

Wicked Winds

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Lament

“Reese Marline here with channel 2 local live report, can you give any new details Officer Simmons?” Reese asked. She thrust the mic over to the officer’s face. He had black hair and green eyes. The wind had already blown away his uniform cap and left nothing but a wet mess. He looked at the lens of the camera with red rimmed eyes. After wiping his face once to get the rain off it he attempted to speak.

“At this time, Miss Marline, the Marcease Building off the corner of Pendex and Main has completely collapsed to the ground.”

“Do we know how many floors?” she asked.

“This building was comprised of 17 stories.”

“How many people is that?” She asked. The officer made a grim face.

“We can not account for how many people would be in the building at the time of the collapse.”

“An estimate?”

“No.” he said, “It appears that the base of the building, comprised mostly of art deco glass first appeared to explode outward. After which the building began to descend. We are thinking that it’s possible that the very ground it rested on may have shifted and caused the building’s structure to become unstable. It’s to soon to be sure. This is all we know.”

“How many survivors have been recovered?”

“I’m not sure, I believe that at least ten people who were known to be in the building are out, that’s all I can tell you right now.” He replied and then wandered away. Reese stood up and faced the camera as it focused back in on her. Dark brown hair and blue eyes filled the screen of the TV that was on in the corner.

One click on the remote and the TV went off. The man in the room sighed heavily.

Trace Johnson was being pulled from the Explorer. “Are you awake Sir?”

“Yea.” He breathed, “Kind of hurts though.”

“Sir you’re in the middle of a massive pile up on freeway 86 east bound. Your Explorer appears to have rolled right over the guard rail in response to being hit by a semi, you’re lucky to be alive.”

“I need to call my wife.” He moaned.

“Sir just relax, our EMTs on the scene are addressing the most severely hurt. Can you tell if anything’s broken?”

“My truck?” he asked. The man smiled, a volunteer fireman wearing a hard cap. The rain was splashing off it readily enough.

“You okay for me to leave you for a moment? Your Explorer doesn’t show any signs that it might catch on fire, at least not in the rain. Just relax, don’t move and we’ll get you looked at ok?”

“Okay.” He replied. He could just make out what was up the hill on the highway and his eyes were showing him the back end of a semi tanker truck dangling over the side. The rest was a blur. He’d been holding a cup of coffee when he heard horns blaring. In the next instance all he was reacting to was the hot coffee all over his front side, which he could no longer feel.

Now he was hanging out the window of his Explorer, the rain was just missing him the way it was coming down in a slant. He tried to focus in on different parts of his body. He couldn’t really tell if anything was broken, he’d never broken a bone before. What he was feeling was like he’d lost his stomach somewhere and there was pain shooting in from his right side. He tried to turn to look at it, but could hardly move.

He checked his watch. When he checked it again an hour had gone by. “Crap.” He complained finally just pulling himself out of the Explorer. “I’m going to get fired.” Once fully out he dropped more to the ground from the way the

Explorer was angled, with excruciating pain he forced himself to sit up.

He found his stomach then, because what had been inside it suddenly wanted out. He turned just in time so it hit the ground, exploding out of him.

“Ahh.” He cried and then wiped the spill off his chin. He then held his hand out in the rain to wash it off. He heard more sirens from the highway, this time though, they were just going by, which meant they might have gotten one lane clear.

Trace slid sideways and lay down, getting his hand back in the window. He looked around for his phone, but failed to see it. Then it rang. His eyes darted back. Somehow it had gone all the way into the back. He groaned and lay still. There was no getting it without going all the way back into the truck. It rang twice more before voice mail picked up the call.

“Sorry Heather.” He said as he laid there, head out of the rain, but the rest of him was getting wet. After another fifteen minutes he was over that. He wanted to get up. He pushed himself away from the Explorer. He then curled back to a sitting position and pulled his trench coat out to get a look at his side. Sure enough there was a cause for the shooting pain. The metal band from his seatbelt, which he thought he’d put on but was no longer sure, had jabbed him mercilessly in the side.

If it hadn’t been on why was he still in the truck? He couldn’t begin to guess the answer. He grabbed the side of the truck to stay steady and began getting up on his feet. “Sir Please, don’t get up.” Trace stopped to look back to see the same fireman coming back down the hill. “Don’t stand up.” He said more calmly.

“Too late.” Trace said as he finished the process. “Feel dead laying there. All wet, too. I need to call my wife, can you get my phone? It’s in the back of my truck.”

“Sorry, Sir.” He said, “I’d have been back sooner, but it’s a mess up there, you don’t even want to know, between that and the collapse the whole town is in mayhem.”

“What collapsed?”

“A building east of town.” He replied. He then crouched down looking at the small hole which once was a window but now was not. “I don’t think I can fit.”

“I just need to call my wife.” Trace complained, “She’s going to be upset. We work at the same place and I left the house twenty minutes behind her.” Trace suddenly made a face, “Jesus I hope she wasn’t caught up in this pile up.”

“I don’t know Sir, when I talked to you before it was recent, ten minutes maybe since the pile up occurred.” He replied.

“Then I really need to call her anyway, I can do that?”

“Uhm, you care if I bust out the back window?”

“No, be my guest.” Trace said. The fireman nodded and scrambled to the back of the upside down Explorer and put his foot through the back window. Trace had to admire his strength, and then he thought it had to have been training, getting people out was just part of his job. With lives at stake Trace had him rescuing his damn cell phone. The guy brought back to him. “I’m sorry. Go help someone who needs it. The only thing wrong with me beside my side being bruised is I’m cold and wet. I might even make it up the hill on my own after a bit.”

“Okay Sir, I recommend you at least sit down, you could have a concussion, stumble, fall and just make it worse.”

“Ok.” Trace said as he leaned against the truck. He brought the phone up to see the last call. It was Louisa. Why was she calling him just then? Trace gained the number he wanted as the fireman wobbled back up the hill. Trace might have been boasting. He’d have slid right back down on his ass if he tried to go up it without being wrecked.

There was no answer. The phone wasn't even going to the front desk. He punched the number in manually and tried it that way, again no answer. He looked at the phone and sighed. Then it rang again. He saw Louisa's number on the screen. He clicked the button.

"Hello?"

"Trace?"

"Yea, Louisa."

"Jesus your alive, how's Heather?"

"She's not with me. How do you know I got in an accident?"

"It's all over the news, what happen. Oh my God, please tell me you know where Heather is?"

"She should be at work, not standing in a ditch off the side of the highway with an upside down truck like I am." He said. He paused and he could hear her drawing in all her breath over the phone, "I tried calling her, no answer."

"Where are you?"

"Off 86. There's a pile up, I got knocked off the whole thing, the fireman thinks I'm lucky, I think Ford makes a damn good product myself. You have to watch those crumple zones, you know?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Just my pride and my side's a little jabbed. I'll get checked out to be sure as soon as someone gets me out the ditch."

"Oh my god you don't even know." She cried. He heard her reaction this time, her drawing of breath.

"What?" he asked. What the fireman had said crossed through his mind, "What?" he became more insistent.

"The office building collapsed." She finally said.

"No."

"Yes, did she leave before you?"

"Yes."

"Oh My God, Oh My God Trace, She could have been in it. I don't know."

“When? When did it collapse?”

“I’m...eight thirty I think they said eighth thirty, well maybe twenty-seven minutes after eight or something like that.” She said. She waited for him to say something more. When he didn’t speak again she said, “Trace you there?”

“I need to hang up now, Louisa.” He explained. He not only hung up, he turned the phone off. He then let it drop into the trench coat pocket.

Trace headed for the hill, ready to crawl up it on his hands and knees if he had to. He tried grabbing at the grass as a hand hold, but he either pulled it out by the roots or his hand slid right off it from being so wet.

He got halfway up before his foot slipped and he slid three feet down. He moaned in reaction. At this point the loss of his breakfast was making him hungry as his stomach seemed to be complaining about one thing or the other. He was still just laying there when a rope came down beside him. He turned to look at it and then back up to the top of the hill. “Grab on.” The fireman said. Trace grabbed the rope with both hands. He felt the man began to pull it tight. Then he pulled Trace easy enough up the wet grassy hill.

Once at the top he helped him to stand up.

“Some men just can’t stay down.” He said as he coiled the rope back up. “Working as hard and fast as we can.”

Trace surveyed the highway. He counted at least 15 vehicles to start scattered over it, some on their sides, two small compacts so tightly pressed together they might have been sharing the same space as a single car.

“You don’t want to keep looking at it Sir, let’s get you out of here.”

“What Building collapsed?” Trace asked.

“The Marcease Building.” He replied. Trace leaned forward, hands on his knees. “You got someone in there?”

“My wife.”

“Well don’t jump the gun yet. We are way to busy here to know what’s happening over there.”

Trace decided it was a good idea. He stood back up and started a mantra in his head, 'She's fine' but after only a minute he decided it wasn't working.

The fireman headed off again, probably running back and fourth along the road was the only thing reminding him that he'd left Trace down over the embankment the first time after deciding he'd live for a while longer without help.

Trace looked at the fire engines and emergency vehicles. There just didn't seem to be enough for the number of cars & trucks devastated. The man was right, he was damn lucky.

"When it rains it pours."

Trace looked over to see an old man, pushing eighty even, stumbling over towards him. "Hun?"

"The rain, son. That and this mess along with the one down the road. It's raining and pouring all over the place."

"Oh." Trace said. The old guy came right up to him, holding his arm.

