

“Canine Companions”

A Young Lovers Series One-Shot

Author: D. Sanders

ACT I - Hansel and Gretel

K-9 Officer Leonard Mancuso or Leo as he preferred to be called had it made in his own opinion. He had everything he wanted in life. A decent house, even if the yard was too small. A good savings account, a great car and his dream job. He was a Third Generation Police Officer with the K-9 unit, following proudly in his father and grandfather's footsteps.

All his life Leo had grown up working with and training dogs for the local police. All throughout his childhood, into his teens and now at twenty-seven there had never been a day in his life where there hadn't been a dog at his side.

Specifically German Shepherds. He knew the breed like the back of his hand and all their quirks and capabilities. Both his Grandfather and Father had retired from the force and now ran the kennel that bred the dogs for service. Only a few really had the extra 'something' that made them perfect partners for officers. Those that didn't quite make the grade often turned into service dogs or that very special pet for a lucky child.

Leo was admittedly biased when it came to the breed and especially biased when it came to his current 'Partner'. Hansel, or just Hans as Leo called him was sitting in the back seat of Leo's restored 1968 Dodge Charger, his head hanging out the window and his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

Hans knew when Leo was in plain clothes they were "off-duty" and like any dog enjoyed the wind in his face as Leo decided to take his partner to the park for a nice Sunday afternoon tossing around his favorite tennis ball and getting some exercise for them both. The backyard was just too small to really let Hans get a good workout and Leo cherished his dog more than anything.

He owed Hans his life.

On more than one occasion Hans had prevented attacks and even took a bullet for Leo. Thankfully it only grazed his rump and within a week Hans was like new again, but that interference had saved Leo's life and Hans was given full police honors and a medal which hung over the mantel at the house. Every time Leo looked at it, Hans had a nice new chew toy in gratitude.

Leo pulled up and parked and the minute he opened the door Hans was hopping about and whining in excitement. That lovely lime green ball in Leo's hands was the be all end all of doggy orgasmic joy and he wanted Leo to throw it already.

Leo chuckled and hauled back and gave a good hard throw and like a dart Hans was a blur across the grass, diving for the ball and bringing it back for Leo to toss again.

From across the park, Leo spotted a young man sitting on a blanket with a sketch pad, a beautiful German Shepherd by his side. He could tell from the bright red vest the dog was a service animal and she was watching the game in earnest but sitting perfectly still at her master's side.

Leo could never resist getting a better look at a beautiful dog and he walked over with Hans trotting along beside him.

"She's a beautiful girl. May I pet her?" Leo asked and the young man smiled.

"Only if I can Pet yours." He answered and Leo laughed.

"He'll be your new best friend." Leo said squatting down and letting the bitch have a good sniff of his hand before he went to work scratching behind ears and under a chin.

"Such a Handsome boy. You could almost be my Gretel's twin." The youth said as Hans flopped into the grass on his side and let the youth rub his belly hard enough to get a back leg going.

"What did you say her name was?" Leo asked again doing a double take.

"Gretel." The youth answered and Leo laughed.

"You're shitting me. His name is Hansel." Leo said and the youth laughed just as amused.

"Beware witches in gingerbread houses then." The youth beamed and Leo finally took a good look at him. He was quite handsome in that fresh faced, 'cute' sort of way. His blond hair was shaggy and half of it was pulled back almost like a girl's with a rubber band to keep his bangs out of his eyes as he sat stooped over a sketch pad. It wasn't quite shoulder length but long enough to hang in his eyes if not contained.

His eyes were a slate blue and his smile genuine and sincere. Leo was suddenly quite interested and wondering why such a 'normal' looking youth needed a service animal. He didn't look handicapped and certainly wasn't blind or deaf. He noticed the vest said "certified therapy dog" which gave Leo a clue at least.

"If it's not too personal, Might I ask what she's trained for?" Leo asked and the youth shook his head.

“Not at all, I don’t mind. I’m rather severely epileptic, she can sense when I’m about to have a seizure and she makes sure she warns me so I can get on the ground so I don’t fall and hurt myself and then she guards me until it passes and I can move again. She’s also trained to get help if I do hurt myself. She’s the most wonderful animal in the world I couldn’t do half the things I do without her. She gives me freedom I never had before her.” The youth said and Leo was fascinated.

“I’ve heard of that. My Father and Grandfather breed not only for the K-9 unit, but service dogs too. Hans here is my partner in the force. He took a bullet for me once, I can relate to thinking my dog is the most wonderful animal in the world.” Leo said and the youth looked equally as interested in the topic of conversation.

“Such a good boy!” The youth said hugging Hans around the ruff and getting a lick for his efforts. Gretel whined and the youth turned and hugged her.

“I’m sorry lover. Daddy loves you too.” He replied and Gretel seemed appeased again.

“I’m Leo, Leo Mancuso by the way.” Leo said holding out his hand and the youth took it firmly and shook.

“Casper Wright. Please no Friendly Ghost jokes.” Casper said and Leo laughed.

“I Promise, that’s too corny for even me. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. So tell me, what’s it like being a cop? I always wondered if it was like what you see on the television.”

“COPS is all the extreme stuff, most of the time Hans and I are driving around town just doing routine disturbance calls. We get the occasional moments like you see on TV otherwise it’s pretty mundane.”

“I wanted to be a cop when I was little. I think we all did. I wanted to be a fireman cop with a little veterinary clinic. I was ambitious.” Casper said and Leo chuckled and settled down in the grass with Hans’ head in his lap to talk.

“So what do you do?” Leo asked and regretted it, the look in Casper’s eyes was painful.

“I don’t. I can’t. I have too many seizures. I didn’t even finish high school because of it. Mom died suddenly my senior year and she was in such debt over my medical bills everything was gone before I could bury her. The house, my medication, everything. I was homeless for six months before my neurologist found out what happened and took me in for a while. He helped me apply for state and federal aide and here I am. I’ve yet to get my GED, I keep meaning too,

but the class is all the way across town and getting there is a long walk. The Park is about as far as I venture on my own just in case. I live just across the street there.” Casper said pointing to the building.

“That’s the Laundromat.” Leo said aghast at what he was hearing.

“I know, there’s a little room behind it I rent out. It’s not much and always smells like bleach, but its cheap and ground floor. Not to mention I don’t freak out my Neurologists kids anymore. They were only little and I have complex partial and grand mal seizures, they scare people. If I live alone I don’t frighten anyone. I have Gretel, that’s enough.”

Leo just took in Casper for a moment. He didn’t know whether to cry in compassion or praise him for his bravery and pride. Leo opted to ask more questions. “I have a little medical training for emergencies. Like I know not to stick anything in someone’s mouth if they’re having a seizure and that’s it’s a myth that you can swallow your tongue. Sticking something in your mouth can choke and hurt worse and I should just turn someone having a seizure on their side to open up air passages. But what’s the difference between a Grand Mal, which I know is where you lose consciousness and first go tonic and then clonic with convulsions versus a Complex Partial?”

“You’re more educated than most. You have grand mal right. A Complex Partial seizure can be many things; it’s an altered consciousness. You can’t ever remember what happened afterwards, you are not in control of your movements or actions. We LOOK like we’re conscious, we’re not. We can speak, move and even run but it’s like a trance pretty much. It’s got to do with the temporal lobes. My CP’s are fairly predictable what I’m going to do so I’m told. First I’m told I look like I’m suddenly high on dope, my eyes glaze over. Then I start fumbling with things, like my shirt or whatever is in my hands and I start talking gibberish. I don’t respond to people, I’m in my own little world. This is where Gretel really is a godsend. I start wandering around and she prevents me from going places I might get hurt. I’ve wound up in the middle of the street before with no idea how I got there. It’s dangerous. It’s total un-organization and unfocused nonsense. I’ve even stripped naked in the middle of a shopping center once screaming in fear over something only my brain could see, hence why I don’t go anywhere far from home. Talk about embarrassing in public and people think I’m crazy when I’m not. It’s just the electronics in my brain are faulty and go haywire.”

“Anyone who thinks you’re crazy are the one’s faulty. I’ve heard of those kinds of seizures, I just never knew what they were called before. I can’t imagine how difficult it is to try and maintain. You take anticonvulsants?”

“A truck load, they make me sleep a lot, another reason a job is out of the question, I get tired easy because of them. I try to do a little here and there. I sell my sketches at the craft fair they have here in the park every Saturday and I do

face painting and stuff for the kids. Although I haven't been the past few weeks. My boyfriend used to help me, just in case I had a seizure, but since we broke up and the bastard took my little pavilion tent and my cash box with him I'm kind of stuck until I can afford to buy new ones. He used to do beadwork jewelry and he took the pavilion and I heard he's in Springdale doing the flea market there now. I have, as they say, rotten luck." Casper said and Leo just didn't know what to think anymore. This guy first gets shit on with serious medical conditions, his mother dies, he's homeless, he's scraping by with disability which Leo knew was next to nothing money wise and then his only extra source of income gets derailed by a heartless prick. Yet here Casper was smiling and shrugging it off. Leo would have slit his own wrists long ago and he was quite impressed with such a sturdy acceptance of life.

"All I can say man, is you have seven ton brass balls and then some. I can't imagine how tough it is for you. I suddenly feel extremely lucky and guilty about it." Leo said honestly and Casper gifted and rewarded Leo's honesty with perhaps the nicest smile he'd ever seen.

"Thanks and don't feel guilty. We all do what we have to in order to get by don't we? I'm still alive, and epilepsy won't kill me unless I run in front of a bus or something. I'm fairly normal considering. Thankfully seizures are just that, and even when my brain goes ape shit, it's not damaging anything seriously unless it goes on for a long time and I start losing oxygen to my brain. I don't usually have long ones. Less than a minute or two on average and only about three or four times a week. I get more people being nasty to me because I'm gay than because I'm epileptic. I don't bother with people who have more issues than I do." Casper said and it was Leo's turn to truly smile and thank his lucky stars he decided to come to the park today. He'd just met the most fascinating, well adjusted person in his life and he was eager to learn more.

"Amen to that one. I can relate to fucktards when it comes to my choices too. Everyone on the force knows I'm gay, but it's one of those things they just refuse to acknowledge. Kinda like the don't ask, don't tell rule in the military. I have to stand in a locker room listening to rookies talk about some chick they boned from a bar, but if I mention I met someone nice, sex doesn't even have to be involved and they all go quiet and change the subject, I'm quite familiar with those double standards and people thinking I'm a pervert or worse."

"My personal hot trigger is when they accuse you of being a child molester. Nothing gets me more angry and ready to sic Gretel on them than when they say something like that. It makes me want to scream and rip out hair." Casper said fuming and Leo nodded.

"I've only had someone say that once, and after he picked himself off the floor I read him the riot act. That one gets my cookies too. That and the perception because I'm gay I will suddenly possess the evil eye voodoo talent to turn

straight men from the path of righteousness down the path of carnal devil sin. Sometimes I wish I had that power, it would make it easier to get a damn date.” Leo said and Casper laughed, a deep throaty musical sound that was almost infectious.

“Hey, if you learn the secret, share please? There’s this guy who runs the knife stand on Saturdays who’s so hot he’s on fire and damn it all if he’s not married with three kids. He’s like a younger Pierce Brosnon double.”

“Oh man, I’m coming to the Park Saturday for just a look now damn it. Don’t those kind of men suck? All drool and no hope.”

“Tell me about it. But the eye candy is nice.” Casper grinned and Leo thought the eye candy at the moment was equally as nice.

“Very true. Although, if I’m being honest and way too forward. You’re not bad yourself. Would I stand a chance in hell?” Leo said and Casper smirked and leaned back on his hands and cocked his head appraisingly and teasingly.

“It wouldn’t have to freeze over handsome if that’s what you’re implying Officer Mancuso. Do you come complete with handcuffs?” Casper retorted and Leo smiled and leaned forward.

“I do if you’re a bad boy.”

“That’s very good to know.”

“So since I’m enjoying this rather nice turn of events and I have a whole evening free. Who do I have to bribe to get you to eat dinner with me?”

“Gretel.” Casper said and Leo turned to the dog.

“Gretel my lovely, can I take your daddy and you out for dinner?” Leo asked and Gretel just licked his nose.

“I think you got her approval.” Casper said and Leo smirked.

“Wonderful. Do you like Italian?” Leo asked and Casper smiled almost feral.

“Love it, the food and the men.”

Leo laughed. “Oh man, today is my lucky day.” He said running his hand absently back through his thick dark hair. Leo was classically Roman in looks. Sharp features and with the sloping traditional Roman profile and prominent arched nose. His olive skin, light hazel eyes and trim physic made a handsome package and dressed in a toga he would have been a perfect likeness to ancient statues

of the first Olympians. Casper had been trying not to drool since he first spotted Leo playing with Hans and now knowing he didn't have to hide his attraction, he wasn't. Leo was responding nicely and it was lovely to know such nice looks also belonged to a genuinely nice guy. If Gretel approved, Casper wasn't going to second guess her instincts. She never had liked Rogelio and for good reason it seemed.

"I'd say very lucky if you play your cards right Cesar."

"Seven card Stud?"

"You are a stud."

"Oh I think this is going to be fun. I could play the innuendo game all night."

"Same here. Finally someone who knows how to banter!" Casper said gleefully and Leo just smiled and stood.

"I can banter with the best and I want to change first. Say I come back and pick you and Gretel up at Seven?" Leo asked offering Casper a hand up.

"It's a date. See you later." Casper said with a wink as he walked away with Gretel dutifully following at his side. He gave a coy and sultry look back over his shoulder and Leo was positive he'd never met anyone who ignited his furnace hotter than one Casper Wright. He was cute, smart, quick witted and more than brave and Leo turned to Hans.

"Hans, what do you think? Is he a keeper?" Leo asked and Hans just sat there looking up at Leo wagging his tail and gave a happy little half yip, half bark. "I thought so too." Leo said as he returned to his car and he and Hans returned home to change for an unexpected night out with a man who was indeed one of a kind.

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ACT II - Manicotti with a side of Undeniable Compatibility

Leo pulled up and parked in front of the Laundromat with fifteen minutes to spare and he checked out his reflection in the glass of the window and gave himself an internal thumbs up before he headed around the side of the building and spotted the door that had to lead to Casper’s apartment.

He knocked and a friendly bark from inside confirmed he had the right door and Casper opened the door all smiles looking incredible with Gretel at his side wagging her tail happily. “You’re early. Come on in, I just have to get my shoes on.” Casper said and stepped back to let Leo inside.

The room as ungodly small. A single room, no larger than twenty-five square feet, with a two foot counter on one side affixed to the wall that was taken up mostly by a sink with exposed plumbing. Two overhead cabinets above it with a tiny under cabinet microwave bolted underneath and a small five cubic foot mini refrigerator made up the kitchen corner. No stove, no oven, just the microwave.

The opposite wall was a stand up shower, glassed in and exposed and a make shift curtain hid the almost prison style stainless steel toilet. Casper’s toothbrush was next to the kitchen sink since it was the only sink in the apartment.

There was a queen size bed shoved against the wall, a little card table with two chairs and a beat up old recliner sitting in front of a small nineteen inch television that used old milk crates as an entertainment center. The rabbit ear antenna’s covered in tinfoil to help aide reception. There was no cable, no satellite, no phone jacks, nothing but primitive living. The apartment was immaculately clean if crowded and the only other “luxury” item in the apartment, and Leo was using the term loosely, was a CD walkman player sitting on the table with perhaps less than a dozen CD’s stacked neatly next to the television.

On the counter next to the sink was a row of neatly organized amber colored bottles with white caps, all of Casper’s prescriptions and when he said he took a truck load of medications, he meant it. At least half a dozen bottles in various sizes sat next to a single glass which was drying on a towel on the counter.

Casper’s clothes hung in a closet without a door and just a colorful curtain to block it off from the room and beside that on the floor was a large lambskin doggy bed, well used and broken in with Gretel’s toys stacked neatly in a milk crate beside that. A single tennis ball was laying in her bed and a stuffed raccoon was half in and half out of her food bowl.

