In a word it was no different than any other day. He had gone to school, English 250 and Biology 100, then to work for 4 hours. The pay sucked, but the waitresses were cute and the drinks free. He came home as the sun set and his mother was waiting for him.

“Hi Mom,” he said casually as he got out of his car, but one look at her face made him ask, “What’s wrong.”

“He ‘s not doing well,” she answered and looked toward the back yard.

He nodded, and gently squeezed his mother’s arm as he walked past her.

He kicked off his shoes and walked quickly through the house. As he opened the back door his friend was there, looking no worse for wear.

“Wha’s the matter with my buddy?,” he asked scratching the golden retriever behind the ears. He walked out into the backyard followed closely by his friend.

He flopped down under a palm tree in the backyard and a warm tongue swiped across his face before he could think.

“Okay, okay, it’s alright,”

The dog assumed his normal position to his right, looking back at the house, the perfect scratching position.

Without thinking he began to stroke the soft fur, and the dog lay down head in his lap, an unusual position, but not that unusual.

He stroked his friend’s head and exhaled slowly, he was tired and worn out, dog tired.

He felt a tongue stroke his hand, and he ruffled his friend’s fur on the head. “You are a silly mutt, getting her all worried like that.”

The response was one of those dog sighs, the ones only dogs have, the ones that let all the tension go. He felt the dog lay his head back in his lap, but nothing more. He kept stroking his friend for a couple of minutes more before he noticed.

His friend was still, too still. It took another second or two for the realization to come, and it came like a wave, as he surrendered to the reality.

His friend was old, very old and he knew this day would come. His reason told him that but his heart shattered. His companion, best friend, the one, the only one who never looked at him with anything but love. They had run, played and grown up together. They had adventures never to be shared with others, and they had love. As devoted as his friend had been, he loved back. This was a brother in his soul, not a pet.

He looked down and knew he was crying, but the tears came so fast they were almost a river. He finally took a breath, a great ragged moan that came from his soul. He made a sound of anguish, of loss that was not words, but raw pain.

 He couldn’t breathe as the pain strangled him. It came in gasps, choking and wheezing. He sat there looking down and stroking his friend on the head.

He wanted him back, but the past six months had not been kind to his friend. Hip problems had slowed his pace to a slow walk, and age had caught up with him. His eyesight was failing the vet said, and he had kidney and liver problems. So he wept for his friend instead, knowing the pain was over and desperately hoping that dogs do go to heaven.

After a time he heard the back door open and his mother came out. A single look brought her hand to her mouth and that comforting look to her eyes. She didn’t move but stood there silently.

“He…he,” speaking wouldn’t come his mind couldn’t think. Finally the words burst from his mouth,” He waited for me to come home.”

She nodded and began to cry as she went back inside. Alone in this realization, a new wave of sobs and pain flooded him, and he made no effort to swim.

He became aware of a light misty rain, but would not, could not move. He was lost in the moment, in the pain, and was unconcerned.

After a time he felt someone tug at him and he looked up through his tears to see his father, home early from work trying to lift him up as the rain was falling harder.

“He waited for me.”

His father nodded, started to speak, then nodded again and let him go. His father walked away then returned with a poncho that he covered his son and his son’s brother to keep them out of the rain one last time.