"Might have gotten lucky myself. Bad heart, bit of cancer and I survive this disaster. Either God's laughing at me or I still have something left to do. Don't have a reason to stick around. Saw cars flying in the air and I thought, okay no slow painful death he's going to slam me with a car. Smashed the windshield out, but I don't have a scratch from that. What I got was my arm stuck up between the bucket seat and the door crumpling it all together like a trash compactor. I think it's broke, but I'm making them wait to get to me, see if they can fix everyone else up first."

"I'm no doctor, but it's not hard to see a break." Trace offered. The old man nodded a bit and stepped closer. Trace lightly ran his hand along the man's arm. The old man suddenly gasped. "Yea it's broken." He said.

"That might explain the pain, son." He said and somehow managed to smile through it. "Seen worse, seen guy's heads get blown off three inches away from me. After that a broken arm ain't nothing, just needs a little fixing."

“Well, you need to get it fixed soon.” Trace said, “You’re bleeding inside and that’s not good.”

“You sure?”

“Yea, I’m pretty sure.” Trace said. “Next time someone asks if you’re alright you tell him or her no, you need help.”

“Alright son, I’ll do that.” He agreed. Trace turned away from him and began heading down the breakdown lane, headed east. He didn’t know how far he’d get, but he was thinking if he could just get a bit more down the road he could see for himself if the office building still stood. He didn’t believe anyone yet.

He walked for an hour, tilting his head back once to allow some rain water into his mouth to swallow against the bile taste. That failed to subdue it completely, but at least it made it more tolerable.

He finally came to a rest when the up hill of the road leveled out. From there he was sure he’d seen the office building hundreds of times, daily on week days for the past six years even, driving to work from the same part of town, local suburbia.

All he saw now was smoke diffused by the heavy rain. There was a mix of rain clouds and something that might have been coming from a fire, but there was no building standing there.

“Jesus.” He complained. He reached down into his pocket and grabbed out his phone. Turning it on and waiting for it to get a signal. He punched in another number.

“Knack’s Snack House, sorry we’re not open right now due to the proximity of the current condition of the building next door.”

“Sam, pick up Sam, are you there?”

“Who is this?”

“Sam, its Trace.”

“Oh my God.”

“Did you see it?”

“I heard it. Sounded like a freight train, stepped out side and there was nothing left.”

“Did Heather come in for juice, Sam?”

The man on the other end of the line hesitated to answer.

“Sam, did she or not? I’m out on the highway, part of the pile up, I don’t know anything. If you do, you tell me.”

“See was in, five after eight, juice and a bagel, smiling like it wasn’t even raining.” He admitted, “I’m sorry Trace.”

He didn’t respond, he slowly clicked the phone off and crumpled to the ground on his knees as the rain continued to beat against his head. He still didn’t know for sure. His heart was telling him it wasn’t possible. Not his sweet German woman. She still lived, she had to, because if she didn’t...he wouldn’t be able to anymore.

Traffic was light on the east bound 86. Mostly tow trucks hauling wrecks behind them. Then there were ambulances coming and going, using the inside lane to head west back towards the pile up. They were all ignoring Trace while he was walking, but now that he appeared to be collapsed an ambulance swung over towards him and stopped beside him.

“You need help Mister?” the young man called out the window. Trace looked up at him and shouted.

“No I’m fine, go help someone else.”

“Are you sure, you don’t look good to me?”

“There’s an old man back there with a broken arm doesn’t want to ask, but he needs help way more than I do.” Trace finished shouting. The young man didn’t hesitate, he headed back over to the inside lane and pulled away.

Trace forced himself to stand up so they wouldn’t stop for him again. He didn’t think he’d be able to walk all the way to where the office building was, especially on an empty stomach. But he started to anyway. He’d gone another half an hour before a police car pulled up along side him. The driver, a sheriff maybe, rolled down the window. “Get in.” he

said. Trace was past arguing. He opened the passenger door and got inside where it was thankfully warm. But it wasn't likely to do anything against the chill against his soul. "You in the wreck?"

"Yea, truck went off the road, I'm okay."

"Where you got to be so bad for walking in the rain?"

"The Marcease Building."

"Why?" Trace looked at him until the older officer looked back.

"My wife." He explained.

"That place is gone, nothing for you to go to."

"I need to find out if she's okay." He explained.

"Well I am headed over there. Mostly just pulling the wreckage away, just any able body, think you could help?"

"Yes." Trace decided.

"You sure? You look pale as a ghost."

"I'm afraid she's dead."

"Yea, makes it worse to do nothing though, I'll get you past the lines, it'll be work, you say you went off the highway?"

"Rolled off." He explained.

"Nothing broke?"

"No, just got a jab in my side, it's eased up already."

"Alright we need all the help we can get, just have to make sure."

"It's not like I have some place else to be." Trace explained.

"Alright." He said, "Sheriff Jensen, you?"

"Trace Johnson."

"Nice to greet you Trace. Wish I could scrape up ten more men just like you for today."

It didn't take them much longer to get there. The entrance to the parking lot was barricaded against the people who had showed up for work only to find out the building was gone. Some places started at eight, others nine. Just an hour between marking who might live and who might die.

The Sheriff was let past the barricade. He pulled over pretty quickly after that. Behind them another fire truck was ambling in. It went past them to get closer to the wreckage. Trace could see the fire rolling up from a big hole. No building left at all, just a massive pile of debris.

“Last chance to change your mind.” The Sheriff offered.

“I’m fine.” Trace said. They both got out of the car and the older man directed him to the back of it. He opened the truck. He then lifted another heavy jacket.

“Wear that.” He said. Trace took the offered jacket and traded it out with his trench coat, which was only really designed to keep out the more casual rain, not the onslaught that was still assaulting the ground around them. The man closed the trunk and led him over to the first line of debris. Men and woman, firemen and rescue people were shoveling it into wheel barrels. Before to long they’d have a dumpster brought in, right then they wanted to get some of it out of the way. “You shouldn’t find anything other than the building at this point. Just help out, you get tired, you stop. You get weak, go back to the car it isn’t locked.”

“Alright.” Trace said.

Someone handed him a shovel. The day got blurry from that point on between the fog rolling in around the rain covering up most everything. Or maybe it was smoke being pushed down by the rain? Trace couldn’t smell anything at that point and his stomach cramped several times from hunger and the not knowing.

The Sheriff came back for a break, looking peekish from the hard work. “You had any water yet?” he asked.

“No.” Trace replied.

“Alright, I’ll get us some, you take a break yet?”

“Yes.” Trace lied.

“Alright, you take one whenever you want, there’s no pay today.”

“I know.” He agreed. The older man vanished. Trace was focused in on how far they had moved from the parking lot towards the building itself and it was almost like they hadn’t gone even a few inches. He stopped to wipe at his forehead, both wet from the rain and sweat.

“Hey.” Trace looked at the fireman who had come up beside him. “Didn’t I pull you out of a Ford Explorer this morning?”

“Yes.” Trace agreed.

“You been to the hospital or anything at all?”

“Need to help out, find out if my wife isn’t here.” Trace explained. The fireman finally just grabbed his arm and stopped him. He took the shovel out from his hand and turned him to look at him.

“No, we need to get you somewhere where you can dry up some, get something to eat if your hungry and get someone to look you over. You just crawled out of a damn wrecked truck, how’d you get here?”

“Sheriff Jensen.”

“Right.” He said like it was all the answer he needed, “Come on.”

“I’m fine, just let me do this.”

“After you’ve eaten something, I know you barfed your breakfast. Your pale as a ghost, you keep this up and you’ll be going anyway, on a stretcher.”

Trace let the man lead him away from the work. They caught up with the sheriff coming the other way. The two men glared at each other. The fireman held out his hand towards him. The sheriff handed over one of the two bottles of water he was holding. The fireman yanked it from his hand and gave it to Trace. They looked like they were going to say something for a moment, and then the sheriff put his right hand up, his head down and walked past him.

After they were further away the fireman spoke again. “I didn’t vote for him.” He explained. Trace just looked at the man. He opened the water and guzzled half of it down. For

some reason it failed to make his stomach feel any better. The man was right, he needed to eat something whether he wanted to or not. They'd brought in a lunch wagon and they walked up to it.

"Anything you can't eat?"

"No."

"You hyperglycemic?"

"No."

"That doesn't explain why you're so pale." He complained. He looked at the man behind the counter inside the lunch wagon, "Just two of whatever you got made." The man handed him two sandwiches. The fireman handed one off to Trace. Trace unwrapped it and took one bite. He swallowed it without chewing. It was soft and was probably luncheon meat and would do just as well all the way down. He did the same with another bite. After that his knees went weak again. The fireman caught him, squishing his own sandwich against Trace's arm. "Alright, Sir. You say you got pinched in the side?"

"Yea."

"Let me see." he said as he helped him to stand up again. Trace set the sandwich down on the counter and pulled the jacket open. He then pulled up his shirt and undershirt to reveal his right side where the seatbelt lock had jammed into it. The fireman looked at it. It looked bruised. He then lightly touched it the way Trace had done for the old man's arm. "Jesus Christ."

"What?"

"You come out of a wreck and expect to go to work? I'm guessing your bleeding inside. Your rib is fractured, a splinter has sliced you up inside."

"How can you tell?"

"Well not for sure, but we need to get you looked at *now*." He said. This time he came up to Trace's left side, got an arm around his back and led him off to where some of the

EMTs were waiting and ready to treat anyone they might be pulling out of the wreckage.