The dog had more “toys” to play with than Casper did, considering all Leo could see that Casper owned was the probably twenty year old television and the off brand cheap walkman he probably bought for less than ten dollars at a bargain store.

Poverty barely scratched the surface, but that being said, there was pride in what little he owned. The bed was made, the room spotlessly clean, there was a old coke bottle acting like a vase on the table and it held silk flowers that added color to the drab little utilitarian space.

Pictures drawn with colored pencils were tacked to the wall with colorful push pins and on the bed was an open sketchbook that looked to have been in use just prior to Leo’s arrival.

The space said a lot about the owner. He had nothing, but found beauty in simple things to make a sad place cheerful. Casper sat in his recliner, that was listing to the right drastically and put on his shoes as Leo leaned against the door admiring Casper’s courage and well earned pride.

Gretel watched Casper intently and just as he finished tying his shoes she picked up her vest that was sitting on a crate in her teeth and carried it over to Casper who just smiled at her, took her vest and placed it around her shoulders. Lovingly fastening it and kissing her nose as he did so. They had an unspoken routine it seemed, she obviously knew they were going out if her owner was putting on his shoes and she was ready to follow him.

“She’s such a fabulous animal, Service dogs always are the smartest of the lot.” Leo commented and Casper hooked her harness on.

“She is, she knows I don’t ever go anywhere without her and I never had to teach her to bring me her vest, she did that on her own. She amazes me and I wish I had more room for her to play. The park is thankfully across the street, but it’s cramped in here as you can see.” Casper said grabbing his wallet and keys and shoving them in his pants pockets.

“For a closet this place is palatial.” Leo said with a wink and Casper laughed.

“Beggars can’t be choosers, and really it’s not bad for what I pay. It’s just a hundred a month, water and utilities included, the owner of the building gives me a break considering. The only really bad part is that the dryers are on the other side of this wall and when someone is drying tennis shoes it drives me crazy.” Casper said and Leo nodded.

“I’ll bet. You ready to go?” Leo asked offering his arm and Casper took it smiling.

“God yes. Where are we going?”

“Café Italia. It’s over on fifth street and main.”

“Oh I’ve heard it’s nice. I read it in the paper, it just opened not long ago.” Casper said as Leo lead him and Gretel to his car and he opened the door and Gretel hopped into the backseat as Casper just smiled at the gentlemanly behavior.

“About three months ago and it’s nicer than you heard, they make the best Alfredo sauce I’ve tasted and my grandparents came here from Italy when they were young and my grandmother is a fabulous cook and even she raves about their sauce.” Leo said shutting the door as Casper got in and he went around to get in the driver’s seat.

“Oh now I’m excited. Next to stuffed manicotti, chicken Alfredo is my favorite.” Casper said and Leo smiled.

“Both of those are nice there.” Leo said as he backed out of his space and drove the ten or so blocks across town to the restaurant. The young girl hostess was looking harried and the small restaurant was packed as they walked in the front door.

“No dogs allowed!” She said and Leo quirked an eyebrow.

“Miss, I realize you’re young, but the red vest should be a clue. She’s a service animal, they are allowed hon.” Leo said politely and she looked like she was about to argue when the manager came out and smiled.

“Officer Mancuso! Nice to see you again, but this is not Hans.” The manager said and Leo smiled.

“Nope, Hans is crashing on my bed probably about now. This lovely lady is Gretel she’s Casper’s Service Companion. Can we get a table out of the way in the back?”

“I have just the table, they’re busing it now. Can the lovely lady here eat too? I have some lovely sausages.” The manager asked Casper who smiled.

“Are they spicy?” Casper asked and the Manager shook his head.

“No, just pork I use in the soup.”

“Then yes, just one for a treat, she doesn’t eat people food much other than once in a while. If she eats spicy they upset her stomach.” Casper said and the Manager nodded as he grabbed menu’s from his hostess and lead the group back himself to an out of the way table in the back of the room.

Gretel carefully followed Leo and Casper back to the table and people watched curious as a dog came into the restaurant. She quietly curled up under Casper's chair around his feet and silently stayed relaxed but alert.

The Manager handed both men menus and then vanished and Casper was torn looking at the menu and at the little girl around five years old sitting at the next table fascinated by the "doggie". Casper grinned, little kids always loved dogs and she was less than a foot away and looked like she desperately wanted to get off her chair and come over.

"Emily, it's not polite to stare honey." Her mother said quietly.

"But mommy, it's a doggie." She whined and Casper chuckled.

"It's alright Ma'am. Gretel loves the little ones. She's probably sitting there thinking it's a "girlie" herself. She can pet her if she likes, Gretel won't hurt her in the slightest." Casper said cheerfully and the girl's mother smiled.

"Can I mommy?" The girl asked and her mother nodded and the little girl was immediately off her chair and Gretel's tail was banging on the floor as she wagged it and had little hands scratching her ears.

"She's a service dog I take it from the vest?" The mother asked and Casper nodded.

"She is, my lifesaver." Casper said as he turned to watch the child with Gretel then looked up to see Leo smiling just as amused.

Once the novelty of Gretel's presence waned and Emily returned to her chair, attention was returned to menus and it wasn't long before orders were placed and Gretel was gobbling her sausage under the table.

"Thank you again for asking me out Leo. This is as much a treat for me as it is for Gretel. I really do appreciate it."

"Thank you for saying yes." Was Leo's response as their meals arrived and they chatted about interests and mundane conversation. Time flew by and they were already having coffee over tiramisu and biscotti lost in conversation.

They talked about their dogs and shared funny stories and moments with them, like Hans couldn't eat people food without horrible gas after effects and Gretel never ate her food without a toy being stuck in her bowl like a fresh kill. Canine quirks were always amusing and when they ran out of anecdotes of the four legged variety, they discussed quirks of the two legged kind.

Leo learned Casper shared musical tastes and they both were huge fans of the Moody Blues and even bigger fans of Calumet City style Blues. They both could quote practically every line from the movie "The Blues Brothers" and did so as they talked.

Casper discovered Leo was not only educated about emergency medical procedures but wasn't too shabby in the fine arts department either. It turned out Casper's favorite historical artist, DaVinci, was also Leo's and they both owned the same book about the man who was so much more than just a mere painter but a brilliant inventor and philosopher of his time.

To say they "clicked" as the evening progressed would have been a drastic understatement. They laughed at the same jokes, liked the same music, both loved their dogs and just plain were as compatible as marinara sauce was to pasta.

They lingered over coffee and lost all track of time until they noticed it was getting close to closing time and Leo insisted on paying the check before they headed out again and Leo drove Casper home.

As Leo parked Casper sighed "I had an absolutely wonderful night Leo. I really did and if you say it's over I think I might break down and cry."

"Cass, it's not over until you tell my ass to leave. You weren't the only one having a great night." Leo replied and Casper smiled and unfastened his seat belt.

"Please say you'll come in for a while, I haven't had such a nice conversation in years."

"Absolutely, same here." Leo said shutting off the car and following Casper inside.

They both curled up on Casper's bed over cans of soda and talked for hours. Casper's head was in Leo's lap and Leo was absently playing with golden locks as their eyes never disconnected from the shared gaze and voices talked and laughed until they were both almost hoarse.

It was almost two in the morning and neither man realized it until Gretel suddenly became overly alert and began whining and then it happened. One moment Casper was fine, still laying in Leo's lap on the bed looking up at him smiling and happy and talking about his sketches when his eyes glazed over and he began talking about zippers on the airplane that crashed in the flowers. It made no sense and happened so quickly it was mind boggling and then the words themselves became gibberish like Casper was speaking in Yiddish and pig Latin simultaneously.

His hands picking at his shirt hem and his left shoulder began twitching. Then his left leg and then silence. He even stopped breathing as he went rigid as a board and Leo gently rolled Casper on his side as the convulsions began. It only lasted in total less than three minutes all together, but a very long three minutes for Leo. He'd never actually seen a seizure and it was indeed scary to watch at first.

As Casper stopped twitching, it took another few minutes for him to regain normal consciousness and he began to cry. "I'm sorry." He said, looking pathetic where he lay on his side, curled up in an almost fetal position, pointedly not meeting Leo's eyes. He was embarrassed and ashamed.

"Don't you dare apologize for something you can't help Cass." Leo said softly, laying his hand on Casper's hair and laying down to face him with a tender smile on his lips.

"Date's over huh?" Casper asked and Leo sighed.

"Not unless you're throwing me out. Honestly Cass, that doesn't bother me at all, I know you can't help it and if you think that is going to scare me off you have another thing coming. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm rather fond of you." Leo said and Casper smiled through his tears looking utterly exhausted.

"I'm rather fond of you too Leo. I really like you a lot."

"Likewise Cass and I know you're tired now after that, if you don't mind if I stick around until breakfast we can catch some shut eye."

"You don't have to stay Leo, I will be fine."

"I know I don't have to, I just rather want to for nothing at all to do with your seizure and everything to do with just wanting to sleep with you." Leo said and Casper smiled brightly and leaned forward a few inches and placed a kiss on the end of Leo's nose.

"If you want me to fall hard for you Leo Mancuso, keep being so wonderful. I'd love for you to stay."

"Then shove over and give me room bed hog and get out of those jeans to sleep." Leo said helping Casper sit up to undress down to his underwear. Leo did the same and flipped off the lights before crawling into bed with Casper and he just held him close.

A peace settled into the room and for the first time in his Life Leo never wanted the night to end. He wasn't falling, he had fallen in love. He didn't need a cheap one night stand, he didn't need anything at the moment except the man in his arms who felt so perfect at his side Leo wanted to cry with happiness.

Casper's head was on Leo's chest as he slept and before Leo knew it, it was late morning and neither of them had moved much all night long and they were still wrapped around each other as if they belonged in each other's arms as they awakened slowly, Gretel content and asleep at their feet.

Leo was disinclined to move as he opened his eyes to feel Casper's weight and warmth pressed against his side and chest and he didn't move until Casper began to stir. Casper sighed and just snuggled closer. "This is the first time I've woken up next to a perfect gentleman. When they made you Leo, they broke the mold." Casper said and Leo chuckled.

"Trust me Cass. It's taking all my will power to remain a good boy around you. How did you sleep?"

"Good. You?"

"I could get used to this pretty damn quickly actually." Leo said rolling on his side, causing Casper to roll onto his back on the bed and Leo hovered over him with a smile. Casper returned the sleepy smile and his eyes drifted closed as Leo leaned over and they finally shared their first kiss.

Casper's arms slid around broad dark shoulders and his foot slid up Leo's calve muscle making him shiver as their kiss took on a decidedly hungry turn. A kiss which was only interrupted by a pair of growling stomachs making a comical musical counterpoint that broke the kiss and turned it into amused laughter from them both.

"What a mood breaker." Leo chuckled sitting up and running a hand through his disheveled hair and Casper propped himself up on his elbows.

"Trust me Leo, you're going to get a chance to do that again handsome." Casper said sliding his legs out of bed as he ambled over to the counter and set about taking a handful of pills still dressed in only his underwear and showing evidence that Leo's kiss had ignited more than an appetite.

Leo followed suit and crawled out of bed and grabbed his jeans and slid them on. "I smell doughnuts."

"Ah Leo, don't fit stereotypes for cops, it doesn't suit you." Casper teased and Leo chuckled.

"Smart Ass. Which direction is the doughnut shop?"

“Two doors to the right. They make really good bear claws but their coffee sucks. Let me make the coffee and I insist on buying breakfast. You treated me last night.”

“And you won’t win that argument Cass. Our date hasn’t technically ended yet.” Leo said with a wink pulling on his shit and slipping out the door before Cass could argue the point.

Casper just smiled and shook his head and opened the door to let Gretel go outside to do her business. “What do you think Gretel? I certainly think he’s a keeper.” Casper said to the dog as she came back inside and hopped back into bed. She just cocked her head and Casper grinned at her.

“Your daddy is in love, they don’t make men like him anymore. God I hope he doesn’t run off like all the others. I really am loving this guy.” Casper talked to the dog as he fixed a pot of coffee and waited for Leo to come back.

Leo was back in a few minutes, a large pink box in hand and looking in a rush suddenly. “Damn it, I didn’t realize it was so late. It’s almost eleven and I have to be at work by two and I have to go home and shower and get Hans. Damn it. Listen Cass, I really like you a lot. Please tell me I can come by again, and soon.”

“Leo, you can come by whenever you feel like it, you’re not the only one here who enjoyed last night.” Casper said understanding Leo had to go to work and even though a little disappointed wasn’t going to dwell on things that couldn’t be changed.

“Do you have a phone number Cass?”

“I don’t have a phone at all Leo. I’m sorry.” Casper said and Leo looked taken aback.

“That’s dangerous Cass. What would you do in an emergency?” Leo asked and Casper shrugged and Leo was digging in his shirt pocket and slapping a cell phone on the table.

“Don’t argue with me Casper. Keep it today, I’d feel better knowing you had this. I’ll pick up another one for you to keep permanently later. It’s a Nextel so I can set up my service with two lines later today.” Leo said picking up a pencil and writing on the cover of Casper’s sketch pad.

“That’s the number for the cell, the others are my home line and the main line to the station. If you need anything, even if you just want to talk, call me, they’ll patch you through to my station mobile in the car.” Leo said and looked up to see Casper standing there, looking stunned and about ready to cry.

“You don’t have to do this Leo.” Casper said and Leo smiled and walked over and planted a rather firm kiss on Casper.

“I know I don’t have to. I want to Cass. It’s not charity, I’d just feel better knowing you’re alright and that I can pick up a phone and call you.” Leo said and Casper smiled and nodded.

“What time do you get off work?” Casper asked changing the subject and Leo smiled.

“Eight, I just have a six hour shift today. Why?”

“Can you come over after? I’ll make you dinner to say thank you. Bring Hans too if you’d like.” Casper said and Leo grinned.

“It’s a double date then. I’ll see you around eight-thirty-ish?” Leo asked and Casper nodded, wrapping his arms around Leo’s shoulders and kissing him until his toes curled.

Leo staggered out of Casper’s apartment with a bear claw in hand and a stupid grin on his face.

Casper just sat down at the table over his pastry and coffee and turned to Gretel. “Damn I love that man.” Casper said to her as he ate and looked at the phone sitting on his table and hoping it rang later on. Waiting to see Leo again was going to be torture.

Casper was walking down the aisles of the grocery store about a block away. Gretel at his side beside the cart when the phone on his belt rang and startled him. He wasn’t used to having a phone and he answered it nervously.

“Hello?”

“Casper, it’s me Leo. I’m over on Second Avenue and Main Street about three blocks from the park and about to take my lunch break care to join me?” Leo asked and Casper smiled.

“I’m practically right on top of you. I’m on First and Main at the grocery store picking up dinner. Do you like pork?” Casper asked and Leo chuckled into the phone.

“That’s a loaded question Cass. Don’t make me be rude on duty.”

“You pervert.” Casper chuckled smiling into the phone. “I’m serious Leo.”

“Love it. I’m in the parking lot now, what aisle are you in?”

“In the back at the meat counter. Come inside, I’ll wait for you here.” Casper said hanging up the phone and a few minutes later was about to cream his pants when Leo walked around the corner looking fabulous in uniform.

“Holy, Mother, Mary and Joseph. Can I put in a request that you wear your uniform in my presence more often. Hubba. Hubba.” Casper said and Leo chuckled as he met Casper by the counter, leaning over to kiss his cheek quickly in greeting.

“Like it?”

“Oh God yes you sexy man.” Casper said and Leo bent over to greet Gretel with a scratch.

“I have handcuffs.” Leo winked and Casper smirked.

“I’m such a lucky boy.” Casper replied with a wink turning to the counter. “And before I get sidetracked staring at you and making a scene in the supermarket. Pick your choice Leo. Chops, Tenderloin or Roast?”

“What are you fixing?” Leo asked and Casper laid a finger to the side of his nose.

