

## Sleeptalking by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/sleeptalking/>

### Story Notes:

This story has been nominated in The Jeds annual West Wing Fanfic Awards in the following category:

Outstanding Non-NC17 Romance

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### Chapter 1 by Xanthe

3am

Josh leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head, his legs on the desk, running through the events of the previous few days in his mind. He knew it was late and he should go home but he was both too tired and too hyped up to sleep. There had been times over the past few days when he had doubted whether any of them would ever get to this point. First the President had collapsed with the flu, then there had been a threatened nuclear meltdown between India and Pakistan, while at the same time they had the State of the Union speech hanging over them - a speech that Toby and Sam had been slaving over for weeks. So, even by the standards of the West Wing, these had been a busy few days. Something else was niggling at Josh though - something he couldn't put his finger on; something had happened between the President and Leo and he wasn't sure what it was but at some point between the President collapsing and subsequently giving the State of the Union speech, the relationship between him and his Chief of Staff had changed. Josh had noticed that the President was having trouble meeting Leo's eye, and that Leo was casting brooding, unreadable glances in Bartlet's direction. He wasn't sure what that was about but

he hoped that it wasn't anything serious. What they needed right now was a few days of peace and quiet after all the recent activity. The Senior Staff were exhausted - the last thing they needed was another crisis to deal with. Josh sighed and rolled his neck; it had been a stressful few days but it had also been exhilarating. These were the kind of days that reminded him just why he loved his job so much.

After the President had delivered his barn-storming State of the Union speech, the Senior Staff had trooped back to the Oval Office where they had sunk down, exhausted, onto the sofas, the room buzzing with excited conversation. Gradually the room had emptied as people went home to snatch a few hours sleep and Josh had been the last to leave - he'd seen the President dismiss Charlie and then he'd got up to go himself.

"Shut the door behind you, Josh," the President had told him softly.

"Aren't you going back to the Residence, sir?" Josh had asked in surprise. "It's late."

"I know...but Leo and I have some talking to do." Bartlet had glanced at Leo who was gazing back at the President, a thoughtful expression in his eyes. Leo didn't seem surprised - in fact, he looked as if he had expected this...or even that he had been promised it. Was that it? Had the President promised Leo that once he was well, and once the State of the Union speech was out of the way, that they'd talk about whatever it was that had created this schism between them? If that was the case then Josh had the feeling that this was going to be a very important conversation. He wondered what it was about as he walked back to his office, still trying to pin down the niggling sensation that was playing at the back of his mind about the atmosphere between the President and his Chief of Staff. Something big had gone down, of that he was sure, and whatever it was, he had the feeling that it was the President who would have to do all the talking to smooth out the situation. He hoped that their conversation cleared the air between them - if the relationship between the President and his Chief of Staff was damaged then they would all feel it; the White House couldn't function without the winning team of Bartlet and McGarry operating at full strength. Josh tried to shrug off the niggling feeling - but his overactive mind worried about it anyway. He glanced at his watch - it was nearly 4am. If he didn't go home now there would be no point in going home at all.

Josh got up, shouldered on his jacket, and left his office. He was about to go when he noticed that the President's secret service agents were still standing outside the door to the Oval Office, meaning that the President was still inside. Had he and Leo been in there talking for all this time? Were they still talking? The entire West Wing was silent and Josh couldn't hear any voices within the Oval Office. Josh hesitated, thinking about it, and then decided that it couldn't do any harm to knock on the door and see what was going on under the guise of saying goodnight. At least then he might be able to put to rest this niggling sensation at the back of his mind.

There was nobody apart from the secret service agents in the lobby outside the Oval Office, so he just tapped on the door and waited. There was no sound within. Josh thought about it for a moment, and then tapped again. When there was still no reply, he opened the door as quietly as possible and peeked inside. He almost laughed in relief at the sight that greeted

him: the President and Leo were sitting, side-by-side, on the sofa - and they were both fast asleep. At least, Josh thought to himself, their conversation, whatever it had been about, hadn't led to angry words or either of them leaving abruptly. In fact, it must have ended peacefully enough if they'd both succumbed to the weariness caused by the past few days, and the lateness of the hour, and fallen asleep.

Josh slipped into the room, shut the door behind him, and studied both men for a moment. The President looked much more relaxed than he had at any point in the past few days. His glasses were hanging precariously from his outstretched fingers and he looked at peace with the world. Leo in repose was harder to read, but Josh thought that his shoulders had lost that taut, tense look - one of his arms was stretched along the back of the sofa, inches from the back of the President's head. As Josh watched, the President shifted slightly, mumbling something in his sleep, and his glasses dangled even lower between his outstretched fingers. Josh tip-toed over to the sofa, and gently removed the glasses from the President's hand, replacing them quietly on the coffee table. He hesitated, grimacing, as Bartlet mumbled something else and shifted again, but, to his relief, the President didn't wake up. Josh got up from his crouching position and walked silently back to the door. He turned as he reached it, glanced back...and then stopped dead in his tracks: The President had shifted sideways in his sleep and as a result had ended up with his head resting on Leo's shoulder, his hair against Leo's cheek. Josh watched as Leo, still asleep, reacted to the President's closeness by moving his arm down so that it wrapped around Bartlet's shoulders, pulling him even closer. The President relaxed against Leo's chest and mumbled something else. Josh grinned - even in his sleep Bartlet couldn't be quiet.

"Man, you two are going to be so embarrassed when you wake up and realise you're cuddling like this," he muttered to himself. He put his hand on the door and was about to go when he stopped again, and gazed at the two men once more. They looked so comfortable together, as if this wasn't something that would embarrass them in the slightest, waking or sleeping; as if this was a position they were entirely at ease with - an old, familiar position. The President had a little smile on his face and one of his hands was resting on Leo's chest. Leo's lips were nuzzling the President's hair, and his hand was curled affectionately at the nape of the President's neck.

Something suddenly clicked into place for Josh - something that he realised he'd known for a long time but had never consciously thought about; these two weren't just friends - what they had went a good deal deeper than that. He wasn't sure whether they were lovers or not, didn't even like to think about that possibility, but he knew, without any doubt at all, that they loved each other in a way he had never understood or appreciated before. Whatever had happened over the past few days to threaten that love had been dealt with here tonight and resolved. Josh didn't know what they'd talked about, but he did know, looking at the loving tableau in front of him, that whatever had been wrong between them was now right again, and for that he was very glad.

Bartlet moved again, mumbling uneasily, as if something in his dreams troubled him. Leo's hand moved, unconsciously, to caress his friend's hair and the President's mumbling subsided, soothed by the action. Leo's arm adjusted to Bartlet's changed position, and wrapped itself more firmly around the President's shoulders, reassuring and comforting.

Bartlet settled once more, now nestled completely against Leo's chest. He looked at peace, as if he had been given some kind of absolution from a problem that had been worrying him for a very long time; as if he had found the forgiveness and comfort he had sought. And Leo...Leo looked much as he always looked in Bartlet's presence - like a man under a spell of enchantment who would forgive anything of the man he was so tenderly holding.

Josh blinked, aware that he was witnessing a private, intimate moment that had not been for him to see, and then, quietly, he left the room. As he walked out of the West Wing, his mind whirling at what he had just witnessed, he was aware that at least that niggling sensation at the back of his mind had been stilled; it was very clear that the friendship between Jed Bartlet and Leo McGarry, whatever its nature, was as strong tonight as it had ever been.

And whatever he had learned from the private, unspoken language of their sleep, a silent language as eloquent as any words, Josh Lyman would never speak of it.

The End

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