Trace saw several bodies behind that truck, laid out on the ground. "Oh my God." He moaned as he realized how many bodies had already been pulled out of the wreckage just around the corner from where he'd been working. The fireman brought him over to a stretcher and forced him to sit down. A woman came over.

"I'm thinking he's got internal bleeding. The damn fool was in the pile up on the highway, came out here to help before getting looked at."

"He's very pale." She agreed, "Sir if you'll just lie down."

"No, I have to find out about my wife."

"Was she in the car with you?"

"No, she was in the building." He answered. The world faded to black after that.

Trace woke up. He looked around at the stark white walls. He then turned his head to see Louisa, eyes red as Rudolf's nose and her hand firmly jammed against her mouth in an effort not to burst into tears on him the second he woke up. She failed and she sobbed.

"They find Heather?" he asked. She nodded through her emotional outburst. "Alive?" This time she nodded no and she wailed and fell forward crouching against her legs. Trace rolled his head away, now looking towards the window and the man in the bed next to him. He was sat up and eating out of a bag of Cheetos. He looked back at Trace with a strange expression.

Trace couldn't go back to sleep, which meant he'd been sleeping a long time. It was still raining hard and cloudy outside, but something told him it was no longer the same day.

He must have been making the other man uncomfortable, because he tried to look away, out the

window himself, but he finally looked back. Trace's face was frozen in an expressionless position.

"Hi." The man tried. Trace failed to respond. "I got hit by a gray van out on 86 yesterday, nearly lost an eye." He pointed at the patch over his eye. "Sprained my leg, twisted it just trying to get out. After slamming this way and that all I wanted was out. My eye felt like it was burning."

Trace failed to react at all. The man looked over him at Louisa who was still trying to rein in her emotions.

"Your friend there, she's been in and out since yesterday." He explained, "She got to talking for a little while, said you were in the pile up, too."

Trace still didn't react. Then he felt Louisa touch his arm. For some reason unknown to him just then he did something he never imagined he do, he slapped her hand. She yanked it away and let out another sound of grief and pain. "I'm sorry." She managed to say. She left after that. He didn't even watch her go, but once he was sure she was gone he rolled over to look the other way and give the other man some peace and quiet without glaring in his general direction.

The next two days were a blur to him. He only ever had to face reality long enough to get in and out of the bathroom. He refused a bed pan. He was stitched up on the side where they went in and fixed the internal damage and they rather he stayed in bed, but he just got up when they weren't looking. Other than that he just lay there. Refusing to eat, they stabbed him with an IV needle and hooked him up to a bottle. He wasn't too concerned about that either way. There was a shower stall in the bathroom and on what might have been his third night there he finally used it. All he had to change out his briefs for were some boxers. He wasn't sure where they had come from just then, but they were clean and they fit. He even suspected they were new. No one was able to get to his house and might have just bought them for him.

In the morning he opened his eyes to see someone sitting in the chair beside the bed. He failed to recognize the man. He was big and beefy, wearing a very thick mustache which was a totally different shade than his hair on his head. With green eyes and brown hair, his mustache was somehow blonde. The man smiled casually at him. Trace took in a deep breath. The man didn't look like a doctor, but he might just be a grief counselor come to pay him a visit. He didn't want any of that. He wanted his grief.

"You don't know who I am do you?" he asked.

"No." Trace agreed. The man let another slim smile escape. Then he picked up the chair and moved it closer to the bed, now he was all Trace could see for the way his head was angled. If he wanted relief from it he'd either have to look straight up or roll over and see the guy with an eye patch.

"I pulled you out of an Explorer." He said.

"The fireman." Trace said, but he really didn't recognize him still. Then again he was buried under all the gear, he might have just caught sight of his eyes then, but he wasn't really looking, it was just a fireman to him.

"They said you weren't talking." He went on. Trace didn't talk then either. He closed off, mystery solved. If he was quiet long enough the man would eventually go away. Problem was he couldn't close his eyes, he'd slept for a while and now he was stuck listening to the TV go on about the morning news while the guy next to him watched it. "Wondering what I am doing here?"

"Maybe." Trace replied, because maybe he was just a bit curious. He failed to show too much interest though.

"Been talking about you at the station. Can't believe what you did. They don't believe me when I tell them." He started. He shook his head along with his disbelief. "Thought I'd say something...I don't know, I guess I just wanted to see

if you made it. I should have gotten you looked at right away.”

So it was some kind of apology. One for failing to help him while saving so many others and then eventually coming back around to getting Trace the help he needed. He might have just collapsed on the debris though. They'd have dragged him off then anyway. For the moment he still didn't care.

“Your roommate tells me your getting released today.” He said, “I thought after hearing that I could get you home.”

Trace narrowed his eyes. Didn't this guy have a fire to put out somewhere? Or was it his day off? He certainly wasn't dressed to go head to head with flames.

“Or maybe you can tell me who to call then.” He said in reaction to Trace's look.

“My parents are all the way out in Washington.” Trace explained, “I don't even know if anyone has called them.” By anyone he was thinking of Louisa.

“Your wife's parents?”

“They live in Germany.” He answered.

“Anyone else?” he asked. Trace thought of offering up Louisa, just because she would have wanted to be the one, but she hadn't come back yet. It wasn't that he'd slapped her hard it was that he slapped her at all, like hitting a noisome fly. He wasn't even feeling guilty yet. And with that being his only other option besides walking or riding the bus he answered.

“No.”

“I'm safe driver.” He promised. “They say you'll be released in a few hours. I'll be in the main waiting area. After they roll you outside, I'll take you home.”

“Sure.” Trace said. The man slapped his knees in a self satisfied expression. He then stood up. Now all Trace saw for a moment was his midsection. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again the man had put the chair back in its

spot. He got as far as the door before he looked back. "Darrin." He said.

"Trace."

"I know." He said with another thin smile. Then he left. Trace couldn't stop himself. He rolled over to look at the eye patch guy. He was absorbed into the TV and wasn't at all paying attention.

A few hours later and Trace was finally getting his clothes back on. They hadn't been cleaned though. Aside from the mysterious appearance of the boxers, no other clothing had been brought to him. If he'd been more caring he might not have driven Louisa off. He still was not ready to get into it with her, not right then. If he talked at all he'd say something she would never forgive, he knew it. He was also aware of just how suicidal he was then. They called it depression at some point. Shocked and now depressed. They even offered a prescription. It would take a while to work. Trace was crumpling it up before the doctor even left his side. He opened his mouth to speak and Trace threw the crinkled prescription into the trash can. They could only tell him what he should do, not force him to do it, at least not after he was released. They had no grounds to keep him.

The only thing left to do then was suffer the ride on the wheelchair going outside. In his condition it was favorable where as others might just think of it as over done. Once outside the much brighter day hit him with some heat. The hospital was still cold inside compared to the outside world. The weather was unpredictable then. Cold as ice one day and hot and muggy the next.

The fireman was standing outside waiting. Trace saw him offer a hand up, but he refused. He'd made it to the shower, he could make it to stand up. He'd cheated getting dressed though, sitting on the edge of the bed the whole time.

He could almost understand why the fireman had become so impressed with him. As weak as he'd become after

a few day's care, what he'd done on the day he wrecked his truck had to have been running off of desperation and adrenalin.

When he wobbled Darrin came to his side and took his arm. "They said you'll stop feeling weak in a few days." He said. Trace looked at him.

"They tell you whatever you want?"

"I kind of made it to where I was responsible for you." He explained.

"How did you do that?" Trace asked. The man hesitated and Trace finally looked at his face, forcing them to stop moving forward.

"I said I was your brother."

"Yea, we have the same last name?"

"As matter of fact, we do." He said. Trace looked ahead again and they began moving forward. The conversation stopped there for a while. Darrin over did it helping him into his car. Trace might have had an urge to slap him once because of it. He held back and let the man handle the seat belt. He thought he could have done it himself. "Keep you from twisting." He said. Trace just frowned at him. "I know, you don't want to be babied."

"How did you guess that?"

"Your look." He said.

Trace was quiet after that, assuming what the man was going to do next he didn't fight to be the one to close the door. Darrin came around the car and got in the driver's side. He looked at Trace who was staring ahead and then started the car.

"I don't know where you live." He admitted.

"South Bend, get to it off Limerick, down past Hill Star Lane."

"Go it." He said. "How do I get to Limerick?"

"You know that spot off the highway that looks like forty thousands houses slammed together in a single field?"

"Yes."

“Limerick runs right down through the center of that.”

“Off the highway?”

“Last time I checked.”

“Got it.”

They didn't say anything the whole ride. Trace realized he was being rude. The guy was just wanting to help. He did think that the guy was over doing it, coming out of left field to Trace's perception. He'd done his job. It was Trace who hadn't listened to him at the time. He didn't need to be doing all of this on top of that. “Green House.” He finally said as they got close. Darrin pulled up in the driveway. Trace sighed heavily. Heather's orange car was in the driveway. He had no idea how it had gotten there. She'd driven it to work. It had to have been Louisa. How she had gotten keys for it he didn't know.

He finally looked at the fireman. He was just sitting there looking between the car and Trace. He then got out. Trace made to open the door, but as soon as he pushed it he was reminded of how stiff his right side was and using his right arm was a challenge. He let go of it and the fireman came around and pulled it open.