“That depends on your choice of cut my handsome. What’s your favorite?”

“I like all three, but the tenderloin is on sale and it looks really good.”

“I thought so too.” Casper said choosing a package and adding it to his cart. Right next to a bottle marked ‘intimate lubrication, self warming liquid’ that had Leo quirking an eyebrow and smiling with wicked intent.

“Like you’re not going to get lucky? Think again Officer Mancuso.” Casper said before returning the smirk.

“Can we skip dinner? I can call in sick.” Leo said and Casper laughed.

“Good things come to those who wait.” Casper replied turning the cart down the produce section.

Leo followed along with Gretel and helped choose his favorites before he drove them both back to the apartment and they ate sandwiches at Casper’s table and shared another wonderful kiss before Leo reluctantly went back to work and Casper began fixing dinner in his crock pot slow cooker. Whistling a merry tune, higher than a kite and so in love he glowed with happiness.

At Eight-twenty five a knock came to Casper's door and he opened it all smiles Leo, still in uniform, was standing there with Hans who just trotted in like he owned the place and went straight over to Gretel and both dogs were sniffing and getting reacquainted. Leo chuckled and took off his hat as he walked in. "Aren't you glad we don't greet each other with butt-sniffing?" Leo said as he stepped inside and Casper shut the door behind him grinning.

"I don't know about that. Butts can be awfully nice." Casper teased and Leo laughed amused.

"Very true. Damn it smells great in here." Leo said tossing his hat on the table before turning to greet Casper properly with an affectionate peck on his cheek.

Casper melted like ice cream on the equator, they just didn't make gentlemen like Leo anymore. Casper was going to make sure to remember to thank Leo's parents for raising their son right if he ever got to the stage of the relationship that required meeting the parents.

Leo might run for the hills after eating his cooking after all. "God, you make my knees weak. Sit down, it's ready. I hope you're hungry, I made quite a bit." Casper said switching off the slow cooker and dishing up sliced tenderloin, tender new potatoes, baby carrots and spinach. All of it had been roasting in the slow cooker for hours and was falling apart it was so tender as he brought the plates over to the table.

"I'm starved and have been looking forward to this all damn day." Leo said, his mouth salivating from the smell and the looks of the food on his plate. Casper brought over a bottle of sparkling grape juice.

"It's not wine, but I can't have alcohol with my pills, sorry." Casper said and Leo just shook his head.

"Don't be sorry, I don't drink either. I prefer this actually. I like a little Fruit wine now and then but given a choice you'll see me buying this for myself too." Leo said as Casper poured them the pseudo wine and lit the candle on the table.

The dogs were both curled up on the bed together, comfortable and dozing and the atmosphere was cozy as they ate and Leo told Casper about his day. It was so comfortable and quiet it was as if this was a regular routine as opposed to the first time that Casper had cooked for Leo. There were no early dating nerves or jitters, just a welcoming comfort zone. Even the dogs seemed to pick up on the compatibility and neither bothered paying attention to their owners; the 'safety' was filling the room making it very peaceful.

“This is wonderful Cass.” Leo said cleaning his plate and Casper smiled.

“Thank you, there’s more do you want seconds?”

“Absolutely, I have a hollow leg.” Leo said grinning and Casper took his plate and filled it again, pleased Leo was devouring his cooking, he liked a man who ate hearty it made him feel good.

After dinner, Casper rinsed the plates and just left them in the sink as they decided to take the dogs over to the park for a walk and to walk off dinner as well.

It was dark as they strolled hand in hand, the dogs cavorting in the open as Casper and Leo walked the perimeter of the park. “I feel like I stepped out of the real world and into a book. Are you Real Leo Mancuso?”

“Very real and I feel the same. Who knew that cute guy with the pretty lady was going to be exactly my type? I’m so into you right now Cass I can’t begin to describe it properly.” Leo replied and Casper slipped under his arm and walked beside him with his arm around Leo’s waist, Leo’s arm resting comfortably across Casper’s shoulders.

“Same here. It’s like I’ve known you forever and not just a day. You make me feel very comfortable and I never feel this way around people. I’m always nervous and afraid I’m going to scare them. Every guy I ever dated didn’t usually last beyond the first seizure they saw, they couldn’t take it and the only one who did stay around for a while wasn’t very nice but I thought I’d never do better, ya know? Beggars can’t be choosers as they say and well... I put up with feeling empty and just accepted it as status quo for a loser like me.”

“You’re not a loser Cass. Far from it, please don’t think like that. Do you want to know what I see? I see a guy who has been handed some really shitty cards in the poker game of life. He keeps drawing cards hoping for a pair and he’s getting nothing to work with and he’s bluffing, holding onto his ace and going for it regardless. It takes a lot of guts to bluff in the big leagues and you’ve got serious guts Cass. You don’t accept what you’re dealt easily and you keep going and tossing in more chips to the bet. I’d have folded a long time ago.” Leo said and Casper wanted to cry but just turned and took Leo’s face in his hands and kissed him.

“I just drew a second Ace. I had the diamond, I now have the heart.” Casper said quietly and Leo growled and crushed Casper’s lips in a return kiss that was fiery and potent.

“Cass, you had my heart last night at dinner. You’re incredible to me, tell me I can officially say I have the best damn boyfriend in town.”

Casper smiled. “Officially, I’ve been yours since you opened your mouth to say hello Leo Mancuso. You’ve had me wound around your finger with that smile and had me in your hands like potter’s clay since I woke up this morning. Oh yes, I’m all yours Officer, arrest me.”

Leo laughed. “You have the right to remain perfect. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a bed of your choosing. You have the right to a set of handcuffs and if you can’t afford one, a pair will be appointed to you by your boyfriend. You have the right to spanking and if you waive that right a grope will be given instead.” Leo said and Casper laughed so hard tears came to his eyes.

“I love you, you smart ass. Somehow I don’t think those are the Miranda Rights.” Casper said and Leo just grinned.

“I just read you your Mancuso Rights.” Leo quipped as the dogs finished their business and the quartet headed back to the apartment.

“You said a bed of my choosing right?” Casper asked as he shut the door and his hands went to the buttons on Leo’s shirt.

“Oh yeah.” Leo responded, his own hands tugging on Casper’s belt.

“Then I choose this one, I’m not being a good boy anymore, I want you bad Leo.”

“Then I am officially off good boy duty. Come here gorgeous.” Leo growled and lips fused together as clothes were shed in record speed.

They tripped over pants around ankles and groped their way ungracefully to the bed, breath hissing as they kissed and pawed and confused a pair of dogs who didn’t know if they were fighting or playing. Thankfully, the laughter that ensued as they fell over the edge of the bed and toppled into it alerted the dogs it was merely human play so they settled down to watch.

Hands groped and pinched, teeth nipped as Leo laid sprawled in the bed, Casper on top of him doing very wicked things with his mouth and tongue. Casper kissed his way down a broad chest and Leo’s hands got lost in blond hair as he threw his head back and moaned as that blond head began bobbing up and down making stars appear behind Leo’s eyelids. Leo grabbed Casper’s hips and literally lifted and turned him so he could return the action, making Casper straddle his head and Casper whimpered when Leo began returning the gift.

That position didn’t last long however, Casper had to pull away panting. He was so close he didn’t want it over so soon, Casper stretched over Leo and grabbed

the little bottle sitting on the nightstand, an old TV tray but it worked. His fingers were shaking as he squeezed the liquid into his hand and began coating Leo's erection with it, pumping and squeezing and making Leo groan with pleasure. He coated Leo with one hand as his other reached back and coated himself.

Leo hadn't been paying much attention to what Casper was doing to himself, lost in what Casper's hand was doing to his erection. He was taken by surprise when Casper moved and straddled his middle and guided Leo's erection home, sinking onto that beautiful spear of flesh with a cry and a moan.

"Fuck, yes." Leo moaned grabbing slender hips to help support Casper as he impaled himself on Leo, panting and moaning.

"God, Leo so good." Casper cried and Leo sat up, making Casper fall backwards onto his back on the bed and Leo hooked his legs over his arms and took over the relentless pace.

"Yes, oh God Leo fuck me!" Casper thrashed and moaned and Leo complied.

"Baby, I'm gonna fuck you until you can't walk straight and give myself a god damn seizure! Holy hell you're fucking incredible!" Leo assured as he worked up a sweat thrusting and moving his hips in a circle as he pounded into his lover, making the bed creak and groan until the springs sounded like they were about to snap and break.

Casper's fingers were digging into Leo's shoulders with a white knuckled grip, his back was arched and his head thrown back in orgasmic bliss as Leo gave him what he would beg for again if he had to, he was lost in the best sex he'd ever had in his life. Leo didn't treat him like an invalid or glass, he treated him like a lover and there was no holding back from either of them. It felt wonderful, Casper felt alive and electrified in every pore as Leo filled him with sensation. "God Leo, I'm gonna come!" Casper moaned.

"Me too, wait for me Baby, almost." Leo grunted back, his eyes tightly shut and his face contorted in exertion and nearing orgasm.

Casper couldn't hold it anymore and he went into convulsions of the sexual variety and his body shook with release. Leo cried out almost in pain as muscles constricted around him and then he too went rigid with release and buried himself deeply with every last thrust, milking out every last drop that Casper felt warm him from the inside out.

They were panting and desperately trying to catch lost breath as they collapsed heaving together. "I didn't ask to come in you, I'm sorry." Leo panted and Casper smiled and rolled to kiss a sweaty shoulder.

“God, don’t be sorry Leo. I know damn well as a cop you’re clean and because of my health I’m tested for everything every six months. I am too. I’m not worried about catching anything from you. You’re actually the first guy I ever slept with without a condom and I never even thought about it once to be honest. I was too into you.” Casper said and Leo smiled and pushed sweaty bangs off Casper’s brow.

“Likewise, I didn’t think of it until just now. You blow my mind Cass. That was fantastic.”

“It sure was and if I had anything left in me Leo, you’d be in trouble. I could ride you from here until next year.”

“I’ll keep you to that statement Cass. Free rides whenever you feel like it.”

“Oh goodie.” Casper chuckled getting up on legs that had turned to butter as he stumbled to the small refrigerator and brought back a can of generic lemon-lime soda they shared to slack thirst in bed.

Leo chuckled as he set the empty can on the makeshift nightstand and held Casper against his chest where they sat leaning up against the wall. Casper’s back against Leo’s chest between his legs. “My Folks are having a cookout Saturday for the Forth after the parade downtown. Tell me you’ll come.”

“Meeting the parents already?”

“Oh yeah. Is that a yes?”

“Of course. The parade passes right in front here, I love the cheesy things. Watch it with me?”

“No can do beautiful, I’m in it.” Leo said and Casper turned to look at him.

“You’re in it?”

“Yup, I’m head of the K-9 unit, Hans and I are always in the parade with Grandpa, Dad and the other dogs in training. It’s a good test to see how they react to a lot of people.”

“That’s right, I knew I’d seen you before. Last year. Your Father is the big man in the attack suit doing demonstrations right? You were the officer in uniform firing blanks and shouting orders.”

“That would be my Old Man and !! Good memory.”

"I thought it was fascinating. But then I love dogs I remember things like that." Casper said turning back with a sigh and leaning against Leo.

"I'm gonna so gloat from the crowd knowing the sexy man in uniform is mine." Casper chuckled and Leo laughed and tipped his head down to plant a kiss on Casper's shoulder.

"All yours. I'll come back after the parade circuit and pick you up and we can head to my folks house from there."

"Should I make anything to bring?"

"You don't have to, but you'll certainly win my mother over if you bring anything sweet. I am a horrible cook, I tend to just hit the store and bring a cooler full of drinks."

"Does she like Banana pudding?"

"The kind with the vanilla wafers in it?"

"That would be the one."

"She'll order me to marry you if you bring her that." Leo said and Casper laughed.

"Consider it done then." Casper replied and looking over his shoulder with a smirk. "Have the justice of the peace ready."

"That's my Uncle Charlie, he'll be there." Leo said and Casper laughed.

"I adore you Leo. Can we stay here just like this forever?" Casper sighed and Leo's arms tightened around his middle.

"You won't hear me complaining. Although work might bitch if I don't show up tomorrow. Moreover, I have a day shift tomorrow. I gotta be in at eight damn it, I hate the early day shift. I'll have to be up by six so I can go home and shower and change for work."

"You don't have to stay Leo, I know it's hard if you have to be to work early."

"Like I'm leaving? Think again Cass."

"I don't have an alarm clock though."

"The cell phone does. Oh! That reminds me..." Leo said leaning over to grope for his shirt on the floor. From the pocket he pulled out a new and matching cell phone. "...This one is yours. Just hit this button here and these work almost like

walkie-talkies. You'll get my cell. I already programmed into it my home number, my station mobile I carry in my car, my parents house in case I'm over there, the station and the hospital emergency numbers. I don't want you without a way to contact people, specifically me, in case you need help. Call me an over protective boyfriend, it comes with being a cop. I've seen too many people hurt needlessly when a cell phone could have saved their lives." Leo said and Casper turned and took the phone and kissed Leo soundly.

"You rock my world Leo. You make me feel wonderful. Thank you."

"Anytime Baby, it didn't cost much more to add a second line to my account and the peace of mind I'll have is worth a lot more."

"I am going to kiss your mama for raising such a wonderful man and I am going to be perpetually bent over in gratitude." Casper quipped and Leo smiled.

"Oh, bonus!" Leo winked and Casper grinned.

"I'll give you bonus." Casper said setting the phone on the nightstand before proceeding to turn Leo into mush a second time around.

After another round of more languid lovemaking, both men were more than exhausted and Leo was bleary eyed as he programmed his cell phone to wake him at six and set it beside the matching phone on the nightstand.

It went off far too soon, Leo was positive he had just fallen asleep six minutes earlier and not six hours earlier. He switched it off and groaned as he crawled out of bed over a still comatose Casper. Not a stir and Leo smiled down at the sleeping form still nude and beautiful.

"I love you already." Leo said softly as he dressed and left a note on the table saying he hadn't wanted to wake Casper and that he'd already let Gretel out to pee for him before he left. He also left a fresh bear claw on the table before he locked the door behind him and he and Hans returned home to get ready for work.

He turned to Hans as he yawned on the way home. Just about a five minute drive to a subdivision off seventh street and Main street. "What do you think Hans. Is it too soon to ask him to move in with us?" Hans said nothing and his eyes were only visible from the rear view mirror.

"I know I'm moving too fast, but damn it you don't find guys like him everyday. Besides this getting up an extra hour early everyday will suck dog turds. I really do love him and I know it's just not because he makes me horny as a rabbit. Tell me you wouldn't love Gretel living with us Hans."

Now Hans reacted and barked once. Leo laughed. "See, you get a girlfriend out of this arrangement too. I'll ask him Saturday at the cookout." Leo said as he pulled into his driveway and he and Hans dashed inside to get ready for work.

“Canine Companions”

A Young Lovers Series One-Shot

Author: D. Sanders

ACT III - In the Line of Duty

Casper woke up late and smiled at the note on the table as he ate the breakfast Leo left for him and hovered over his coffee pot waiting for it to brew. He was sore, but a wonderful kind of sore. His body had been through a rather good workout the night before and just the thought made Casper shiver. “God, Gretel your daddy is seriously in love. I hope you approve because I’m rather hopelessly stuck on Leo.” Casper said and Gretel wagged her tail and rested her chin on Casper’s leg to get him to scratch her ears.

“What do you think of Hansel? You sort of get a boyfriend too out of this arrangement.” Casper asked and Gretel just continued to wag her tail happily. “I thought so. He is a handsome boy for you and I’d better tell Leo you’re not fixed and are a breeding bitch just in case Hans gets a little happy on you. Although puppies would be awfully cute. Here I am, making us a family already. Oh yes, I’m a goner. Hook, line and sinker. I’m pathetic and am moving way too fast I think. I don’t want to scare him off now do I?” Casper said turning on the little television set as he fixed his coffee and took his pills and settled into watch the morning news.

