He died awhile ago - back in 1991," Ron replied.

"Ron, I'm so sorry." Leo said, taken aback by where the anecdote had gone.

"He had Aids," Ron said softly and then he glanced at his watch and got to his feet. "It's my shift," he said, gazing out into the semi-darkness in the general direction of the President. "Thank you, Leo." He nodded his head and then left the porch as silently as he had arrived, walking with that innate dignity that was his hallmark. Leo watched him go, feeling profoundly honoured that Ron had chosen to share this story with him. He sat there for a moment, and then he pulled himself up and walked wearily out onto the farm.

Jed was still sitting on the paddock fence, gazing in the direction of the now fading sun.

"Hey," Leo said softly, coming to stand beside him. Jed didn't even look at him.

"Hey," he said, in a tired, depressed kind of voice.

"Toby left hours ago," Leo told him. Jed's shoulders hunched even more and he gave a tight shrug.

"Yeah," he murmured.

"I told him we'd speak to him in a private meeting at the Residence when we get back."

"That'll be something to look forward to," Jed growled.

"It'll be fine. I had a word with him. Told him a few things that I think will make him understand things a bit better. I think everything's gonna be fine," Leo said. Jed almost visibly un-hunched his body and turned to gaze at Leo, an incredulous expression on his face.

"Everything is going to be fine?" He queried, in an unbelieving tone.

"Sure." Leo nodded.

"Leo! Either you're a miracle worker or completely delusional!"

"I lean towards the miracle worker thing myself," Leo said modestly. "Seriously, Jed – it's gonna be fine. Why don't you come down from there and we can go inside and eat?"

Jed gazed at him, unmoving. "I keep replaying this morning...shit...the expression on his face," he sighed.

"Yeah." Leo nodded. "You need to forget about that now. Come on." He beckoned but Jed remained where he was.

"It happened," Leo nodded, "but maybe it needed to. It's not as if he didn't already know what was between us. Jed, he's kept quiet about it all this time – he's not gonna say anything to anyone. Toby's loyal – we should have given him more credit for that this morning. He's a good man. He's been with us all the way."

"Yeah." Jed sighed. "I hate that we put him in this position, Leo."

"I know. Me too." Leo nodded. Jed gave a sigh, and then, finally, leaning on Leo's arm, he jumped off the fence and landed clumsily on the muddy ground below.

"Oh shit." Leo patted Jed's damp clothing. "You didn't change after this morning did you?"

"I wasn't in the mood. I needed to take a walk, clear my head."

"You must be cold and tired. You've been walking all day," Leo murmured, gazing at his friend in the hazy twilight gloom.

"I'll take a bath." Jed shrugged. "I'll soon warm up."

"I'll join you," Leo grinned and that comment managed to tempt just a glimmer of a grin from his lover.

"We're doing the right thing, aren't we, Leo?" Jed asked as they began walking slowly back to the house. Out of the corner of his eye, Leo was aware of Ron's unobtrusive presence,

shadowing them. There weren't any other agents out here, although he knew there would be another one in the house.

"Sure – we're doing the right thing," Leo replied.

"Only..." Jed stopped, and he looked utterly dejected. "I thought about what Toby said, Leo – I've been thinking about it all day - but I don't think I can do it. That's all. I know that makes me the weaker one – I think you could do it, but I honestly don't think I can." He lowered his head, gazing at the ground, and Leo's heart went out to him.

"Hey." He put his arm around Jed's shoulder and pulled him close.

"Leo..." Jed said, looking alarmed.

"It's okay." Leo kissed his bemused friend firmly on the mouth.

"Ron..." Jed looked around helplessly.

"It's okay. Ron knows too," Leo told him, squeezing Jed's shoulder firmly.

"Oh man – does everyone know?" Jed grumbled.

"It's beginning to look that way," Leo agreed. He slid his hand into the back pocket of Jed's stiff, partially damp jeans and caressed his friend's butt reassuringly through the fabric.

"Ron?" Jed glanced at Leo, a wry smile on his face.

"Yeah. He's cool about it. I'll tell you the whole thing while we're having that bath," Leo said, as they reached the porch steps. They climbed the steps and paused for a moment on the porch. Jed looked up at the first few stars that had started twinkling in the sky.

"I'm only human, Leo," he said. "I get plenty of things wrong."

"Yeah." Leo shrugged.

"But not you," Jed told him, gazing at him. "Not us. That's never been wrong and it never will be."

"No." Leo smiled, and he took Jed's face in his hands and kissed his friend gently on the mouth. "No, Jed. It never will."

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