He then crouched in towards Trace. “Get me around the neck with your left.” He explained. Trace didn't understand the move. Darrin was busy clicking the seat belt. When Trace failed to react he finally looked right into his face. He reached over and grabbed Trace's left hand. In reaction to the move Trace snapped it away. “Just wrap it around my neck.” He said again.

He had to turn sideways to do this. Once he got his arm there the other man pulled him out easily letting Trace do the hard part just by holding on. Once his feet hit the ground he stood them both up like he didn't weight a thing.

“Alright you can have my shoulder if you want it, otherwise I'll just stick close incase you do fall.” He said.

“I'm a really bad patient.” Trace said.

“I heard.” He agreed. Trace finally moved his arm back up and the man got him behind the back and guided him to the door. He got the door open with his right hand. Trace was wondering how it got unlocked. He’d locked it before leaving to go to work.

Darrin set him down on the couch, sitting with him for a moment so he wouldn’t have to bend all the way down. Once Trace got his arm off him the other man stood back up. He went back to the door and closed it. He looked at Trace.

“Well your home.”

“Yes.”

“You’re still edgy.” He said, “Not having a good feeling about leaving you alone.”

“Not your place.” Trace said.

“I help people, that’s what I do. This...well your probably wondering why I am doing all of this. It’s just that you seemed to be all alone.” He explained. The idea hit Trace then, because he was. Heather was gone. He hadn’t even done the funeral thing yet and part of him was cold and viscous about it, he wasn’t going to do the funeral thing. He looked down at the floor. He was trying to keep focusing in on the physical pain to keep the emotions at bay, but for a few seconds he lost the battle and his eyes welled up. “You need to let that out.” Trace turned to look at the man.

“You can leave now.” He said. He should be saying thank you, but he just wasn’t that grateful.

“I will.” He said, “But I want to come back and check on you. They told me you refused to eat. If you don’t actually eat something in the next few days you’re going to be in trouble.”

“You’ve done enough.” Trace said, “Whatever you’re feeling guilty about, just get over it.”

“Now see, I can admire that stubborn streak in you. It’s what got me into trouble as it is. But I’m going to have to fight fire with fire. I’m going to leave now, because I can tell

you really need to just be alone for a while, but I'll be back to make sure you eat dinner."

Trace opened his mouth to say something back, but the fireman was already heading out the door closing it quietly after he'd left. He threw his head against the back of the couch, looking straight up at the bland off white ceiling and let all his breath out.

His head slowly tilted to the left. It brought a picture on the end table within view. A mug shot of him and Heather he always hated, but she insisted it stay right there. She thought he looked natural and he thought he looked stupid. But any image of her was always perfect to him. She was always beautiful. He leaned over and grabbed the picture bringing it in front of him.

He ran his fingers along the glass over her. He was still trying to cap off his emotion about it. She was never coming home. The picture went airborne. It crashed into the fake fireplace and shattered all over the floor. A few tears escaped his eyes before he could clamp down again. He wasn't ready for the bleed out. He was still thinking death would be peaceful. He'd just float away to where it was she went. He didn't entertain the idea that they would be together in this, but at least he would no longer be left behind.

He closed his eyes in a short amount of time after he was asleep, sliding along the couch with his feet still hanging off it.

He woke up to the smell. Before his head could become unfogged all he was thinking then was how good something smelled. He opened his eyes then. The delight of the scent faded. The next thing was the feel of the comforter on him. It hadn't been in the room when he'd fallen asleep. He heard noises, coming from the kitchen most likely considering the scent of some kind of beef and onions had filled the room.

He pulled himself up slowly. The stiffness was going to stick with him for a long time. The insides had swollen against the torn muscles and the stitching required to keep the fragment of the bone together. His new problem then was his whole back ached. It might have just been from sleeping on the couch, but it almost felt like he was getting ill on top of everything else.

He tried to stand, but got dizzy. No IV feeding him for a while and his body just had nothing left to run on. He fell back on the couch and swore. His eyes recovered the spot where the broken picture was. All cleaned up then.

“Louisa?” he called out. He could only guess it was her for coming into his house uninvited and being so liberal. Although he was having trouble imagining her actually cooking, sandwiches maybe, but not something with beef in it. With that thought he realized it wasn’t her. He became annoyed and frustrated.

“Awake then are we?” the fireman asked as he came into the room.

“Who let you in?”

“The door hasn’t been locked all day.” He explained.

“Locked or not, you don’t just come into someone’s house.” He added.

“Can you stand up?” he asked. Trace turned away. He couldn’t stand up. He waited a moment and then spoke again. “Kind of hard to get the door to let someone in if you can’t even stand up.”

“Right.” He agreed giving over some gratitude even it wasn’t said nicely.

“I’m making my specialty. It might actually be the only thing I cook well. I found the meat in the refrigerator. I’m assuming you eat it.”

“Yes.”

“This Louisa, would you rather she was here helping you out? I could call her for you. That would settle things for me.”

“No, I don’t want her here.” He answered. He’d almost said ‘I don’t want you here either.’ But he couldn’t quite complete the sentence. The smell of the food was making him hungry and he couldn’t get stood up.

“Alright, I’ll see you eat, get you to bed and then I’ll clear out of here.” He said. “Then it will probably be a good idea to lock your door for the night. You got a key I can use to get back in tomorrow so you don’t have to get up for me?”

“No.”

“No you don’t have a key or no you don’t want to give me one?”

“No I don’t want you to have a key to my house.” Trace said firmly. He gave him his smile.

“That’s okay, I’m well trained in breaking down doors.” He said. Trace wasn’t sure if he was making a joke or not. The guy had already turned away and was headed into the kitchen leaving him stranded on the couch.

Trace tried to get up again, this time pushing himself onto the floor, down on his knees. He lost track of his plan after that. With both hands on the coffee table he tried to push himself up and felt something tear in his side. He cried out. He felt stupid for doing that, but it was the first time he was in tune with his real problem, actual damage.

Darrin came back. “You are one stubborn person.” He said. He came up behind Trace and grabbed him under his arms. Trace wanted to complain more, but he’d rather be on his feet. The big fireman lifted him all the way up. He let his hands down to his sides. “You think you got it now?”

Trace blew out his breath in frustration. Maybe he could have been a little more accepting. People got hurt and needed help all the time. It just wasn’t something he’d been through before. He thought about the old man. Until he himself told him that the guy needed more help he wasn’t very accepting either. “No probably not.” He finally said.

The arm came around his back and Trace threw his left arm over his shoulder and let him help him to the table.

He was careful to make sure he was sitting down without falling over before he let go. He went back over to where he was still preparing the meal.

“Thank you.” Trace said barely audible. The man glanced back and didn’t say anything. He finished fixing a plate of food and set it down in front of him.

“Something to drink?”

“A beer.”

“I think you’re out of beer.” Darrin said as he went over to the refrigerator. He wasn’t out of beer, but he got the message. “You got milk, some soda, cola, what’s this?”

“Heather’s juice concoction.” Trace replied. After three seconds on hearing her name come out of his mouth he felt the other kind of pain he was suffering from. It shot across him killing his hunger and making him want to vomit. He began gulping against it. The fireman looked at him seeing him react.

“I think water would be good right now.” He said, “Give your stomach a chance to get back in order after not eating for four days.”

“Yes.” Trace managed to agree. Darrin got out a glass and the bottled water and brought it over to the table. He poured out the water and set it in front of him. Trace drank half of it and waited to see if his stomach wasn’t going to change its mind again and allow him to eat. He ended up closing his eyes until the dizziness passed. In that time he heard the other man sit down at the table. He opened his eyes again. “You’re not eating?”

“Your food.” He explained.

“How much did you make?”

“Not much.”

“I doubt I’ll finish this.” Trace said, “Why don’t you eat the rest.” The fireman tapped the table three times with his index finger and got up. Trace didn’t know what his plan was, feed him then go eat at his own home? He didn’t know how he’d feel about sitting there just watching someone eat.

Darrin filled a plate with the rest of the food. Steak with onions, healing properties there, and some squished up potatoes, not quite mashed. He avoided adding butter to it and Trace was staring at the plain potatoes thinking it was just what they needed.

He experimented with his first bite while the other man returned to the table, not immediately getting something to drink along with it.

The food and flavor won out over his thoughts and feelings and he pretended it was all that was happening. He was just a guy eating, nothing more nothing less. It worked. It worked until he'd finished, clearing the plate even, but when it was over it sagged in his stomach and the feeling in him was threatening to escape. He was guessing even if he was just sitting there alone he'd still be fighting against it.

It was why he didn't want to be anywhere near Louisa, she wouldn't hold it together and she'd force him to let it out. 'Weeping is good for you' she'd say. She cried at the drop of a hat even. On her way over she'd spotted a dead cat that reminded her of one she'd had and showed up at the door in a wash of tears. He couldn't respect her about it and made a snide comment, which Heather chided him about after their friend had left.

"Good?" Darrin asked. He'd finished himself and was getting both plates out of the way.

"Food...." Trace said still losing the battle, "Good." The other man nodded, looking sternly at him as he rinsed off the plates. Trace didn't expect him to do more than that. If he did it himself, Heather complimented him as opposed to actually just dropping the plates in the sink un-rinsed and expecting them to wash themselves. She'd laugh then, because he'd smile like he'd won a grand prize and she'd laugh and rinse them again as if he hadn't done it well enough to just stick them in the dish washer. "Could you leave now?"