This was where he froze and his eyes became glued to the set. There was a hostage situation happening across town at a local mini-mart and the news cameras were filming and Casper saw Leo and Hans at the scene working in the background. Hans looked ready to charge in and Leo had his gun out behind a car.

“There were shots fired at police when they arrived and the state of the hostages are still unknown. The K-9 unit and Swat teams have been called in and the police are trying to make contact with the man inside holding six people at gunpoint.” The news voice over said and Casper’s insides churned with worry.

“Oh god!” Casper said as his spine became knotted with dread as he watched the man he loved on television in a very dangerous and life threatening situation.

It went on for hours and the stand still seemed never ending. Then suddenly the door of the mini-mart opened and a hostage came out with her hands up, the man had the gun at her head shouting. Casper’s heart went into his shoes as Hans and two other police dogs were seen skulking closer in the background, quietly, carefully. Unnoticed by the man whose attention was in front of him and not behind him, he had no clue well trained dogs were stalking him. The moment the gun was no longer pointed at the woman and was being waved around in a frenzy as the man ranted at police, Casper saw Leo in the background give a

hand signal and Hans leapt with the other dogs, and Leo was there diving for the woman.

“SHOTS FIRED! SHOTS FIRED!” The newscaster commentated and Casper screamed when he saw Leo fall and stumble but he held tight to the woman who was taken from him by rescue workers as they swarmed Leo.

Police and dogs immediately subdued the man in moments and they were rushing inside to get the other hostages out. Casper was waiting and praying for news.

“An officer is shot and is down. He’s being rushed to Mercy Medical.”

“No, no. No!” Casper threw on his clothes, grabbed his phone and Gretel and raced to the bus station. When the bus didn’t come soon enough he ran thirteen blocks to the hospital and to the front counter out of breath.

“Officer Mancuso! Shot! Saw it on TV. Is he okay? Oh God please let him be alright.” Casper panted out of breath and worried frantic.

“They just brought the officer in, I don’t know. Are you family?” The lady at the counter asked looking sympathetic.

“No, he’s my boyfriend. Oh god.” Casper was out of his mind with fear and the lady behind the counter sighed.

“I’m sorry, if you’re not family I can’t release information to you. I know you’re worried sir, but I can’t give you information.” She said and Casper did cry now, sinking to his knees as a Man rushed in just as frantic.

“My son, Officer Mancuso. Saw it on TV!” The man said and the woman nodded.

“It seems you both saw it on television. I’m sorry there’s no news yet they just brought him in, you can wait in the Emergency waiting room Mr. Mancuso and I’ll have the doctor’s come and tell you after they see your son.” The woman said and Casper was up on his feet.

“Can I wait too? Please, please.” He said and the woman sighed.

“I can’t sir, you’re not family.”

Vincent Mancuso cocked an eyebrow. “Are you Casper and Gretel?” He asked noticing the youth and the beautiful service dog and Casper nodded.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Leo called this morning telling us all about you. Come with me, I don’t care what they say at the front desk, you’re family to Leo so you’re family to us.” He said and Casper wanted to hug the man with gratitude as he followed Vincent’s wake.

Casper took to pacing the waiting room nervously, looking shaken and worried. “No sense wearing a grove in the floor son. Talk to me, where did you meet my son?”

Casper sat and fidgeted. “The park. He spotted Gretel and the rest just sort of clicked I guess you could say. He’s a hard person not to love.”

“He takes after his mother, very true. I’ve never heard him so happy on the phone. Whatever you’re doing to make him that way I hope you keep doing it son. Leo’s not had a lot of luck in the relationship department. You’re the first one he’s wanting to bring home to meet us, that right there is enough for me.” Vincent said and Casper smiled.

“He didn’t tell me that. Now I want to cry again.” Casper said picking at the hem of his shirt with nervous energy. Gretel whining at his feet.

Vincent could tell the way the youth’s eyes were becoming glazed and the reaction of the service animal the stress of the situation was sending him into a seizure. Thankfully, Leo had mentioned that Casper was epileptic on the phone and Vincent wasn’t too worried and just eased the rambling youth to the floor so he didn’t fall from the chair. He too had emergency medical training and just sat with the youth until his consciousness returned. He didn’t go into a Grand mal attack and just rambled nonsense and gibberish for a few minutes and he came out of the seizure as quickly as he’d gone into it.

“How did I get on the floor?” He asked and Vincent smiled.

“About the time you were talking about Monkey’s in Paris teaching Frog’s Judo kiddo. Alright again?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.” Casper said looking mortified.

“Don’t be. You can’t help those spells. With all the stress I’m not surprised you had a seizure.” Vincent said helping Casper back into his chair again.

“Still, it’s embarrassing.”

“It shouldn’t be Son, you’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about, it happens and you move on. There’s nothing wrong with you but some brain electronics going bonkers on you. You’re not crazy.” Vincent said and Casper could finally see why he adored Leo, because his father was exactly the same way. Non-pulsed by the

seizure and just as friendly before as afterwards, like father like son they treated him normally and for that Casper was eternally grateful he'd met this family.

Suddenly Leo's mother and grandparents turned up and everyone was waiting for news and getting to know Casper.

Having them all around helped get through the long wait for news, Leo's mother was trying to put on a brave face and was failing. She confided in Casper that she'd spent twenty years worrying over Vinnie day after day and had spent more time in the hospital than she cared for over him, and now every gray hair she attributed to spending it worrying over her son. Vinnie claimed Leo took after her and she claimed he took after his father and Casper mused he saw them both in their son. Leo looked like his mother, had the same sense of humor and duty as his father and grandfather and if Casper hadn't been in love already, he would have been spending those three hours in the waiting room with the people that had shaped and molded Leo into the man he was today.

Finally the doctor came out and everyone stood expectantly. "You all can sit down, he's still asleep and being taken to a recovery room. He's got a shattered collarbone from the bullet. It just missed his vest and hit him in the neck line. An inch to the left and he'd not be here it would have hit him in the throat. Thankfully the only damage is his collar bone and we've removed the bullet and put in a pin to help hold the shoulder in place." The doctor began and everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

"How long is he gonna be laid up?" Vinnie asked getting right to business.

"He's not to do anything for the next six weeks at the very least. We have to give time for the shoulder to heal, no lifting and he's going to be in a sling."

"Leo's not going to like that." Franco Mancuso, Leo's grandfather whistled through his teeth and Vinnie nodded.

"That's for sure, Leo likes working he'll go stir crazy."

"Better stir crazy for a few months than lame from healing badly." The doctor said and Helena, Leo's mother spoke.

"But other than that, he's alright?" She asked and the Doctor nodded.

"He should be, I'm going to keep him here a few days for observation and then he can go home to recover and come in for therapy. I'll explain it all to him again when he wakes up." The doctor said as the nurse came over and indicated Leo was settled in a room and they could all go in to see him, he was coming around.

The group began walking over and Casper hung back to let his parents go in first and just as he was about to walk in, the nurse stopped him. "I'm sorry, family only." She said and Casper nodded sadly, knowing it was too good to be true and he lingered in the waiting room.

"Where's Casper?" Helena asked noticing he wasn't in the room with them.

"I don't know. He was here a minute ago." Vinnie said turning to see Casper and Gretel being ushered away from the door by the nurse. "Damn it. I hate hospitals." Vinnie said going out again.

"Why won't you let him in? This is idiocy." Vinnie said to the nurse.

"It's hospital rules, family only." The nurse replied and Casper smiled.

"It's alright, I'll wait here. Tell Leo I'm here please and I love him." Casper said and Vinnie fumed.

"Tell him your damn self. I know my son and he'll want to see you, you're family to Leo. Screw rules." Vinnie said daring the nurse with his face to argue with him.

The nurse just sighed and rather than argue further let Vinnie lead Casper inside just as Leo began to come around. Casper was standing at the foot of the bed and was the first thing Leo saw when he opened his eyes and smiled.

"Hey beautiful.." Leo said sleepily and Casper smiled.

"Hey yourself, how do you feel?" Casper asked and Leo yawned.

"Like hell. I got shot."

"I know, I saw it on TV and it scared the hell out of me." Casper said as Leo finally noticed the rest of his family in the room on either side of his bed.

"Did you all see it on TV?" Leo asked his father who nodded.

"We did."

"Did I at least look good going down?" Leo asked and His mother frowned.

"Damn it Leo, that's not funny." She scolded as three men, Franco, Vinnie and Casper sniggered. They thought it was, Leo's humor was still in tact.

"Sorry Mom."

"You'd better be." She said and Leo turned to his father.

“How’s Hans?”

“Fine, not a scratch. Joe came in while we were waiting and said he’d take Hans home with him until you’re out of here.”

“The hostages?” Leo asked still focused on the job it seemed.

“Fine, no injuries except yours.” Vinnie said and Leo looked relieved.

“Good, then I can rest easier.” Leo said and Vinnie smiled.

“You’d better rest. Doc says you’re decommissioned for six weeks at least.”

“Fuck. God Damn it.” Leo swore and Casper pinched his toe.

“Swearing won’t change the fact Leo. I agree with your father you will rest if I have to make Gretel sit on you to do it.” Casper said and Leo smiled at him.

“You would too wouldn’t you?”

“Watch me Leo. I will make you stick to doctor’s orders if it kills me and if I have to move in to watch you twenty four hours a day I will.” Casper said and Leo smirked.

“The man has my vote.” The doctor said as he came into the room. “Officer Mancuso you just nearly missed being a corpse I’ll have you know and if you mess up my hard work on that collarbone with being an idiot I’ll sic my dog on you and he’s not trained and a bloody nuisance.” The doctor said and Leo grinned.

“I’m about to be lectured I think.” Leo said and the doctor nodded.

“Instructed, I only lecture when you’re not obeying orders.” The doctor said flipping open his chart notes. “Six weeks and I mean six weeks you do not move that arm unless you’re in here for therapy. Give the bones time to set properly.” The doctor said and Leo grimaced.

“Not that I can move it doc, you’ve got a ton of plaster on me.”

“That will come off in three weeks, then you’ll be in a sling and in therapy. Three times a week and I’ll give you the schedule when you’re discharged. They’re prepping your room, you’re under observation for the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours to make sure there is no infection and you’re healing. Then you have two choices. Go stay with relatives or have someone stay with you. I don’t want

you lifting or trying to do anything with that arm until I say it's okay, that includes dressing and cooking."

"Damn it. You're shitting me."

"No Leo. That arm is to stay immobile, do you have someone who can stay with you?"

"Yes he does... Me." Casper said and Leo smiled at him.

"You don't have to Cass."

"Like you could keep me away? Hardly. Think again Leo." Casper said and Vinnie chuckled.

"I guess he told you. Cass gets my vote for keeping Leo in line." Vinnie said and Leo shook his head.

"Okay, I give. I was gonna ask you to move in anyway, this is just speeding things up a bit." Leo said and Casper smiled.

"You were?" Casper asked and Leo winked.

"Yeah, I was. So can you put in notice on your place?" Leo asked and Casper nodded.

"Consider it done. I'll start packing." Casper said fighting tears in front of Leo's family who were all smiles.

"Oh I'm gonna cry." Helena said and Leo took her hand in his good one.

"Save tears for sad things." Vinnie said as Leo took on a curious look.

"Cass, how did you get here? You don't drive."

"I ran, the bus was too slow."

"You live across town from here!"

"I know and I'd run it again if I had to and I'd better not have to Leo. I swear to god I shit myself when I watched you get shot on the news."

"You ran across town?" Vinnie asked and Casper nodded.

"No wonder you had a seizure son! You're not supposed to do that in your condition."

“You had a seizure?” Leo asked and Casper nodded.

“Baby, promise me you’ll call my parents if there is a next time please don’t hurt yourself over me, that’s worse than getting shot.” Leo said looking concerned and Casper nodded.

“I promise and there had better not be a next time!”

“Amen to that!” Helena said smiling at the man who she could tell loved her son and whom her son obviously loved in return. Even if Leo hadn’t been a gushing ninny on the phone that morning, she would have known just watching the pair interact together. They fit each other nicely and if eyes were the windows to the soul as people said, she could see a shared one reflected in their eyes.

Leo yawned again and the doctor noticed. “All right, everyone out and let him sleep it off. You can all come back later to see him.” The doctor said and before Casper left, he walked around the side of the bed and leaned over and kissed Leo softly.

“Sleep well, get better. I love you.” Casper said, saying aloud that he loved Leo for the first time and Leo’s eyes beamed with happiness.

“I love you too Cass. Come back later?”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. Go to sleep.” Casper smiled and followed the family outside.

Vinnie and Helena drove Casper and Gretel home and Helena made Casper promise to either call or take the bus when he wanted to go back to the hospital and she or Vinnie would come pick him up and take him.

He promised and went inside and fixed himself something to eat and fed Gretel before he showered and changed into better clothes and headed back to the bus stop and this time waited for the bus to take him back to the hospital.

He paused at the front desk to inquire which room they had moved Leo into and was pleased to hear that Vinnie had insisted he be added to the visitor list.

Casper paused at the gift shop and purchased some flowers before getting into the elevator with Gretel dutifully and silently walking alongside him.

Leo was sleeping in a new room when Casper came in and he set the flowers down quietly and sat in a chair to wait until Leo woke up.

Gretel curled up on the floor and took a nap herself.

Leo woke up about fifteen minutes later. "You should have woke me baby."

"You need your sleep Leo." Casper said dragging over his chair and taking Leo's good hand.

"But I want to see you more. Where's Gretel?"

"She's sleeping over there on the floor at the end of your bed." Casper said and at the mention of her name she got up and came over and nosed Leo's good hand. Leo scratched the top of her nose between her eyes and she licked him in thanks.

"She seems worried about you too." Casper said and Leo smiled.

"I'm alright. Sore as hell and annoyed at dumb luck, but other than that no worse for the wear. I'm more excited thinking you're moving in with me." Leo said and Casper chuckled.

"You might regret it you know. I'm going to make sure you do what the doctor tells you to do."

"But you'll be there all the time, what a nice bonus. I should get shot more often."

"Bite your tongue Leo!" Casper said and Leo just smiled at him.

"Okay, bad joke I know. Do you need help packing?" Leo asked and Casper smiled.

"Your Dad already offered to come help me move out. I called my landlord when I went home and gave notice. I'm paid until the end of the month already, but he said he'd not ding me for early move out considering the circumstances. I don't have much to pack I can probably be finished and moved by the time they release you."

"Fantastic. My parents live literally just four houses away across the street, my mother comes over a lot unannounced, I'll warn you now."

"I adore your mother, that's fine by me. She loves you and I can't blame her for wanting to check on you since you said you can't cook." Casper said and Leo chuckled.

"I'm abysmal at it, I'd starve if it weren't for take out and my mother bringing me leftovers."

“You won’t now. I can cook with a match for a burner, with a real stove I’ll make you fat. I love to cook, it gives me something to do all damn day so I’m not bored. I’m sure you noticed I’m a neat freak too, hope you don’t mind me cleaning house constantly either.”

“You certainly won’t hear me complaining Cass. I hate clutter, I’m the same there and yes I noticed you’re a neat freak, but so am I.” Leo said and Casper laughed.

“That’s really nice to know. However if you lift a finger to lift the toilet seat I’m yelling at you to let me do it for you until the doctor gives you the all clear. I refuse to let you over do it, I’ll warn you now. I can be really bitchy when I want to be.”

“I’ll be good, I swear.” Leo said as they continued to chat until visiting hours were over and Casper kissed Leo goodbye and took the bus home again and began packing that night.

The following Morning Casper was fixing breakfast when his phone rang making him jump and laugh at himself. He’d have to get used to ringing phones again he thought to himself as he answered it and it was Leo’s mother.

“Cassie! Did I wake you?” She asked and Casper smiled at her choice of nickname. His mother had called him that once and he hadn’t heard it in years and only older women were allowed to call him Cassie, anyone else got a glare for the use of a girl’s name.

“No, I was already up. How are you this morning?”

“Fine, I just wanted to let you know that they had to take Leo back into surgery this morning, nothing serious don’t worry. Just some internal bleeding I guess from what the doctor said. He’s not allowed visitors until after two this afternoon so we have a morning free and I didn’t want you to get all the way over there only to have to come back home. Vinnie and I can come over and help you pack up this morning if you’d like.” She said and Casper was touched at how they were indeed treating him just like a member of the family.

“That would be wonderful. I have most of it packed already, I don’t have much and I’m leaving the furniture behind so it’s just my personal items anyway. It’ll probably all fit in the trunk of a car actually.” Casper replied.

“Then we can be over in say twenty minutes complete with a trunk. Does Gretel Like sausage? I have leftovers from breakfast and I don’t dare give them to Hans or Otto, it makes them fart.” Helena said and Casper laughed, Otto was Vinnie’s old partner and getting up in years and Hans was one of Otto’s sons. Leo had

told Casper all about the gastric woes of people food and those two dogs. Thankfully Gretel didn't suffer too greatly.

"She'll be your new best friend if you bring sausage. No Farts from my classy girl."

"It's because she's such lady." Cassie grinned over the phone and said good-bye and she and Vinnie were indeed over to Casper's apartment in under twenty minutes, prompt and on time just like Leo always was. Another trait he'd picked up from his parents.

The phone rang again as Vinnie was toting out items to stack in the trunk and Helena was helping Casper pack inside. This time it was Leo.

"You're supposed to be resting Leo." Casper scolded but smiled.

"I know, I know I wanted to talk to you." Leo replied and before Casper could answer he heard his mother in the background.

"Tell Leo to go to sleep and we'll come by this afternoon. He never did like resting like a GOOD BOY!" Helena scolded and Leo laughed.

"What is my Mom doing there?"

"She's helping me pack and feeding Gretel about a pound of sausage. Gretel is glued to your mom's side hoping for another hand out. The fickle little hussy." Casper said and Leo laughed.

"I'm jealous. I want leftovers, I'm on fucking Jell-O."

"Only for today, you'll be back on solids tomorrow you'll survive Jell-O I think." Casper said holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder as he continued to pack.

"Is he bitching about food?" Vinnie asked as he came in for the next load.

"Yup." Casper said and Leo laughed on the other end.

"Tell my Dad to stuff a sock in it, last time he was in here he had mom smuggle him in Lasagna!"

"Leo said to stuff a sock in it and to mention Lasagna."

Vinnie laughed and just continued working.

"Ask him what I can bring." Helena said wrapping up a plates in towels.

“Your mom wants to know what she can smuggle you in to eat?”

“Bless her. Anything other than Hospital food.”

“He said anything.” Casper relayed and Helena nodded and continued working.

“We’ll I’ll let you all finish, have Dad take you over to the hardware store and make you a key for the place. He’s got a spare and if you’d pick up Hans and Take him home for me I’d appreciate it.”

“Consider it done. Anything else?” Casper asked and Leo just smiled.

“You coming to see me later.”

“Again that’s a given handsome. Get some sleep and I’ll see you later. I love you.”

“I love you too. See you later.” Leo hung up the phone and settled down, incredibly happy even with a busted collarbone and high on painkillers.

“I think we’re all set here, you really didn’t have a lot.” Helena said and Casper nodded.

“The place was too small to collect clutter. Just essentials. Leo asked we also make a key from your spare and pick up Hans too and take him home.”

“I already got him last night, he’s over terrorizing Otto at the moment and I already had you a key made too. I know my son.” Vinnie said with a wink as he closed the trunk and Casper did a last walk through of the apartment to make sure he had everything he wanted to take with him.

He did, so he and Gretel climbed into the backseat of Vinnie’s classic 1969 Cadillac and they drove over to Leo’s house.

The whole neighborhood was a string of 1950’s era tract homes, all cozy and comfortable and well established. The trees lining the street were lovely, there were kids out riding bikes and homeowners out gardening, it was a beautiful little neighborhood. Helena pointed out their house which was indeed just a few doors away from the nice little bungalow style house painted white with blue shutters.

Vinnie parked in the driveway and handed Casper back his key. “Home Sweet Home.” Vinnie said and Casper was now nervous, he was walking into a completely new life and was a little leery about it, he didn’t want to overstep boundaries.

“For now, why don’t we just put my stuff in the garage. I’m not sure where to put things away yet and I’d like Leo here for that.” Casper said and Helena nodded, she loved this boy, he was so conscientious and polite and the smile he put on Leo’s face and in his voice made her love him like her own.

“Right-O.” Vinnie said as he opened the garage and stacked the few boxes of Casper’s belongings in the garage.

Casper went over to test his key and it fit perfectly and he opened the door into heaven. Leo was indeed just as much a neat freak as Casper was. Everything was neat and clean and organized.

The front door opened into the large living room and Casper’s jaw hit the floor when he spotted the huge plasma screen TV hanging over the mantle like a painting and the surround sound speakers. The furniture all creamy soft and supple black leather and a Persian rug on the hardwood floors.

Gretel’s nails made little clicking noises as they walked inside and took in the very masculine but very comfortable and classy space. Leo had fabulous taste and decorating sense. The bookshelf was filled with books and DVDs and all manner of CDs for the gorgeous BOSE stereo system. Leo certainly spared no expense on home entertainment that was for sure. Casper noted as he turned and spotted the Kitchen.

“He just remolded the Kitchen last year, shame he can’t use it for shit.” Helena said following Casper inside.

“Oh, but I can! I’ll never leave this room I’ve died and gone to heaven.” Casper said running his hands over the dark granite countertops and stainless steel appliances, dark cherry cabinets and black counter appliances. Again a very masculine look to the overall décor.

“Leo’s gutted the whole place since he bought it three years ago. He’s redone everything in here himself. He’s quite the handyman.” Helena said leading the way and showing Casper around.

“He did all this HIMSELF?” Casper asked and Helena nodded. Casper just whistled low, impressed with the handyman boyfriend who’d missed his calling as an interior designer to be a cop.

The House had four bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms, it was a large house and Casper wondered what a single man needed with all the space and he soon found out. The first room they came to had been converted into canine heaven. There were soft cozy places to lay on, toys galore and a feeding system in place to provide constant metered food and fresh water. This room was the only room carpeted, and had good solid indoor/outdoor carpeting that was kind to

dog feet and durable. All of Hans' service awards and certifications and medals hung on the wall, this was Hans' domain and Leo absolutely loved his dog and it was evident. Gretel was sniffing around and found the water bowl and took a drink, looking like she felt right at home.

The next bedroom had been converted into a home gym, complete with free weights, a dazzling high-tech treadmill and machines that broke you into a sweat just looking at them. This explained why Leo was one walking package of sexy, firm man flesh. The man worked out seriously. He had a plasma on the wall in here too, so he obviously liked to watch TV while he worked out as well. Casper noted as they continued on. The third bedroom was reserved as a guest bedroom and was neatly arranged and looked not to see many guests and had a small private bathroom attached. The half bath was at the end of the hall, but really could have been considered a three-quarter bath. It had a sink, toilet and small stand up shower. The last room, took Casper's breath away.

The Master suite was massive. All dark woods that matched the walnut floors. A huge four poster bed with black sheets and comforter duvet. A walk in closet that was practically the size of Casper's old apartment and the bathroom, oh the glorious bathroom.

Slate tiles from floor to ceiling. A huge jetted soaking tub, a massive Japanese style shower with about fifteen shower heads at various angles was next to that and the counter vanity had two sinks with those bowl like basins on top of the counter. "Leo must watch a lot of Decorating shows, this place looks like a show piece from them." Casper gasped and Helena laughed.

"He does. He did do a great job on the place, I keep begging him to do mine next." Helena chuckled as the tour ended and Casper breathed deep, trying to avoid breaking down into giddy laughter that he actually lived here now.

Vinnie showed up with Hans and Hans greeted Gretel and Casper happily as one final stop on the tour was made.

They walked out from the sliding glass doors off the living room, with a permanent doggy door affixed to it so the dogs could go out whenever they felt like it and into the backyard sanctuary.

Leo had his handiwork in the backyard too. There was a terra cotta tiled patio with a protective arbor overhead to keep one dry on rainy days. A Built in gas grill area with a mini fridge and wet bar for entertaining out of doors. The landscaping was gorgeous and there was a whole set of climbing apparatus for the dogs to make up for not a lot of running room. And the final orgasmic joy of all joys, a pool and hot tub combination. One of those rocky grotto looking oasis types with waterfalls and cascading water over rocks. The Hot tub section raised above the

small soaking pool which Hans was jumping into to cool off and swimming about. Gretel just stood there looking at him before she too jumped in and followed suit.

They got out shaking off and went to lay on cool Terra cotta to dry off.

“I think Gretel thinks we’re on holiday, I certainly feel like it. I’m afraid to touch anything.”

“Don’t be sweetheart, Leo wants you here and you’re the only person he’s ever let in here before. To have him already wanting you to live here says a lot to the rest of us. Leo’s actually a very private person and he doesn’t open up to people easily. Sure, he’s friendly and will chat with anyone, but it’s never personal, not to this extent. He wants you in his life, which speaks volumes. Whatever you’re doing to make him so happy, keep doing it sweetheart.” Helena said and Casper sank into a patio chair and cried. He felt so overwhelmed and happy and a host of other conflicting emotions the tears wouldn’t stop.

Helena just hugged him and smiled. “I just saw all I needed to. Welcome to the family Cassie.” Helena said kissing Casper’s cheek. The tenderhearted youth touched every maternal instinct she had and she could see why Leo adored him. He was genuine and wore his emotions on his sleeve just like Leo did. They were matched well.

Vinnie and Helena bid Casper a temporary farewell so he could get adjusted and they’d be back in a few hours to collect him and take him to the hospital to visit Leo.

Casper just sat outside and watched the dogs play with each other before he went inside to feed himself and use the kitchen for first time. While he fixed lunch, he turned on the news and again was standing there in shock as Leo was on TV again.

Somehow reporters had gotten into his room to interview him, and Casper noted what Helena said. Leo was private and he looked more annoyed at being interviewed in bed than happy about it.

“Officer Mancuso, we saw the footage of you being shot yesterday and everyone would like to know how you’re feeling.”

“Tired, but alright I suppose considering. Getting shot is a risk of the job as they say. I’m not the only cop to get bitten.” Leo replied and Casper smiled and watched.

“We have messages from the hostages and they want to thank you and the others for getting them out safely.”

“That’s nice to know, thank you. But really, it’s just my job it’s not necessary to thank me but I appreciate it. Thank the dogs more, they did a brilliant job.” Leo said and Casper settled on the couch with his sandwich to watch. Hans and Gretel at his feet listening to Leo on the Television with him.

“Yes, the dogs were a finely trained force and the footage shows your direction. Do you train the dogs yourself?”

“I train them with my Father and Grandfather and the other handlers in the force. It’s a group effort. Dogs are amazing creatures and very smart and we don’t give them half they credit we should at times. Hansel is more than my pet, he’s my partner on the force and I couldn’t ask for a better one.”

“Hansel, amusing name.”

“We call him Hans for short. If you want a good chuckle though, my partner of the human variety has a service dog named Gretel. That was good for a laugh when we first met. Hans seems to like her well enough, but she is a looker too sort of like her owner.” Leo said winking at the camera and Casper chuckled. It was rather amusing to have a pair of Dogs named Hansel and Gretel and not have it planned before hand.

“Ah, so you have someone special Officer Mancuso. They must have been worried over you yesterday.”

“Cass saw it on TV along with my parents. They were all here practically before I got here, yes. But like I said, I’m alright, I’ll be decommissioned a while to recover but it’s not something that will stop me indefinitely. I’ve got a great family at home I’ll be fine. Cass will keep me in line I’m sure.”

“Damn straight I will!” Casper replied to the TV laughing and noting that beyond the gender ambiguous Cass, Leo was divulging nothing personal. Which was smart and Casper decided to be amusing himself and dialed the hospital room.

Leo answered while still on camera and laughed. “Cass is watching and is requesting you all leave me to rest and that I’m not supposed to have visitors at the moment.” Leo related and winked at the camera.

“You sexy man. I love you.” Casper said into the phone and Leo smiled and blew a kiss at the camera.

Casper chuckled and hung up and was glad to see the reporters cut the interview short and leave Leo to rest.

Helena called laughing at his interview interruption and he chatted with her on the phone a few minutes before they all headed back to the hospital together to visit Leo.

That night after visiting hours were over and Casper returned home, he made sure the dogs were fed and washed his plate from earlier then went to the garage to find his clothes and changed into something comfortable for the night.

Come bed time he was torn, should he sleep in the master bedroom or the guest bedroom? He opted for the guest bedroom, he still felt a little out of place and without Leo here he felt like an intruder and the master bedroom was Leo's domain and he wasn't about to invade the space without Leo there making the offer.

Gretel and Hans followed him into the guest bedroom and the bed was crowded with two dogs joining him to sleep. Come morning however he was alone and the dogs had moved onto the floor beside the bed, they too must have been crowded. Gretel was alert the moment he was and followed him out of the room, Hans however just raised his head, cracked open one eye and then went back to sleep. "Lazy bones." Casper chuckled heading into the kitchen to make coffee and watch the morning news.

Hans trotted out a few minutes later and just resumed his sleep on the couch instead. Casper was amused, Hansel and Gretel had very distinct personalities. Gretel was an elegant lady, like a classical ballerina and always alert and attentive and Hans, had he been a human, Casper pictured him as a large blue collar construction worker sitting in a recliner with a beer and a cigar after a hard day.

He adored them both and sat between them on the couch with his toast and coffee and scratched chins resting in his lap lovingly. The one thing they shared in common was affection, Casper noted both dogs were full to the brim with unconditional love and affection. Hans licking the butter off his fingers however showed the boy was also sneaky.

"You don't love me, you want people food. No way Jose. Your daddy says you get the farts that strip wallpaper. Maybe he has treats for you in the cupboard." Casper said going into the kitchen and indeed finding the box of milk bones on the top shelf. He needed a step stool to reach it.

"Damn my tall ass boyfriend!" Casper chuckled finally getting the box down and grabbing a handful of treats to give to the dogs excitedly wagging tails at his feet when they figured out he was getting down treats.

They were happily crunching away when the phone rang and Casper answered it and again it was Leo.

“Hey, they’re paroling me early for good behavior! The Doc said I’ll be discharged this afternoon at one.”

“Wonderful! What would you like for lunch then and I can get it started before we come get you.”

“Oh god, anything Baby, I’m not picky. I just want my own damn bed and you I give a shit about anything else. How did you sleep?” Leo asked and Casper smiled leaning against the counter.

“After Hans got off my face? Fine. Your guest bed is really comfortable.”

“The guest bed? Um, babe in case you hadn’t figured it out already I didn’t ask you to live with me as a room mate you know.” Leo said and Casper chuckled.

“I know. But you weren’t here and well call me crazy but I didn’t want to sleep in your bed without you here in it with me.”

“You just gave me a toothache, god I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“So Hans treated you to the butt brigade last night?”

“Yup.”

“Figures. At least you know you’re accepted. He doesn’t shove his ass up just anyone’s nose. Just say ‘Down in Front’ next time and he’ll get off the bed.”

“I didn’t mind and he and Gretel ended up on the floor anyway. I moved their treats one shelf down by the way. I’m too short to reach where you kept them.”

“Ah, sorry. No problem. The nurses are here to take me to x-ray, I gotta go for now. I’ll see you later.”

“See you soon.” Casper said making a kissing noise in the phone that was returned before Casper called Helena to let her know the pick-up time and then set about getting his crock-pot out of the garage and raiding the fridge for items to cram into it for an impromptu lunch.

Leo had nothing but TV dinners and Casper was back on the phone with Helena and they made a quick run to the store so Casper could buy actual food and nothing ready made and filled with junk.

She helped him stack away the groceries and chatted with him and helped him cut up carrots as he de-boned some lamb chops to stick in the slow cooker with red potatoes and mint leaves.