“As soon as I make sure you make it to your bed.” He replied. Trace, still battling, got angry about being hurt on top of everything else and pushed himself away from the table. He then attempted to stand up. He was figuring out the problem. In the hospital there were bars to hold on to everywhere, it made movement possible, he’d grip them as hard as he wanted to and stand up from his arms. Otherwise his muscles on his sides were needed. Using them caused a shard of pain through him and caused him to lose control over all of it. He gripped the table with both hand and forced himself up.

Darrin moved over towards him, hands out but not touching him. Trace made a disgruntled noise. “Alright, Jesus Christ.” He said. Darrin moved in and helped him stay stood up. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Alright.” He agreed and helped him back into the living room. Trace groaned each step. The fireman set him back down on the couch. Trace reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. He flung them onto the coffee table. “There’s my key, you can leave now.” He almost shouted. The other man picked up on the mood change. He grabbed the keys and locked himself out of the house. Trace lost all his control after that. He couldn’t really sob though, that would involve too many muscles and would come back at him on his side and cause him more pain.

He sat there for a long time letting tears roll out of his eyes as he remembered her. Ever moment from the time they met until he saw her last, tapping him on the back while he lay in bed until he looked up at her. She’d told him he was going to be late while she was almost dressed to leave.

Even the sadness became too much to bear and it sank him into a fugue state of being half asleep and half awake.

He woke up in the middle of the night and realized he was in trouble. His body had been reserved most of the day,

but by then it needed relief. He needed the bathroom then. He swore if he'd had a bedpan just then he'd have used it.

He tried to apply logic to his dilemma. Would crawling work? If he managed to get stood up could he walk without all those bars to support his movement? "Jesus." He moaned. He was basically trapped. If he let Louisa come she'd have spent the night, maybe even a few nights until he could be up and around on his own.

He sat up using the back of the couch with both hands. Once fully sat up he realized he wasn't alone. He put his feet on the floor and saw the figure in the dim light coming from the hallway as it appeared to him to be someone sat in the chair.

"Who's there?" he called out. The figure moved, groaned a response and then a hand clicked the light switch on the lamp which was sitting on the table next to the chair. "Unbelievable." Trace complained. He should have had more of a sense of relief, but he just couldn't believe what he was seeing. The damn fireman had come back and was sleeping in the chair watching over him?

"What?" he asked. He was not awake, Trace decided.

"What are you doing here?"

"I got thinking you might need help again." He answered. Trace wanted to complain more. Truth was he'd given him the key, legally that meant he could come right in when he wanted to.

"Yea, help me up." Trace said as the strain was becoming unbearable. The fireman got up. He came over to him and lifted him facing him this time. One good grip on his left arm and he moved to his side.

"Think you can mange like that?"

"I'll try."

Sooner or later he'd have to be able to walk alone again. He thought about not only walking for hours down the highway while being injured, but shoveling heavy debris. He'd damaged himself worse for it and had been thinking the

whole time he'd only bruised his side. What he ended up with was nothing more than his own fault.

With just the one hand holding him he managed to walk, but it was painful. "You need to sit or stand?" Darrin asked after getting him the bathroom.

"I'm in I'll handle it from here."

"Look, I'm tired, no time to talk you through this. Just drop 'em, then I'll either help you stand or sit down. Standing I stay, sitting I leave."

"Jesus." Trace complained some more as he undid his pants. He pulled them down. His shirt was covering him for the most part. "Sitting." He managed the turn himself, but getting down he needed the help. The grumpy fireman sat him down and then left closing the door behind him.

He'd said nothing about helping him back up. Trace could have stood for what else he was doing, but decided he'd get through it all at once. He then had to strain some more to finish up. Now ready to get back up he thought about whether or not he should ask the guy for help.

He'd been sitting there thinking about it, waiting for the shocking pain in his side to completely go away from the exertion of walking. It failed to stop him from mother nature's call, but none of it sat well with him.

"You done?" Darrin called back through the door.

"Yes." He called back. The man came back in.

"All done?"

"Yes." He answered gathering his meaning. He came forward and got his hands under his arms and used them as a guide. Trace grabbed his arms and realized he was letting him do more of the work, just making sure he didn't fall over forward for trying. Once stood up the other man began to bend down. "What are you doing?"

"You want to reach for your drawers yourself?"

He wanted to say yes, because he was beyond embarrassed. He suddenly had sympathy for those who were old and could no longer do such a simple task. He'd

imagined that after a while having someone else do it for them they stopped complaining about it. “No.” he finally answered. The man finished going down and grabbed the edge of his clothes and pulled them up to his hands. He then let go of him.

Trace was standing just fine then. When the other man was sure of it he turned away. Trace managed to get his clothes back together. Then he grabbed the man’s hefty arm with his left and thought that might be enough support.

It wasn’t, because once he took a step he almost went all the way down. At that angle his head would have smashed the bowl and he’d have been going back to the hospital. But the fireman was quick, getting all the way around and grabbing him up in both his arms. For a moment Trace’s face brushed against the other man’s shoulder.

The pain was overwhelming and he was using the other man for full support. Darrin finally turned and got him a step foreword where he could let him lean against his side.

“Let me know when you recover from that.”

“Next week.” Trace said. The other man looked at him and finally smiled realizing his sarcasm was in invitation for humor.

“You are something else.” He said, “Your woman friend, she wouldn’t have been able to do this for you.”

“I know.” He agreed, for more ways than the fireman knew about. He took a few more deep breaths, trying to mask the pain. He had some more pain killers somewhere. He might just have to resort to one after all of this. “Ok.”

They went even slower coming out of the bathroom. “Why don’t you let me take you to your bed?”

“I don’t want to sleep in there.” He explained. When the other man glance a look he added, “Alone.”

“But if you did I could finish sleeping on your couch.” He said.

“No.” Trace said firmly. He didn’t need to be dealing with that then either. Just the flash image of his bedroom,

their bedroom, contained images of sleeping with Heather. Her need to have her side of the bed not invaded while she always ended up on his side, but never the other way around.

Darrin took him back to the couch. He helped get him back onto it. He then sat down beside him for a moment.

“You can probably go home now.” Trace said, “I’ll be fine until morning.”

“Too tired.” He replied, complaining just a bit himself. He pushed himself back up.

“Fine, why don’t you sleep in the bed then.” Trace said in a haughty tone as he lay back down. The other man looked like he was going to say something else, but stopped. Trace might not have realized just how tired the other man was. Didn’t fireman get up in the middle of the night to fight fires? Then he remembered he was a volunteer. He’d forgotten about that until just then. That might also explain his need to get personally involved in Trace dealing with the aftermath of what he’d done to himself. Because he’d failed to get him looked at or stay put when he should have.

Trace suddenly decided he should feel guilty. He was waffling in his own mind just then about whether or not he cared at all. If he’d pushed himself just a bit harder, if the man hadn’t showed up beside him at the site of the debris when he did Trace might have worked himself into a grave already.

When Trace looked back he was gone. He hadn’t left the house altogether so he must have accepted the offer of the bed. Trace closed his eyes.

He felt cold when he woke up. A glance towards the window showed him that the sky had grown heavy with clouds again. It wasn’t enough for the heat to go on, but without the blankets and spending a day and night in the same clothes, the ones he’d been wearing the day he rolled his truck was holding too much moisture against his skin and making him cold.

The comforter was on the floor. He reached for it and was reminded the hard way he should be favoring his right arm and using his left. This required him to roll over which he managed, going really slow. The reward was the blanket. He pulled it back over himself.

After laying there a while in the quiet house he caught sight of the paper on the coffee table. He groaned and rolled over some more reaching for it with his left hand. At this point he had no overwhelming desire to get up for anything, not even a drink. He just wanted to be warm again. He got the note between his fingers and pulled it back over towards him. He looked at it.

Went into work. I'll be back around ten, hopefully you'll not need anything before that, if your hungry just hang on I'll bring something back with me for you.

Darrin.

“Jesus.” He moaned as he let it drop onto the floor. He was caught between the realization that he needed the help and the idea that he just didn't know this guy at all. He thought about calling Louisa, it might be a good spot to let her know he didn't hate her. She'd think that, he decided. She was that reactionary, it was why she was just sitting there looking at him in the hospital unable to stop crying. She looked up to them, and half of them was gone. Heather was the bright happy side of them and he was the more stern forceful part that made sure certain things got done when they needed to, like forcing Louisa to break a commitment that she should have never agreed to. Heather couldn't muster the voice to get her to comply, but he had. He had that effect on her.

Then he wondered what happened to his cell phone. It might still be in his trench coat, which might still be in the

Sheriff's trunk. The jacket he'd been wearing however was gone, probably returned to the policeman.

Trace glanced at his watch. It was nine AM. He didn't think he could sleep the whole hour. And the TV, pushed all the way against the wall when not in use, wouldn't have offered relief. He'd had his TV central to the living room arrangement before she had come to live with him. After that the TV was something that detracted from the look and feel of comfort in the room. He gave in to her easily. There was the one in the bedroom, but that got put away. It was a hindrance to them communicating. He'd given that up as well. He went out of his way to please her. And what had she done for him? She'd made waking up everyday thereafter a day to celebrate. She always had a smile for him then, even if the day before she was speaking at him with the full volume of her voice. He was ready for kids by then, but she was not. Her career was not full steam and would get left to the side if she even only just took maternity leave. Never mind raising a child from scratch. But she wanted them, too. One would be good and two would be max to her.

The door opened and Trace turned to see Darrin coming though. Trace wiped at his eyes. Darrin came over with some fast food and set it on the table. "Have to be quick." He said, "You need the bathroom?"