"I never thought to stick them in the crock pot." Helena remarked and Casper smiled.

"They fall apart and soak up the mint, I love this crock. I abuse it." Casper said and Helena smiled.

"I should start, it's also easy. Turn it on and leave it all day."

"Precisely and it makes the house smell good too. Think I should add those green beans too? Does he like green beans?"

"Hon, he'll eat whatever you shove under his nose, he's not picky in the slightest." Helena said handing over the fresh and not canned beans that Casper added on top of the potatoes and carrots.

Once Dinner was started Vinnie came over to pick them up and they headed to the hospital to collect Leo and bring him home.

As they headed to the main doors, there were half a dozen cameras and suddenly reporters swarmed the group. "Are you Officer Mancuso's family. We hear he's going to be released today." One asked shoving a microphone at Vinnie.

"Goodness gracious. Yes, we're here to get my son. What in blazes is all of this?" Vinnie asked stunned at the media attention this was getting.

"It's big news, everyone thinks your son is a hero. We have women writing and calling the station non-stop asking about him. He's quite popular." One said off the record which had Casper laughing out loud and trying to cover his mouth.

"What's so funny?" One asked and Casper just shook his head, he couldn't answer he was far too amused. Gretel at his side cocking her head at her owner.

One noticed the dog and on her vest her name. "Wait, this is the Gretel Officer Mancuso mentioned yesterday?"

"That would be her." Casper said smiling, getting a sick thrill out of the situation.

"But where's her owner? Officer Mancuso mentioned a Cass."

“That would be me, I’m Cass. That’s short for Casper.” Casper said non-pulsed and waited for the realization to dawn on the reporters.

“Oh, we assumed it was short for Cassie.”

“Most do and only Leo’s mother can call me Cassie without trouble.” Casper said and Helena laughed hooking her arm through Casper’s.

“Because Mama’s are special and do let us by, we’ll be late picking Leo up.” She said as they pushed past reporters who were now buzzing with questions about the relationship of Leo and Casper on top of getting film of the handsome hero cop being released from the hospital.

Leo was not looking forward to the media circus as Casper pushed his wheelchair down and out of the front doors. Flashbulbs went crazy and blinded them all for a moment and Casper went down with a cry and Gretel was barking and hovering over him.

“STOP WITH THE FLASHES! HE’S EPILEPTIC AND YOU’LL GIVE HIM A GOD DAMN SEIZURE!” Leo and Vinnie hollered almost in union and Casper groaned.

“Cass!” Leo hated the chair and cast on his shoulder as he tried to turn to see Casper behind the chair.

“It’s all right, I blocked my eyes in time. I wasn’t expecting that, not at all. Sorry.” Casper said righting himself and shaking the spots out of his eyes.

“Don’t be sorry babe, as long as you’re okay.”

“Fine.” Casper said standing up again and dusting himself off.

“We are sorry, are you all right sir?” One reporter asked and Casper nodded.

“Fine, but you should warn people you know, epilepsy isn’t something you can tell a person has just by looking. Strobe flashes and other visual sensations can easily put someone into a seizure just so you know.” Casper said educating the reporter and whoever else was now watching the news.

“So your service dog isn’t a cop too?”

“No, Gretel is trained to take care of me and alert me if I’m going to have a seizure so I can prepare and not get hurt. She makes sure to turn me on my side so I can breathe during a seizure and guards me. Dogs have a sixth sense about them that humans don’t. Like how animals can sense an oncoming earthquake, she can sense a few minutes before I have a seizure the electronics in my brain are going crazy and she tells me so I can get into a position where I won’t fall or

worse end up in a place that will kill me. She's my lifesaver. She allows me to live a fairly normal life where I couldn't before." Casper said and the reporters seemed fascinated. Leo looked pleased where he sat in his chair. Casper adapted amazingly well to public pressure and being in a spotlight he didn't want to be in. Leo was glad the attention was off him for the moment, he felt and looked like hell and the last thing he wanted was media attention over just doing his god damned job. The attention on Casper didn't last long much to his chagrin.

"Officer Mancuso, you mentioned her yesterday."

"I did, she's a beautiful girl isn't she?" Leo said scratching her ears with his good hand smiling.

"She is a beautiful animal, did you train her too?"

"Oh no, I'm not qualified to train medical certified animals. We do however breed them and those that qualify for temperament, which has to be even better than that of one who makes the cut for officer training get sent to the hospital training program. They have to go through a lot more training than our K-9 Officers. Gretel here probably spent her first year in a foster home, getting used to people in public places first then brought to the hospital for another two years of intensive specialized training. Some learn to lead the blind, some learn how to help domestically for the physically handicapped and some like Gretel learn how to take care of people who suffer epilepsy like Cass."

"I got lucky, I've been around Gretel since she was a puppy. My neurologist fostered her for her first year and I was with her throughout her training. She'll be six in August." Casper said absently and lovingly stroking her head where she leaned against his leg.

"A long love affair then." The reporter said and the look on Casper's face spoke volumes how much he loved his dog.

"Oh yes, she's so much more than my pet and companion. She's also not on duty all the time, she's a dog like any other too. I had to keep her and Hans out of the pool this morning."

"Hans is taking advantage of the fact I'm not home. The booger knows he's not supposed to go in the pool, his hair clogs the drain! But he does it anyway." Leo laughed.

"And they track in water to mop up." Casper added and Leo chuckled.

"So you two are...?" The reporter asked leaving the question open ended and Leo sighed.

“Not answering personal questions on our relationship, about my job or the dogs is one thing, our personal life is private thank you.” Leo said and Casper squeezed his good shoulder in support.

“But, you are partners right? The people want to know, you have quite a fan base Officer Mancuso.”

“I really am touched so many people think I’m some sort of hero. But I’m not; I’m just a cop like any other just doing my job. I got unlucky with a bullet that missed my vest and shattered my collarbone, nothing more than that. At home I’m just a guy who likes to kick his feet up just like the next. Does it make a difference who I share that time with? Please, can we leave Casper’s and My personal life out of this? I just want to go home and have a decent meal and sleep in my own bed tonight. That’s all.” Leo said and the reporter nodded.

“We understand, thank you for your time Officer Mancuso.”

“Thank you. You’re welcome.” Leo said and Casper helped him out of the chair and into the backseat of the Cadillac. Gretel hopped in next and Casper got in and they all drove off heaving a sigh of relief that was over.

Leo gratefully flopped on the couch when they got inside and Helena and Vinnie bid them goodbye to get settled.

“What smells so good in here?” Leo asked as Casper took off Gretel’s vest and she hopped up on the couch with Leo and Hans.

“Your dinner. Lamb chops.”

“God I love you! Come here beautiful.” Leo said and Casper smiled and came over to the couch and curled up against Leo’s good side.

“Welcome home Leo.”

“It’s great to be home, even better to have you in it and I haven’t had a kiss all day, I’m having withdrawals.” Leo said and Casper chuckled and sat up to give Leo a very nice welcome home kiss that had Leo sighing with bliss.

“Better?” Casper asked and Leo grinned.

“Much.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Not at the moment, just you.” Leo said getting comfortable with Casper as he turned on the TV and they watched themselves on the news. Leo dozed off from

the painkillers not long after and Casper covered him with a blanket and let him sleep in front of the television while he checked on dinner.

“Canine Companions”

A Young Lovers Series One-Shot

Author: D. Sanders

ACT IV - Weathering Controversy

Leo didn't get to sleep long, the phone started ringing off the hook. Female admirers who'd seen him on TV, Male admirers too for that matter. Three of Leo's ex-boyfriends, the news station, some telemarketing company and so forth and so on. After a while, they began ignoring the phone and letting the answering machine pick it up.

Then the door bell started ringing. Flowers and candy deliveries, telegrams, and actual fans.

“Jesus Christ how did they get my address?” Leo shouted from the couch angry that his privacy was being invaded.

“The phone book probably.” Casper said bringing in yet another floral bouquet and finding space for it on the cluttered table.

Then the real shit hit the fan. Outside on the street was forming a crowd with picket signs that said things like “God Hates Fags”, “No Fags on the Force” and other hateful slogans and then came the supporters with rainbow signs touting peace and love.

The phone went again and it was Leo's Boss. “I just want you to know your job is safe Leo. I cannot believe these assholes, they are picketing the station.”

“They are picketing my god damn house Ted! Can you send anyone over to break them up or something? They're tearing up my fucking lawn and I don't need this crap.”

“I'll send over a car. They can't picket on private property. Hell man I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault Ted. Some asshole at the network thinks I'm good for ratings I guess.”

“Good looking cop gets shot while saving a woman from a lunatic on live feed TV makes good ratings and sucks for you. I'm on it Leo. How you feeling otherwise?”

“Hurt like hell. I'm on massive pain killers at the moment.”

“No doubt. I've already done your temporary disability paperwork and you're on paid leave until you recover and take all the time you need, I want you back to work at one-hundred percent and not before. And personally, I didn't know you were living with someone you tight lipped bastard.”

Leo chuckled. "Cass just moved in, he wasn't here before I got shot. We've only really been seeing each other Christ, not even a week. He's hot isn't he?"

"Leo you retard. But it explains you singing in the locker room recently."

"Oh hell yes. He's perfect and I love him."

"Great news. I'll send a car out to disperse the rabble take it easy and rest."

"I will." Leo said hanging up and relieved that at least his job wasn't going to go by the way of the do-do with all the public pressure.

Casper kept peeking out the curtains looking upset and Leo turned the news on when Casper indicated they'd arrived and a reporter was standing on the sidewalk talking.

"No rest for the weary and heroic it seems. Officer Mancuso has just arrived home from the hospital and as you can see, picketers are lining the street and are out front of the police station calling for his termination based on his unconfirmed and supposed sexual orientation. This station would like to mention it's support of Officer Mancuso and remind people of his actions that saved the lives of six hostages Tuesday morning. Our correspondents in our legal department would also like to remind people that federal law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, religion and sexual orientation..." The reporter rambled on and Casper joined Leo on the couch to watch the chaos outside his house.

Hans was restless, pacing the floor and Gretel sat glued to Casper's side, attuned to his heightened state of stress.

The station cut away to the police station and Ted Baxter, Leo's boss was giving a statement. "We here at the station just wish to state for the record that Officer Leonard Mancuso has been a shining example of law enforcement for the past six years. He is on paid leave until he recovers and under no uncertain terms will his position as the head of our K-9 unit be in jeopardy over this. He's been decorated twice for valor and his service record is spotless. Our official stance on the matter is that regardless of public opinion, Officer Mancuso's record speaks for itself and we support our fellow Officers." Ted said publicly and then the news cut back to in front of Leo's house.

"So there you have it, official communication from the district in support of Officer Mancuso. Pardon me sir, but can you tell us why you are picketing?"

“Because got hates fags man! They corrupt and rape babies and guys like him should be in jail and not cops!” One bigot shouted and another called out in response.

“You misinformed troglodyte! Homosexuality is as normal as Heterosexuality and has nothing to do with a man who took a bullet to save someone! Raping babies is a gross slur and insult to a remarkable officer of the peace!”

“It’s Sodom and Gomorrah! It’s end times when we allow queers to roam free!”

“Roam Free? What are we sheep?”

The arguments went back and forth and Casper groaned and buried his head in his hands and Leo just reached down and patted his back.

“Welcome to controversy. Christ this shit gets really old, really fast.” Leo said as he noticed His parents marching through the crowd, his mother looked livid.

“Oh hell, here comes Mom. Wait for the old bird, she’s fit to be tied. Twenty bucks on mom to kick ass out there.” Leo said and Casper looked up to see Helena walking purposefully up to the reporter.

“Look here you, it’s bad enough these people are interfering with my son’s recuperation! But to have you putting it on television for sensationalism for the sake of it is despicable! It’s all your fault in the first place, you just couldn’t leave Leo alone! Good looking young cop gets hurt doing his job. He’s just the same as the next cop just like he said. But you see a handsome face and suddenly he’s all over your news and the situation is blown all out of proportion. Then you corner us like rabid wolves around a kill when all we wanted to do was bring Leo home and you put poor Cassie on the spot and spawn this madness! Let me tell you one thing missy. Leo is a good boy, he’s always honest, and he’s always giving and loving. He’d be the first to jump into a burning building to pull you out of it and Cassie, oh god Cassie. Sweetest damn boy I ever met! Do you know the hell he’s been through? Do you know the first thing about him? No! Let me tell you. All his life he’s had to deal with a condition that makes just going to the park risky! He loses his mama when he’s just seventeen, lives homeless for a while, until his doctor helps get him on public aide that left him stranded alone! He’s had to survive all on his own for the past seven years, with next to nothing and with a serious medical condition to cope with on top of it! Yet he’s still plugging away and still the first to smile at you in greeting, the first to offer to help. Now you treat him like some leper and picket his home? Madness! Take your cameras and leave them alone!” Helena ranted and raved and Leo and Casper just watched her stunned.

The cops arrived not long after and the crowd was cleared away and Helena marched up to the front door with Vinnie and Casper greeted her with a hug and tears. "Don't cry sweetheart, those vultures."

"No, I'm crying because I love you. Thank you." Casper said and Helena just smiled and hugged him back.

"Ah, sweetness, we love you too. It's hard not to. How are you both doing?"

"Fine mom. Ted called and work is fine if harried over this, it's crazy but we'll manage once the heat dies down." Leo said taking it better than Casper.

"Just call us if you need us. My word it smells nice in here, those chops are probably done." Helena said and Casper chuckled.

"We've been a bit preoccupied to eat. There's enough for us all, would you like to stay for dinner?" Casper asked and Vinnie and Helena accepted and Leo shuffled over to the table and Casper cut up his meal into bite sized pieces before putting his plate in front of him.

"Thanks, God I haven't had anyone cut up my meat for me since I was five." Leo chuckled trying to juggle a fork with his left hand.

"I told you, I'm doing it for you until the doctor says otherwise Lefty." Casper said smiling and fixing his own plate.

Dinner was subdued but wonderful. Casper beamed with Helena's compliments and there were no leftovers as Vinnie and Leo made healthy inroads into supper.

Once dinner ended, Vinnie and Helena returned home and rather than turning the news back on, Leo had Casper stick on a movie and they both enjoyed watching "The Blues Brothers" before bed.

After the movie Casper helped Leo undress for bed, minding the plastered shoulder. "God I feel grimy as hell and I can't get this fucker wet with a shower." Leo complained and Casper just smiled and led him into the bathroom.

"First, get on your knees and lean over the tub, I'll wash your hair." Casper said turning on taps. Leo was purring as Casper scrubbed his scalp and carefully washed hair to avoid getting his cast wet. He wrapped a towel around Leo's head, then had him sit up on the edge of the tub where he proceeded to abuse a washcloth to give Leo a sponge bath.

"I really appreciate this."

“Like you wouldn’t do this for me if I was the one with an arm out of commission? I love you Leo, this is nothing. It’s actually wonderful to feel useful for a change.” Casper said and felt Leo’s good arm wrap around him.

“You were never useless. Just because you can’t work a nine-to-five doesn’t mean you’re useless. You’re a damn fine cook, one hell of an artist, and now nursemaid to gimpy here. You’re more than capable and I will tell you this always until you believe it yourself.” Leo said and Casper melted and leaned over to kiss Leo.

“I just adore you. Ready for bed?” Casper asked and Leo nodded and Casper towel dried his hair and combed it before pulling back the covers and helping Leo in.

Casper shed his own clothes and flipped off the lights and sighed with contentment as he crawled into bed beside Leo, snuggling close.

“This is just about perfect.” Leo sighed as well as the dogs jumped up onto the foot of the bed and everyone settled in for the night.

The following morning Leo was gently prodded awake by Casper who had looked to have been up a while and Hans had taken over the warm spot Casper had left behind. Leo groaned in pain as he tried to move and a gentle hand just settled on his chest. “Your pills have probably worn off and you have to take them with food. I’m just here to ask you if you want bacon or sausage and how do you like your eggs?” Casper asked and Leo cracked open heavy eyelids.

“I don’t have bacon or eggs in the fridge.”

“Yes you do. I had your mom take me to the store yesterday before we came to get you. “ Casper said perching on the side of the bed and smiling down at Leo.

“Babe, you don’t have to buy us groceries. You don’t get squat on disability, I know that, save your money for important things.”

“You are important and we’ll talk about money later. You need to take your pills and I need to feed you so you can take them. So again Bacon or Sausage?”

“Sausage please.” Leo smiled lost in the warmth of feeling he suddenly felt well up inside just at the thought of Casper intent on taking care of him.

“And how do you like your eggs?”

“Over medium?” Leo asked and Casper smiled and leaned over and kissed Leo’s nose.

“Then over medium it is. Need help getting up?” Casper asked moving to take Leo’s good hand and giving him support as he threw long legs out of bed, wincing at his bad shoulder that was on fire this morning.

“Just go sit down, breakfast won’t take a minute and I already have your pills and coffee ready so you can take them.” Casper said leading the way to the table where Leo flopped into a chair grateful and downed his pills and coffee as the kitchen smelled of frying sausage and eggs and fresh coffee.

He watched Casper still dressed in his robe standing at the stove, his blond hair shaggy and askew and looking quite happy as he fixed breakfast and brought it over to Leo at the table.

“What on earth did I do to get so lucky?” Leo asked and Casper cocked an eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t call getting a bullet in you lucky hon.” Casper said buttering toast and placing that next to Leo and filling his coffee again without being prompted or asked.

“You, all of this. I feel like I just won the damn lottery. I have never felt more settled and comfortable in my life, and I mean that Cass. I feel like I’m in an episode of Ozzie and Harriet over here.” Leo said and Casper laughed going to fix his own breakfast.

“I know. Just call me Donna Reed and the Dogs Wally and the Beaver.” Casper grinned over his shoulder and Leo chuckled and winced.

“Ow, don’t make me laugh babe until the Meds kick in.” Leo said wiping up coffee he almost spilled laughing. Casper came over and did it for him, again without being prompted. It was like he was so in tune with what was happening in the house he had a canine sixth sense about it and he was rapidly becoming a fixture in the house that Leo knew he’d never be able to function again without now that he had him.

“So Donna, my perfect fifties housewife...” Leo began and Casper just gave a comical glare but smiled at the joke. “... Finances and hear me out first before you bitch babe. Trust me, I know you get nothing on federal disability and social security. I’ll take a generous stab in the dark here and guess you get about three hundred a month after taxes am I close?”

“Three twenty five, yes very close.” Casper said as he sat at the table with his own breakfast listening.

"I can also do math. You already mentioned you paid rent this month over on your apartment and you've been shopping for me twice now to feed me. You've probably got next to nothing left in your wallet. Again am I close?"

"Yes, but Leo..."

"Save the butts Casper, really. I'm just going to be blunt about this and call me the stereotypical macho Italian guy but I can't abide even considering alternatives here. I want you to save your money. Put it in the bank; let it accumulate for emergencies or just things you want for a change. I make more than enough to cover any and all living expenses we can hope to generate together. I bring home about five grand a month after taxes, plus I have a pension fund started and after six months of cohabitation I can add you to my medical insurance as a domestic partner. I'm dead serious about you Casper, this is no walk in the park for me, I'm a commitment minded guy and I want you and have wanted you about three seconds after I met you." Leo began and Casper just nodded listening knowing Leo was not done talking yet by the dead serious look on his face.

"In case you hadn't noticed or my mother hasn't already blabbed all my personal business to you already I don't make commitments easy or share much. I have never brought anyone back here, none of my past relationships ever got past the front door. I was never comfortable with any of them to invite them into my personal space. You however are a different matter entirely. You don't even cause a ripple in my comfort zone, you just add to it very nicely and you light up the whole room just breathing for me and I'd be a damn bastard if I didn't acknowledge the fact I love you and want to make this a very long term thing. Lifetime sounds just about peachy and it starts here. Call me a prick, call me a macho bastard, call me whatever you like but I have every intention of supporting you just as you support me. Money is nothing, you can't buy what we have and I couldn't pay for what you give me even if I wanted to. You read me like a damn book and don't deny it cause you know you do. I'm old fashioned Cass and again you already know that too. I give a flying fuck you can't work; you do enough for me just being here. So please, don't use your own money anymore for mundane things like groceries. I'm going to get you on my account at the bank and get you a duplicate debit card so household expenses come out of my check not yours okay?"

"Leo, I don't know what to say. I think this is moving awfully fast. Not that I don't appreciate the gesture I really honestly do and I love you so much I can't see straight anymore. I have no intention on leaving and to get rid of me you'd have to throw me out, but Leo I can't contribute nothing to us as a couple that's crazy."

"Who says you contribute nothing? Who got up first and let the dogs out and made breakfast and coffee and got my pills ready and helped my gimpy ass out

of bed? Who helped me wash and dress? Who did the dishes and cut up my food so I could eat it? If that's not contributing I don't know what is Babe."

"That's just because I love you Leo and you'd do the same for me."

"Precisely my point Casper. I'm only temporarily handicapped and you're permanently in that situation and still taking on extra tasks. When I'm better and back to work again having you here to manage the house for us will take such a load off me I can't begin to tell you. I hate shopping when I'm exhausted from pulling a double shift. The last thing I want to do when I'm famished, sweaty and tired is to cook. I don't even have the energy to microwave a TV dinner most times let alone lift a fork to my mouth. Then there's checking the mail and sorting out bills from junk and things that I don't even want to look at sometimes because I'm just beat and heart sick at seeing some woman beaten by her husband and refusing to press charges. Or having to get kids out of squalor and into protective services. Chasing druggies down and getting pushers in jail. I despise having one glorious day off and spending all day cleaning the house. Trust me, your contributions to living here are so many I can't list them all. My job is hard and not just physically but emotionally and I just want to come home at night, curl up with you and forget the world outside. It's all I've ever wanted. It took me forever to find the one I wanted to do that with and I won't let go of you easily." Leo said and Casper let out a choked sound and moved and straddled Leo in his chair, minding his shoulder and kissed him soundly.

"Leo, you're not the only one who suddenly feels like he hit the lotto. I've always felt so useless but the way you put it makes me feel so needed I want to cry. I promise I'll always be here to help you forget the world since you make mine a place I finally want to live in. I love you."

"I love you too Cass. So are we agreed I bring home the bacon and you cook it?" Leo asked with a grin and Casper smiled.

"Agreed, now eat before your sausage congeals." Casper said getting off Leo's lap and moving back to his plate.

"OH! I almost forgot! Your mom called while you were still sleeping and asked if you felt up to coming over to the cookout later today still. Your grandpa and dad are at the parade now and I guess Joe is taking your place in the demonstration. She said she's going to put the meat on the grill around two this afternoon and even if you just show up to eat she'll be happy."

"That's no problem. I can sit down there as easy as I can here and Mom makes the best bratwurst links we don't want to miss those. You can meet my sister Lu too; Lucretia will be there with her husband Bill and their rugrat. My niece, Penelope, is three and a pisser. Just watching her wrap my dad around her finger is a trip." Leo said and Casper smiled.

"I love little kids sounds like fun. Gretel absolutely loves little girls." Casper said picking up plates to wash and then handing Leo the phone. "I told your mom you'd call her back when you got up and I'd better start on the pudding." Casper said smiling and turning to indeed begin fixing the banana pudding he'd said he'd make since they were still on for the cookout it seemed.

Leo called his mother and moved to the couch to talk to her and confirm he felt well enough to eat and he could do that at her house just as well as his and she scolded him for being cheeky and he laughed and chatted and flipped on the TV and began channel surfing while he talked.

"Aw hell! Turn to channel twenty-seven mom. Jesus Christ it just doesn't stop does it? Casper come in here!" Leo said stopping on a station that had pictures of Casper up on the screen and commentary.

"This station has learned that the statements made by Helena Mancuso about Casper Wright, Partner of Officer Mancuso almost gunned down in the line of duty Tuesday were indeed true and an inspiring story for many. We just had to share this story of triumph over adversity with you our viewers..."

The voice over began as pictures of Casper from his childhood and high school year book flashed on the screen like a montage.

"What the hell? Where did they get mom's old photos?" Casper asked sitting down with Leo on the couch.

"Our sources indicate that Casper was born to Karen and John Wright in Mercy Hospital on August Thirtieth. He was nearly asphyxiated due to the umbilical cord being wrapped around his throat causing severe oxygen deprivation to his brain which was the catalyst to his Epilepsy which was diagnosed at three months old and he spent his early childhood in and out of the hospital. He lost his father when he was three, murdered at the convenience store he managed in a robbery and Karen Wright, a secretary, raised Casper alone on a meager salary and mountains of medical bills. The tragedy didn't end for Casper there, his epilepsy caused him many issues in school and then during his senior year at Valmont High, his mother died of an unpredicted brain aneurysm and it was Casper who found her dead on their living room floor when he got home from school." They said showing montage after montage of pictures.

Casper was shaking, eyes glued to the television on the verge of tears and Leo reached over and took his hand as they all watched.

"But it didn't end there, the source also indicated that society let him down. Without his parents and with the mountain of debt left behind due to his medical needs, he lost everything and Casper at just seventeen, alone and with a serious

medical condition was thrown out of his own home on top of it all by the mortgage company. They have refused comment on the matter when we contacted them. Casper was forced to leave school and live homeless for six months. He had no medication, no money and no roof over his head and social services never was alerted to the situation. It wasn't until he missed his check-up with his neurologist that it was discovered he was living in a shelter and destitute and suffering even worse seizures due to his lack of medication."

"How do they know all this? Who is their source?" Casper asked furious that his personal life and hell was being used as a sympathetic ratings gimmick.

"He lived with his doctor for about a year, and that is where he came in contact with the service dog Gretel." Here images of Casper and Gretel taken from media footage outside the hospital were shown.

"The service dog allowed Casper, now nineteen years old to move out on his own and away from charity. Living on meager social security disability and subsidizing his disability with his beautiful artwork sold at a local craft fair held on Saturday's in Roosevelt Park, he managed to live six years in a small single room apartment behind a Laundromat." Here images of his artwork were shown and his apartment. Pictures from inside the apartment no less were splashed up for all to see.

Casper felt sick.

"Our sources indicate that even artwork of such beauty barely afforded him to buy the supplies needed to create them, but he managed to live without charity and stand on his own two feet. A testament to the power of will alone. The story doesn't end here; we also learned in our investigations that even his ability to work the craft fair was taken from him. Casper had been seeing a fellow artisan from the craft fair, a first serious relationship for the youth and we've learned Casper was robbed and abandoned by his former lover who had taken all of Casper's possessions, money earned from the fair and his pavilion booth. Everything was taken and Casper was left again with nothing. We attempted to contact the one responsible and were unable to reach him for comment."

"I am going to kill their "source" if I ever find out who it is god damn it!" Casper was livid.

"Then there seems finally something good happened, Officer Mancuso and Casper met right here in Roosevelt Park and sources say it was a match made in heaven. The two met not long before Officer Mancuso's near brush with death and then as you know Last night these two had to face more scorn and picketers over their relationship. After hearing such a story of fighting against adversity, this reporter wonders how anyone cannot be moved to tears over it and furthermore how anyone would want to cause more harm to a life this reporter

believes has seen enough hatred and strife. I share this story with the viewers and I hope it has the same effect on you as it does me. I am grateful for all I have in life and before I judge someone, I should perhaps consider the shoes they have walked in before, they just might be a lot stronger than we give them credit for. This is Rose Anderson for WKGT Signing off.”

“I’ll give you shoes you bitch! Right up your ass with my foot still fucking in them! Give me the God Damn phone!” Casper ranted and Leo handed him the phone and Helena, who’d heard the yelling quickly hung up so Casper could dial the station.

He dialed information. “Give me number to the Station WKGT.” He ordered and was dialing like a man possessed.

“WKGT”

“This is Casper Wright and you just aired a piece on me and if I don’t have Rose Anderson’s boss on the phone immediately I will sue you all and you’ll be hearing from a lawyer!” Casper shouted and he was immediately patched through to public relations.

“This is Lucas Furnby, head of public relations, Mr. Wright is there a problem?”

“Is there a problem? I’ll say there is a fucking problem! Aren’t you supposed to have a release or something signed by me if you’re going to humiliate me and put up all my dirty laundry for the public to view?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You just gave my whole life story on air! How can you not ‘understand’? You used me as a sob story without my permission! I want Rose Anderson and her fucking ‘source’s’ head on a platter! That’s my life, my personal history and if I wanted public sympathy I’d have written a god damn memoir!”

“Hold just a moment, let me check what just aired.” Came the frantic voice and then canned hold music played while Casper paced the floor. Leo watching just as annoyed and simultaneously amused by the fuming blond in a bathrobe. Casper certainly had balls and Leo was going to let him rip off heads.

“Mr. Wright, I am sorry for the hold. Yes, I do see Rose Anderson put in a last minute expose and I have documents here with release signatures.”

“You’d better get a lawyer then, because I certainly didn’t sign anything!”

“You didn’t?”

"I certainly did NOT! Would I be this furious if I knew I was going to be sitting here eating breakfast while I was made a public spectacle? You invaded my privacy! How would you feel if that was you up on the screen having to relive a life I didn't much care living through the first time around? Seeing pictures of my dead mother and father on TV and made to look like a freak! How would you feel Mr. Furnby?"

"You're saying you knew nothing?"

"Do I have to repeat it again? Obviously I knew nothing. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll have a legal department contact you about your allegations of forged release papers."

"See that you do! Call 555-7569." Casper punched the "off" button on the phone so hard he hurt his finger.

"So?" Leo asked as Casper sank deflated onto the couch again.

"So, the legal department will call me back. Someone forged release papers apparently." Casper said and Leo's eyes went wide and immediately took the phone and dialed.

"Uncle Charlie, Hi, it's Leo. Listen; are you coming to Mom's cookout today? Good, cause we gotta talk. Did you happen to be watching WKGT just now? Did you see the report on Casper? GREAT, yeah he is my boyfriend, thanks for the congratulations. Yes, he is nice. Yes that was true. Uncle Charlie, shut up for two seconds please. They aired that without Casper's knowledge and the station claims they had release papers signed by Casper and Cass never even saw them and was just as shocked as I was to see that on the news this morning. He's furious and I guess the legal department is gonna call him back. Yes, those papers have to be forged. Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh. Yes, never even spoke to the reporter once. Yes, uh huh. Great! Thanks, see you later." Leo said and hung up and Casper quirked an eyebrow.

"I caught about half of that."

"Uncle Charlie is a judge, used to be the district prosecuting attorney. Once I said you didn't sign release papers he went into legal mode. You have legal counsel now and he's calling the station on your behalf right now. He'll get more info than you can they'll put him right through to the legal department and he'll have a copy of those papers so fast heads will spin. He'll talk to you at the cookout later and get more details. He also said you're cute and congratulated us." Leo said with a wink and Casper laughed.

“Wow. This family sure doesn’t mess about. Thanks.”

“Hey, that was illegal babe. They can’t report stories like that without a release from you. It’s considered hearsay and it’s not like they are reporting alleged crimes and you’re a suspect. Or reporting picketers on our lawn treading on my begonias. That’s a different set of rules. That was a story about you, based on third party information and was not substantiated from the topic as truth. You have to have knowledge and give approval first before they can air shit like that. You Casper are looking at a lawsuit and I can tell you that Furnby guy right now is shitting himself and I’ll bet Rose Anderson will be in the unemployment line soon.”

“Whoa. Here I was just pissed off at seeing myself look pathetic. I threw out the lawyer thing just to scare them really and get a public apology and retraction. Is it really that illegal?”

“Oh yeah. Big Time.”

Casper gulped. “Okay, I’m not going to panic over this. I’m just gonna go finish the pudding I think. Do you need anything?”