"No." Trace answered.

"Anything else?"

"The phone." He decided. When the man started to look for it he added. "In the kitchen, left of the doorway." Darrin went and got it bringing it back to him.

"Can you reach this?" he asked indicating the bag.

"Not with ease."

"See, now you're starting to play along here." He said with a quick smile. He set the bag of food on his side. "Alright, have to get right back, but I'll come by during lunch."

"Where do you work?"

“You mean when I am not off helping the fire department?”

“Yes.”

“I run an office, I’m the office manager. They deal with sales mostly, I just handle the people working, and making sure everything runs smoothly.”

“Oh.”

“And you?”

“Finance.”

“Okay I gotta go.” He said as he headed towards the door.

“Darrin.” Trace said. The man looked back. “Thanks.”

“Yea, we ain’t done yet though.” He assured him and then left.

It took him awhile to want the food, during that time he was weeping again. When that was over he ate. Then he stared at the phone for a while trying to reopen the door with Louisa. Although he wanted to apologize, he didn’t want her coming over. He was just barely tolerating the man. He might end up tearing her to shreds. Since she hadn’t tried to call him yet he decided to leave well enough alone for the time being.

After a long time he finally sat up slowly. Not wanting to go much further. He should have asked for the TV, he thought. Before he could get too caught up in the idea though, Darrin came back through the door. He had his own bag of food with him.

“Two birds at once.” He said as he sat down in the chair. “You’re sitting up. Did that hurt to just sit up?”

“No.”

He nodded as he ate his lunch. Trace decided he wanted that out of the way before he offered up any more help. Trace did need to get to the bathroom, the easier of the two tasks he decided. He even thought once in there and stood up he could handle all the rest alone.

He realized Darrin was eating fast. Just rushing back to his house was eating up the man's lunch hour, or half hour if that's all he had. Trace was thinking he was done fighting the issue. He'd lost each time he tried so far anyway.

"Let me wash up." Darrin said as he got up crinkling the remnants of his bag and heading into the kitchen. He came back a few moments later. He didn't even ask. He knew Trace needed to get up. He guided him again, letting Trace use his own strength and pulling on his arms. "You're going to need a shower."

"That can wait."

"Up to you, I made for the time though."

"How much?"

"Well they are use to me running off to help people, so I said I was helping someone. I'd like to keep making some money, too. But you can have me for a few hours here."

"It won't take me that long." Trace explained.

"I got a tip for you." Darrin said as he helped him to the bathroom. Trace was already feeling the strength returning to his legs from eating again.

"What?"

"If you just have to piss, just do it in the shower."

"Ok."

"That'll eliminate a step. You take a shower in the hospital?"

"Yes."

"You use those bars?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you have any of those?"

"No."

"Then you might need me to give you my arm for it, up to you."

"I'd rather not crash and burn in the shower." Trace said. But he wasn't really thinking about it all that much, at least not until they stopped with him facing the shower and he realized at this point he'd be taking off all his clothes.

He looked down at his socks. Normally he'd just bring his feet up one at a time and pull them off. With Darrin to lean against he tried to do that. He winced in pain in reaction to bending down some while trying to get his foot up to his hand. And that was just the left side. He'd be totally warped for his right.

Darrin moved down. Trace made a face he couldn't see in reaction to it. Feeling like a toddler he had his hand on the other man's back while he lifted one foot at a time to pull his socks off. He thought he might have been able to get them off himself sitting on the couch if he'd thought about it then.

Darrin came back up and Trace managed to stay stood up on his own long enough to begin unbuttoning his shirt. He should have just gotten all his clothes off while sitting on the couch. He was never shy about running through the whole of his own house without them before. He made another face as he tried to peel off his shirt on his own. The left side wasn't that bad, but the right he snapped his arm back forward.

"Can I help you?" Darrin asked. Trace dropped his arms, with the shirt half off his left side already he might have struggled his way through it. He'd managed to get the thing on. Somehow that had been easier, back when he was still on pain killers, too.

Darrin moved to get both ends of the shirt near his shoulders and pulled it away easily. If anything he was jealous of the ability. At least all the shards of self inflicted pain were distracting his mind from other thoughts. For some reason he just wasn't as embarrassed as he was the last time they stood in the bathroom.

Trace held his arms out forward and let him peel him out of his t-shirt next. The pants and boxers would be easy enough. They dropped to the floor the night before. Once they were down to his ankles he stepped out of them.

"The boxers fit?"

“Yes.” Trace said eyeing him while he got the shower curtain back and started the water. “You bring those?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” He said. Darrin turned to look him in the eyes.

“Hot hot or kind of warm?”

Trace tried to lean in to test the water. He stomped forward to keep from going head first in the shower. The reaction of tensing his muscles every time he moved was just killing him. Darrin’s hands returned to his sides until he was well enough to stand on his own again.

“Frustrating.” Darrin said.

“Yes.” Trace agreed. He wasn’t sure if the other man understood or not. He just thought he was trying to give him some sympathy. “Kind of warm.” Darrin let one hand go and reached back into the shower. He cupped some of the water and brought it over to Trace. He missed the cue altogether and most of it had spilled through his fingers before he figured it out. “Sorry.” Darrin nodded and did it again. Trace put his hand against the other man’s. “That’s fine.”

Darrin moved in close to his side and gave him his shoulder. He’d be stepping in left side first and his back would feel the water first. That meant he’d have to turn once inside the water.

Getting his left foot over the tub’s edge wasn’t hard. His right caused him to fall completely onto the other man. Darrin took his full weight and pushed him into the shower. Hands still under his arms Trace turned to face the water.

They didn’t even mess with the shower curtain. Water splashed on the floor would dry. Without the bars Trace would have no way to save himself from another fall. He’d never felt so dependant in his life, even when he had been as a child. He’d just never felt it before. It sucked. He was sure it was almost the worst thing he’d ever experienced and it was coming right along side the thing that was the absolute worst.

He managed the shampoo and his hair. His shoulders up and he was fine. It was any bending at all that was going to kill him along side lifting his legs to walk. All those muscles along his right side had simply been trashed. They were needed to do all that and he had never given it much thought before then.

He tried to pretend he was alone, but it failed. The only other person who had shared the space with him while he was doing that was his wife. He finally just looked back at the man. If they had been friends, if they had something more to talk about then maybe he wouldn't have felt like it was so strange that the other man was doing nothing other than watching him shower.

He held on to his fore arm when it came time to use the soap and bend over. He got stuck several times, but failed to speak, suspiciously stopping what he was doing waiting for the muscles to loosen up enough to move again. The third time was a no go. "I...I need you to straighten me up." He finally confessed. Darrin leaned in and grabbed his front side and back and moved him up straight while Trace made a grimacing face.

He then pulled away. Trace could see he was completely splashed by then. If it was still cold outside, he wouldn't dry off that quickly. If he was more formally an orderly he'd be wearing the clothes for it. Trace finally clicked off the shower after he had made good on the other man's suggestion.

He then looked at him. "Towel." Darrin realized, "Don't move an inch." Trace just looked at him. He didn't think he'd fall from standing still, but considering his track record so far he understood why he felt he had to say it like that. He went to other side of the room and pulled the towel hanging off the rack. He came back with it and handed it to Trace.

He managed his front side well enough, but he couldn't get his arms back and around to dry off his back. He

began cussing then. Darrin didn't say anything at first. Between the pain and the frustration anyone might start running off at the mouth.

"Why don't you let me do it?" Darrin offered. Trace looked at him showing him the feeling he was having by his look. "Up to you."

"Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"No." he admitted.

"Than maybe you're doing it wrong." Trace shouted at him. The man didn't react. He just stood there with his hand out.

"I have had people under my care before. Just not past a few hours at a time. So this is different, but it doesn't make me incapable. All you have to do is allow me to wrap it around your backside, once you have the ends it goes right back under your control."

"Jesus." Trace muttered and handed him the towel.

"Turn." He said. Trace turned so his back was facing him. Darrin lay the towel over his back and brought the ends around so he could grab them.

"Just do it." Trace said, "I'm racked with pain already. I don't want to be in here all damn day long."

Darrin ran the towel down his back side. It didn't take as long as it did for Trace to do his front side, trying to avoid pain. Once down to his legs and he dried him off where Trace had been having trouble bending down that far. He came up and wrapped the towel around his waist and tied it off. The whole time Trace was staring at the tiles on the shower wall. "Okay ready to get out?"

"Yes." Trace said turning giving him his left side. Darrin leaned in and helped him back out. Trace sighed heavily once he stood there.

"Get you to your room so you can get dressed."

"I don't want to go in my room." He said.

"Then what?"

"You been in there already, right?"

“Yes.”

“Go grab me something, I’m not going anywhere so it doesn’t matter what you get.” He said.

“Alright, let me get you out of here first.” He said. Trace gave two seconds thinking about combing his hair and then just put it out of his mind. It would serve no purpose under the sun past the habit. He was aching and the pain was making his teeth keep clamping together.

Darrin guided him back out into the living room where he supposed he’d end up getting dressed. That might actually be a first, considering. He might have run through the house without clothes on before, but he always managed the removal or putting them on in the bedroom or bathroom. He snorted at the idea. Despite himself he was pushing his hair back absently lining it up with his hand. The whole idea of what he did out of habit was just going through his head as inconsequential.

He’d had to work to get Heather to stop wandering through the house with a tooth brush sticking out her mouth. She would get started and wander around taking her time, sometimes telling him what the weather forecast was while the brush hung out of her mouth. To him it should be done in the bathroom and the damn brush should stay there.

The doorbell rang startling him out of his thoughts. There he was chance opportunity to just happen to be standing there in a towel only with someone else in his room and the damn bell rang. He wasn’t likely to run to it anytime soon. He might make it over there if he took his time, maybe thirty minutes at the most.

“I got it.” Darrin said as he came back by him, dropping what he’d gathered so far over the side of the couch next to him. He didn’t open the door wide, considering how Trace was just standing in there. Then the concept of only ever changing in the bathroom or his room redoubled. Other people might not have such conventions.

“Just open it.” Trace said, frustrated again. Darrin gave him one strange look. There was already some grief from the person beyond, he could hear it. Darrin stepped back opening the door all the way.

There was Louisa standing there. She gave Trace such an odd look just then. He could do the math rapidly. With her mind it was simple. He was undressed and there was a stranger in his house, someone she hadn’t met and didn’t know. “Are you alright in here?” she asked. Her tone had to have been in reaction to him shouting. This only confirmed his idea it was to soon for her to be around him. He’d shouted enough when life was good.

“No I’m not alright.” He replied trying to tone his voice down, “My wife is dead, I can’t walk around on my own. I can’t even stand up. I’m screwed, royally, so no everything is not alright in here.”

“Other than that?” she asked looking strangely at Darrin.

“There is no other than that, Louisa.” He explained.

“You’re still off with me.” She said in a condescending tone

“You really want to have a talk right now?” he asked.

“Say something.”

“I’m sorry I slapped you. I didn’t feel like talking and it was the quickest way to send you a message, I don’t want your comfort, I don’t want your sympathy and I don’t want to watch you cry over *my* dead wife.” He shouted. She looked stunned. If he’d had seen her at the hospital she’d have looked the same. Without caring about the specifics of the moment she ran out the door.

Darrin followed her closing the door behind him.

“Jesus.” Trace cried. He wasn’t to happy with that move either, going to talk her down. He wouldn’t have much luck with her never seeing him before. She was beyond suspicion. It would take her a month getting to know him before she felt at all comfortable with him being anywhere

near Trace. He'd lost a friend once because of her. She kept telling him the guy was to weird for him. He could only imagine what weird was to Louisa. It could range from an off haircut to a serial murderer, you never knew. But after her insistence on pestering him about it he just let off trying and then stopped talking to the guy.

She had to have been right though, because he disappeared completely after that. He didn't know anything more than that. He was still fuming when Darrin came back in. "What the hell do you think your doing?" Trace asked.

"Just letting her know that it's not all about her right now."

"You don't need to be telling her anything." He complained, "I can deal with her in my own way."

"That was me helping her."

"Why? You don't know her, hell you don't even know me."

"Yes, that's true, doesn't stop me from doing it. I help people all the time I don't know, it's not a requirement." He explained as he came over to him. He then smiled, which didn't sit well with Trace at all. It was a bad reaction to his anger. "You want help getting dressed?"

God did he ever want to reply, "No thank you, get the hell out of my house." But he couldn't. He was standing still and suffering for it. He needed to lie down. He needed to get the pain killer prescription filled, because if he didn't he was just going to snap. "Yes." He replied and it came out of him in a normal thankful tone.

Trace reached for the shirt, a simple pull over, not that he was complaining. He waited for Darrin to be right next to him before he got his arms in it. Leaning against the couch more than anything else he pulled the shirt all the way up, but couldn't quite get it over his head. He tried but his body was no longer willing to move past a point where he'd gone already causing his muscles more problems. He saw

Darrin's hands come around each side of his head and pull the shirt over. He then let him pull it all the way down.

Trace pushed off the couch standing up again he pulled the towel away from himself. He was only slightly aware of the idea that he was exposed with some guy standing directly behind him. He grabbed the briefs and handed them to him.

He watched as Darrin's head came down along his right side, opening the cloth out so he could attempt to step into the pair. He wobbled when he lifted his left foot. He got in the hole and then groaned. "I can't lift my right anymore."

Darrin leaned against him giving him the idea to put his right hand on his back. Once he was there he pulled up his foot well enough to get it in the hole. He then came up pulling them all the way up. No point in stopping to let Trace finish when he'd already started. "Turn around and lean against the arm of the couch." Darrin said. Trace did just that. He wanted to be done though, so he could lie down again. Darrin knelt down with his pants in his hands. It might have been easier to do the briefs the same way, but Trace was only slightly uncomfortable with him kneeling in front of him at all, let alone while his bottom half was without clothing.

At the last he thought he was just being childish. Anyone else might have faired better. The only other thought he could think of to make it worse was if it was a woman trying to do these things. Louisa was big and strong enough, she just wouldn't have the patience that this strange man had. Darrin pulled his pants up. He stopped to look at Trace's expression before giving over the flaps to him. That would just require him to use his hands and try stand again. He went ahead and closed up the front for him. "Two things." Trace said when he stepped back. "One when you leave there's a prescription in the pocket of my pants in the bathroom, please get that filled for me."

"Sure."

“And get me on my back on the couch anyway you have to because I can’t hardly move.” He said. Darrin nodded. He then came to his left side.

“Lean back.” He said. Trace stopped trying to stand on his own. He let all his weight fall against his arm. With Darrin’s right arm, he reached down and lifted him completely in the air. He’d been thinking he looked strong before, but he was more than impressed by him slinging around a grown man making it look easy. He then gently lay him down on the couch.

“Jesus.” Trace said. Darrin smiled and threw the blanket over him. “Thank you.”

“Maybe you can get some more sleep.” He said. He grabbed the towel and went off to the bathroom. “I got it.” He announced when he came back out. Trace looked at him. “I’ll be back a little later, perhaps seven. Can you wait that long for this?”

“Yes.” He lied. As long as it was coming, he might make the day, but not another, not if he planned to move at all the next day. Darrin nodded and then headed off. Once he was outside the pain and frustration of the day, the embarrassment of it, the loss of his wife, all the physical pain aside Trace just began sobbing for all he was worth.

Although he hadn’t actually slept, he became more alert around six PM. His more immediate pains abated from being so still, he had gone back to just feeling stiff. That might just be his muscles healing, trying to realign the right way according to the way they were made versus the tearing them this way and that he’d done to himself.

He pulled himself up to a sitting position. Then he swiveled his feet off the couch. He lay back. He wasn’t about to move around any more than that on his own just then if he didn’t have to. Not until he had the pain killers. He could wait another hour. He was hungry and in some need of the bathroom, but it was bearable.

He was also more stable inside. The out burst had cleared some of his feelings from him. He just couldn't keep deigning them. He was done being suicidal then, he was moving towards anger. His face curled in a snarl as he thought about it. He wasn't sure who to get mad at? God? That always seemed like a good place to start when things went wrong. He was after all the Almighty was he not? But that wasn't really in sync with his rational mind, not that anger had to call that part of him home, but he wasn't angry enough yet to just be irrational. No, his rational mind was telling him there was a reason. A reason the building had simply collapsed and he needed to know why. Poor planning, bad construction, or overlooked inspections that might have signaled a problem that could be dealt with?

He knew where to start looking. If he turned on the TV then he'd only be led astray by it. No the truth was out there, but there was a better screen to find in on, the computer. Now that he had that idea in his head, he needed to wait to pursue it. He needed to wait to get helped to his feet, use the bathroom, get some food in him and then finally get into the office where the computer was.

Fully alert and left waiting with out being able to do more than twiddle his thumbs was already driving him just this side of crazy. It only left him to keep remembering what had happened. It was becoming more of a fact in his mind, before it was an experience he was having that he might still wake up from and then it would only be a really bad dream. No, he was awake now, this was no nightmare. His life was over.

Which only made him wonder why he was still drawing in breath? Because he wanted to live still, he just wasn't sure how to go about it now. He'd have to wait until he healed, get a job somewhere else, and fall into a routine. The routine was only ever made to get from one moment with Heather to the next. What purpose was it going to serve now?

He took a deep breath. The idea of seeing a grief counselor suddenly became a good idea just then. It had a purpose, to help him deal with it, to move on. It wasn't his first experience with someone close dieing on him. He had a friend he'd had since high school, a man with a wife and two kids already. Trace spent more than one afternoon just green all over for the fact of the kids, even if he found his wife to be a little odd at times.

An accident at work and he was dead, just like that. Years of knowing him and his family, always welcomed at weekend bar-b-qs and it was over. His wife moved back to Seattle. They'd migrated together even. Two wild young men ready to conquer the world, roommates, pals, double dating. After that he'd gone back to get her. Having the good job and income she'd agreed to come back to New York with him. That was all just memories now, not only him, but Heather, too. He'd suffered the loss with dignity, never even cried over it. Death was just a natural part of life and he was the anchor during the time of crisis.

He didn't give it enough credit then. Because all he could think about was the man's wife and kids at the time, who they'd lost and it allowed him to never have to focus on his own loss. By the time he'd figured that out it was mostly said and done. It came back on him then, with Heather being gone, too. He felt so alone just then.

The door opened startling Trace's train of thoughts. He flipped his head back to see Darrin coming through the door. "Your priority?" he began asking, "Water and meds or the bathroom?"

"Bathroom."

"Ok." He said. He came over and put the pharmacy bag on the coffee table and then proceeded to help Trace to his feet. "Want to walk some or no?"

"After." He said, "Once I've had them pain killers, because it's going to hurt even if it's the right thing to do."