“Nope. Relax babe, this too will blow over once we’re no longer hot news. Hell, we’ll probably be controversy free now considering they probably won’t want to set foot anywhere near us now that this shit just hit the fan. It’s kinda like an unexpected reprieve.”

“I hope so.” Casper said with a sigh and headed into the kitchen to chop bananas.

They arrived at Leo’s parents house around one in the afternoon and Helena happily took the large bowl of pudding and made room for it in the fridge and scolded Casper that he didn’t need to bring anything but thanked him anyway because she loved banana pudding.

Leo settled in a chair outside on the back patio and had a three-year-old in his lap drawing with a marker on his shoulder cast.

Hans was chasing Otto in the yard and Gretel was happily lazing under Casper’s lawn chair watching the little girl on Leo’s lap with interest.

Lucretia, Leo’s older sister was bitching about the news report she’d seen too. She was a lot like Leo in mannerism and colorful turns of expression and was livid and fit to be tied over a “gross inconsideration”.

Bill was helping Vinnie and Franco fire up the grill as Charlie arrived and headed straight for Casper with a faxed copy of the release forms.

“Is that your signature Casper?”

“No. God that looks like Rogelio’s writing!” Casper said and Charlie quirked an eyebrow,

“Who’s Rogelio?”

“You remember that Ex-boyfriend they mentioned that ran off with my money and pavilion? That’s Rogelio. I wonder how much she paid him to rat me out? He also ran off with a box of my mom’s pictures that I had in his trunk with some of my art supplies. That probably explains where they got all those pictures of me as a kid too now that I think about it.” Casper said and Charlie looked like he hit gold.

“They refused to divulge the source of the information, I think you just did all the detective work I needed to. I’ll supena this Rogelio character and we’ll see if he won’t sing a different tune.” Charlie said making notes in a small notepad from his pocket.

“Last I heard he was skulking around the Springdale Flea Market. I haven’t seen him in over a month.”

Charlie scribbled the information down. “What’s his name?”

“Rogelio Martinez.”

“Do you know his address?”

“His mom is on Fifth Street I think. I have no clue what her name is other than Lupe. Rogelio either stayed with her or with me. He drives an old beat up Buick, bad paint, and mostly gray primer. He’s fairly normal if the perhaps the laziest guy I know. He can’t hold a job; he’s perpetually late and has a drinking problem. He thinks malt liquor is a healthy breakfast. He’s nice enough, personable, he’ll talk your ear off you let him. He’s just got really messed up values. That’s really all I know, we only dated about three months and never went any where other than my apartment or the Park to work on Saturdays. Gretel hated him, she’d pee in his shoes if I didn’t watch her.”

“That’s a good indication he was a loser babe. Dogs know.” Leo said and Casper smiled.

“True. But I told you before, I was not spoiled for choice and I was lonely. It’s all water under the bridge now.” Casper said taking Leo’s hand and Leo squeezed.

“Too true, watch out for my Nephew. He’s the macho type.” Charlie teased and Casper laughed.

“I noticed. Good thing I dig macho guys huh?” Casper said with a wink and Charlie chuckled.

“I’m grateful you do.” Leo winked right back as Charlie tucked his pad back in his pocket.

“Well, I have enough to start putting together a case. I spoke to the legal department and they are already talking settlement out of court. I’d recommend that and they’ll make a public apology as well.”

“I really don’t want anymore headaches, I’d settle for them just leaving Leo and I alone .”

“You’re entitled to restitution too Casper. If you’re not interested in anything other than an apology, we’ll just take whatever they offer then without a counter and have it settled quickly.”

“I’d prefer that. I’m not greedy or looking for money I just don’t want them butting into my life again.”

“You’re a class act kiddo. I wish all my clients were like you. Leo, hang onto this one.”

“Plan on it Uncle Charlie.” Leo said and Charlie grinned.

“I can do weddings too you realize.”

“One thing at a time I think.” Leo said and Charlie just smiled and headed over to help his father and brother with the grill.

“I just adore this family.” Casper said as Penelope came over to ‘pet the doggie’ and Casper thought Gretel’s tail was going to knock over his chair.

The meat was soon cooking and making the yard smell like heaven, the dogs were hovering nearby and getting tossed treats from Helena who just said they’d deal with farts later, it was a holiday after all and the dogs were family too.

Casper had Penelope on his lap and they were blowing bubbles and getting sticky with soap.

Leo was dozing in the chair, his meds had kicked in and were making him groggy and the others let him rest as Casper got to know Lu and Bill as they chatted over soap bubbles and a cute little girl.

Casper had never felt more accepted and normal in his life. He was so wrapped up in his conversation he didn't hear Gretel whining. Leo did however and woke up just in time to see Casper crumble out of his chair and whack his head on the pavement. Stiff as a board.

"Just stand back Lu, give him room, He'll be alright in a minute just turn him on his side." Leo said and Bill gently rolled Casper over.

"What's wrong with Uncle Cass?" Penelope asked scared and Leo took her hand.

"It's nothing to be scared of Penny. Uncle Cass just has a brain that sometimes makes him shake. He'll be okay in a minute you'll see, nothing to worry over." Leo reassured and Casper shook in convulsions for just under a minute and as they stopped Helena came over with a damp washcloth for his head.

"Okay now Cassie?" She asked dabbing at the cut.

"Ow. Yeah. I'm sorry everyone."

"Don't be, it happens. We're just glad you're okay." Lu said reaching down to help him sit up and he turned concerned eyes to Penelope as she walked over.

"Uncle Leo says your brain makes you shake like that. Does it hurt?"

"Yes, my brain is different and sometimes it hurts when I fall down. I'm sorry if I scared you honey."

"It's okay. Uncle Leo said not to be afraid. You looked like those funny dancers we saw in the city."

Casper laughed. "Funny Dancers?"

"We saw break dancers on the street on Friday." Lu said shaking her head amused as Helena applied a bandage to the cut on Casper's forehead. Casper laughed so hard tears came to his eyes.

"That's a first." Casper said reaching over to press Penelope's nose. "Angel, you just gave me the best gift ever. I'll never have another seizure now without thinking of 'funny dancers'." Casper said and Leo smiled as Helena and Lu helped Casper back into his chair.

"Out of the mouths of babes." Leo remarked as everyone carried on with the cookout and Casper took some time to recover. He was always tired after a seizure.

“You want to lay down a while?” Leo asked and Casper shook his head.

“No, I’ll be fine here I don’t want to get up yet. My legs are always shaky after. I’ll be fine. I’m so glad I didn’t scare her.”

“She’s gotta get used to it Cass. What better way than to let her see and make sure she realizes it’s nothing to be scared about? You’re her Uncle Cass after all.” Leo said and Casper just gave Leo a lazy smile.

“I love you Leo. Thank you for turning my life upside-down for the better.”

“Anytime beautiful Anytime. How’s your noggin? You cracked it pretty good.”

“Just a cut, I didn’t fall far I’ll be fine.” Casper said as he shut his eyes and just melted into the lawn chair chaise and let the sun relax him and the smell of barbeque send him off into a nice tranquil semi-rest.

He hadn’t realized he’d dozed off until Helena woke him with a plate of food. He felt much better after the short nap and ate gratefully with the others and enjoyed good conversation until dusk when they all moved to the front yard to watch the street come alive with fireworks and sparklers. It smelled of horrible gunpowder and sulfur but Penny was having a ball and Franco and Vinnie had probably spent a small fortune at the local fireworks booth in the supermarket parking lot to entertain a three year old and themselves.

Casper carefully shielded his eyes to watch and after the fireworks he helped Leo home and they both went to bed fairly early, exhausted with the day.

“Canine Companions”

A Young Lovers Series One-Shot

Author: D. Sanders

ACT V - Good Things Come to Those Who Wait

The weeks seemed to drift by lazily. Before they knew it Leo was in getting his cast off and then going to the hospital three times a week for therapy. At home, he wore a sling that also wrapped around his torso that kept his arm immobile and he was rather annoyed at not having the use of his hand.

Friday was shopping day. Helena always went to the market on Friday mornings and now Casper and Gretel joined her. She'd pick them up on her way and they'd gossip all up and down the aisles as they filled carts.

Leo had been to the bank and had gotten Casper a debit card to use for the shopping and Casper had to laugh at the not so subtle choice of PIN number he'd had assigned to it. Every time Casper punched in 0069 into the machine at the register he had to stifle a giggle. At least he'd never forget his PIN number or the fact he had a closet pervert for a domestic partner at home.

They'd consolidated finances during that trip to the bank, and Casper's disability checks went right into a joint savings account. He stipulated that if Leo was going to give carte blanche accessibility to his finances, Casper was going to give him accessibility to his. Especially since, in case of an emergency or the dreaded loss of life, the funds weren't going to be unavailable if needed.

Leo agreed that was wise so they set up the direct deposit of Casper's money into a new Savings account and Leo subsidized it from his check too. They'd have a nice nest egg and fun money when they needed it.

Home life settled into a groove almost immediately and living together was proving increasingly that they did indeed compliment each other nicely. They were so comfortable in the relationship it had already gotten to the point they were finishing each other's sentences. Helena commented they were like freakish Corsican twins separated at birth and was sure if Leo broke another bone it was going to be Casper who felt it in the future.

Casper made sure to state that Leo had better not break any more bones because he whined enough already. Leo didn't take being idle well and Casper was always having to scold him to rest and tighten his sling back up again.

Leo would just state for the record that he was sick and tired of having sex with one arm out of commission and that the minute he got the all clear from the doctor, Casper was in serious trouble. No matter how much he liked being a ridden cowboy, he wanted to be able to drive again. Casper would just chuckle and remind him in return that if he followed orders he'd heal faster.

That usually shut Leo up for a while.

Casper's twenty-fifth birthday came at the end of August and Leo took him out to dinner at the restaurant they'd had their first date. Complete with having the waiters sing "Happy Birthday" and bring out a special tiramisu with a surprise in the bottom.

It was just a simple silver and gold band, but it was a statement and symbol of the commitment and Casper was teary eyed when Leo slipped the sticky ring on his finger, trying to juggle it with a left hand he still wasn't used to using.

Leo was shown that night, just how appreciative and commitment minded his partner was as well. It was almost dawn before either of them got any sleep.

Charlie kept in regular contact and September rolled around with news that had both Leo and Casper sitting slack jawed at the dinner table. Charlie handed over papers and the number written on it was staggering.

WKGT had made an offer of restitution and a hefty one especially considering the papers had indeed been signed by Rogelio which he admitted to in a signed affidavit and Rose Anderson admitted she had not contacted Casper before she ran her expose.

Casper fingers shook as he read the paper and realized that his and Leo's savings account was about to explode. "Half a million now, another half million paid out over twenty years. With a public apology. I didn't even have to ask for a figure after I gave them Rogelio's affidavit. This was on my desk this morning." Charlie said and Casper's throat was dry.

"A million? I don't believe this!"

"Believe it Cass. That's actually peanuts to them, they think they are getting off with a bargain if you sign that."

"Oh my god. I really... this is too much."

"I've never given a lesser counter offer. If they are willing to offer that, let me tell you they will actually go five times more willingly on a counter. It's how it works. They offer very low and wait."

"This is LOW?"

"To a national network station? Yes. I'd sign, I know you don't want more and really making a lesser counter is not advisable."

Casper's hand shook as he signed and filled in his bank information. Charlie left with the documents and Casper turned to Leo.

"I feel drunk." Casper said and Leo nodded.

"No shit babe. Wanna be my sugar daddy?" Leo teased and Casper laughed.

"Honey, I am so going to spend a truck load on you. Absolutely!" Casper cheered wrapping his arms around Leo's waist and smiling up at him.

"Trip to Hawaii?"

"For the whole damn family!"

"Married on the beach?"

"With a luau reception complete with a whole pig on a spit with an apple stuck in it's mouth!" Casper replied happy and content knowing that he would never have to worry about anything in life ever again.

"Baby I love you. Congratulations."

"Leo, I'm just gonna say, I now believe in the phrase 'Good Things Come to those who Wait'. I waited my whole life to be happy. I got you. This is just a really fabulous bonus!"

"Damn, there you go making me get all sappy again. Come here handsome." Leo said and they shared a long kiss before it was derailed by noises that were decidedly a pair of canines being naughty.

Both turned to see Hans going to town on Gretel in the backyard and neither man had realized she had gone into heat.

"We might have to postpone our trip babe, we're going to have our hands full of puppies."

"Looks like it, not that I mind. Can we keep one?"

"Are you kidding? I'd keep them all if we had a bigger house!" Leo said as he closed the drapes to give the dogs a little privacy.

"We could buy a bigger one now if we wanted." Casper said and Leo laughed.

"We could but do you really want seven or more monsters?"

“No, besides I’ll bet they’ll be some great candidates for service dogs considering both parents are.”

“Very true. Donate the ones we don’t keep?”

“Absolutely. I want to keep one we can train like Gretel. She is six, I’d really like to have another like her when the time comes.” Casper said a little sadly and Leo hooked an arm over his shoulders.

“I was thinking the same. Hans is getting up there too, I want him to retire in another year or two. We might end up keeping two. I’d like to keep it in the family too.” Leo said as they settled together on the couch and turned on the TV to drown out the sounds of mating dogs.

They made plans and called Leo’s mother to tell her the good news and Casper pampered Gretel all evening and going on-line to check how soon he needed to take her to the vet to confirm pregnancy.

October saw Leo going back to light duty at work and Casper was taking an on-line GED course to obtain his diploma at last. November rolled around with a Huge Thanksgiving dinner that Casper cooked for the whole extended family and a very pregnant Gretel was fed turkey scraps from Penelope as a treat as she sat under Casper’s chair.

Christmas was joyful and the large tree in the living room twinkled and was loaded with presents. Casper made a nice dip into their savings to shower Leo with presents and a matching ring to the one he wore from Leo was under the tree waiting for him.

With the New Year come and gone came nine puppies in all and a large whelping box was erected in the dog’s room. Leo, Franco, Vinnie and Casper stayed up all night with Gretel while Helena kept them all plied with coffee for the all-nighter.

Leo was back on active duty and Casper had his hands full at home with nine six week old puppies getting into everything. He was glad they were only keeping two; all nine had him harried day in and day out. They’d gone through three chewed up remote controls and the rug in the living room was going to need to be replaced after the chaos settled. Nevertheless, it sure was fun being buried under a pile of lively playful puppies.

They ran the puppies through the standard personality testing and they decided that the little bitch that looked exactly like Hans was going to be the one Casper kept. The male that showed the most traits of Hans was the brute of the litter. He

was the largest and the biggest handful but a very good candidate for officer training. They named them Heidi and Peter, after the children's book characters and keeping with the theme of having dogs with paired names. Even if the first two had been unplanned it seemed a shame to not run with it.

The first year seemed to fly by before either of them noticed the time. Leo and Hans went to work everyday and came home to Casper, Gretel and the two puppies in training every night. Casper had gotten his GED and was now working on art courses in his spare time. There had been an unexpected bonus to that expose that had aired, they had shown some of his artwork on that piece and people had noticed. The local art gallery had specifically asked for some pieces and Casper was at work creating some nicer pieces to give them. He also had several requests for portraits and a corner of the guestroom had been converted into a little art studio for Casper to work in.

Summer rolled into another winter and Leo and Casper made good on taking the family on vacation to Hawaii. Leo's parents and Grandparents, Sister and family and even uncle Charlie stood witness on the beach as Casper and Leo exchanged vows on Valentine's Day. Gretel, Hans, Peter and Heidi as well were in attendance, all wearing Lei's and sitting at perfect attention to witness the ceremony of their "daddies". Gretel's red vest and Heidi's "In training" vest adorned with hibiscus blooms tucked into the edges because Casper thought his "ladies" needed to carry bouquets since they were his 'attendants'.

Good things had finally come and seemed to keep coming now that they had each other and had waited long enough to be happy. From here on out, whatever happened, they'd face it together.

For Richer for Poorer, in sickness and in health until death do they part...

END