"Yes, your right." He agreed.

It went a lot easier when Trace didn't complain about it so much. The other man was physically holding him up which allowed him to focus in on what he was doing over suffering just trying to stand. He was only slightly annoyed that it had gotten harder and worse long before it was ever going to get better.

Darrin helped him out to the kitchen and got him sat down there. He went back for the meds and served him a glass of water. Then while Trace was medicating himself the other man came to a halt staring at the kitchen. "What?" Trace finally asked. The other man looked at him.

"Not a wiz in the kitchen." He said, "Have no idea what to make."

"And if you were home?"

"I order out most nights, other times I get grub at the station with the guys."

"What you made last night tasted good enough to me." Trace said, "Right now I don't care what it is, I'd like to have something to eat."

"Yes." He said finally moving and looking through the cupboards. He struggled, scratching his head as he managed to put things together to make.

He produced macaroni and cheese along side some fried up ground beef. A can of carrots to the side and all Trace could think about was how these were all the things they had had for food that Heather never touched. He usually managed the mac and cheese by himself when forced to. The can of carrots might have been there a few years by then and the ground beef just wasn't presented with any dressing, just grease.

"Sorry." Darrin said as he filled two plates and they hit the table.

"Shopping would have been yesterday." Trace said as he began eating.

"If you need me for this tomorrow I'll bring back take out." He offered through bites of food.

“You keeping track of how much I owe you?” Trace asked.

“No.” he replied.

“Alright, then I’ll approximate. I got the receipt on the meds, keep the receipt of the take out and I’ll square it with you.”

“I’m eating your food, too.” He reminded him.

“And helping me.” Trace said, “You can eat my food, but I need to pay for the food your out buying for me.”

“Fine.” He said. He realized that he was uncomfortable with the conversation or he was becoming uncomfortable with him altogether. Trace was never known to be pleasant. When it came to work he was practical and to the point which didn’t earn him many friends at the office.

He left it all up to Heather after she had come into his life. At parties and other get togethers, she would be the pleasant one while he stood behind her with a proud look on his face and they melded together with the rest of the world that way. “Get me a beer.”

“You can’t drink a beer with those meds.” Darrin said. Trace read the warning label on the bottle of pain killers. Sure enough there was a label not to take with alcohol.

“Beer isn’t alcohol.” He decided.

“You could have a bad reaction and end up in the emergency room.” He said, “Something tells me you don’t need the added grief. When you’re past this, when you’re done with the meds I am sure your going to want to get stomping drunk. If you’re not against it, I’d be happy to join you then, but not now, not tonight.”

“Jesus.” Trace muttered. Darrin got up and rinsed off their plates and the rest of the dishes. He then made a move for the dishwasher. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Yea, not so quick to do it at home either.” He said, “But they are just going to pile up if they don’t get done. You want to do them?”

Trace bit down on his first comment. He never wanted to do them, even if Heather said ‘It’s easy enough, you just load, pour soap, close and turn it on.’ At this point he didn’t want them done at all. They could pile up in the sink for all he cared. He wanted to express that, but it was getting stuck in his mouth. Not to mention the double shot of pain killers, one over what was prescribed, was making him a bit loose in his own mind about it.

When Darrin finally finished Trace really wanted the beer. He had two choices to get one, either force the other man to give him one, or try and get to the refrigerator himself. “One beer is not going to kill me.”

Darrin moved rapidly towards the refrigerator. He popped a can out and snapped it open. He moved to the table and set it down just out of Trace’s immediate reach. They stood staring at one another for a moment. If he had to guess, the fireman just didn’t believe in drinking it at all. None of his business if Trace had some and drank them when he felt like it, was it? The idea that the stranger cared about him, while trying to care for him was just beyond Trace’s perception. He strained to reach it, pulling on those stiff muscles. It stung, but the sharp pains were now successfully under the control of the meds. He reached it just the tips of his fingers before he slid back against his chair.

“Bastard.”

Then Darrin smiled. Trace didn’t like him at all just then. But since he wasn’t taking no for an answer, he understood the move better. The next step would be to try and stand up on his own and see how that went. How bad did he want it? It was an almost viscous move on the fireman’s part. When Trace didn’t make another go for it the man tipped it up to his own lips and began drinking it.

Trace tried to ignore that, but when he turned to empty more than half of it into the sink Trace spoke again. “That’s my beer, if you drink it fine, but don’t waste it.”

“Take it off my bill.” He replied and rinsed out the can and left it sitting on the counter. Trace was feeling like a prisoner in own home for the moment. Darrin smiled and came around the table. “Back to the couch?”

“No, the office.”

He got stood up again. He might make it to the frig now, if he really wanted to, but he could see that was only going to make the smiling man turn against him. He started to walk some on his own. He was doing good. He got all the way out into the main part of the living room facing the hall. He thought he could keep right on going, but he was missing a fact. Without the pain to keep him still he was abusing the worn out muscles and they started to twitch and cramp causing him to cry out against it.

He wobbled and started to go down and one very large arm was easily keeping him up. Trace almost hit it with his teeth while he had his mouth wide open crying out. He was cussing for several minutes after that while Darrin stood him back up and said nothing. He was doing something different though. They moved into the position without thinking about it.

Trace had both hands on his arm and it was coming around his side and holding back against his front. Trace suddenly became aware of how close the other man was standing behind him. He pushed the arm out some, loosing his grip on it and Darrin moved back to his side, ready to catch him again.

“Alright.” Trace began, “Something is not right. The hospital should not have released me in this condition. I wasn’t healed enough. Now all I am doing is making it worse. Why would they do that?”

“They released you into my care.” Darrin said, “You’re supposed to be lying in bed right now, using a bedpan, having a sponge bath. Something tells me you would be going out of your mind by now in the hospital if you were still there.

“Plus I think you needed to be home. The longer it takes to get back in here, the harder it would be. Just like you not wanting to go in your bedroom, you’re going to have to do that soon, or you may never do it.”

Trace didn’t say anything. He was already tired for walking. He stood there just staying balanced. He slowly turned to Darrin and then threw his arm over his shoulder. “Get me to the office.”

He let him practically carry him after that. He was delusional to think he was going to be jogging in the next few days. It only made him think about physical therapy. They should have prescribed that, too. Probably somewhere between the cold stares and throwing away the prescription for the anti-depression medicine the doctor just let him leave. There was always the problem with a professional who cared for others getting personally involved, letting him affect his decisions based on his mood. It suddenly didn’t make any sense then. Why would Darrin have pushed for getting him out early without knowing if he was going to let him care for him?

The answer was he did know. He knew Trace would have no choice, except maybe Louisa. It had to have been a ruse to offer to call her to take his place. He’d had to have heard about him sending her out of the room. He knew too much.

Trace looked at him as he stopped just next to the office chair. He wasn’t sure what to say. It was either all bad or there was some good in it somewhere. What did he really want? Nobody did this for free without a reason.

“Can I bring you anything?” Darrin asked after getting him the chair.

“A beer.” Trace mumbled.

“Anything else?”

“That juice stuff. It’s going to go bad soon.” He said as a matter of fact. He watched the big man leave and Trace wished, wished for a split second with all his might he was

right behind him, slamming the door. He took a deep breath and looked at the computer, *her* computer. It wasn't off and he knocked the mouse and waited for it to wake up.

The flowery scene came on the screen. He'd hated it. It was girly. It was her computer, but he spent a fair amount of time on it himself. She suggested separate logins and he made some kind of grunt in response, not caring exactly what she was referring to. She knew way more about the infernal machines than he did. That's why with no cable or satellite for the TV, there was still cable coming into the computer. She had to have the latest and the greatest of everything.

Not to mention a desktop image of a flowery scene. He sat there transfixed looking at it. He'd heard stories about situations where a person who'd lost someone did things without ever allowing a change, like wearing the wedding ring of your dead spouse, or maybe leaving the hated flowery scene up, because she'd been the one to set it. It was the evidence of her presence in his home.

He grabbed the mouse and clicked on a few screens. He was looking at the selection of scenes. The one he'd loaded, which she changed back within the day to her own. He selected it. He sat there breathing and staring at the screen as his heart, a little off from the meds, ached. He finally clicked ok, scene gone now, just like her.

He rubbed his face vigorously with both hands. When he went to put his hands down he almost knocked over the large plastic glass now sitting beside him. Darrin had brought it to him without saying a word.

Was he watching? Had he understood and not said a word? Trace could believe he didn't hear him. He was drowning out his thoughts then, with anger. It kept coming up like a wave crashing through him as if he were the shoreline. And right after it settled there'd be another one to follow.

He got surfing then. He'd get a lot of crap at first, he was sure of it, but eventually he'd stumble on a site that might be blaring out what the news sites weren't saying. The official word of course was that it was still under investigation.

Trace popped through browser windows, one after another, getting side tracked killing off the pop ups that wanted to sell him Viagra and send him to porn sites. He was about to give up when he saw something as he scanned an article. Most of them were statistical, but this one had a bent about it. It started off with the word conspiracy and although that didn't grab his attention while he scanned it, the word 'Bomb' did. It could have been hearsay, more than likely it was, but he was now back at the beginning of the article and reading it more than scanning. He drank the juice as he went, the last of her juice, and the secret of how it was made taken to the grave with her.

He set the cup down and leaned forward. A picture was pulling up. "I'll be damned." He said. It had to be fake. Although there were numerous pictures of similar disasters, who would just happen to have a camera set up to take a shot of what he was looking at?

To his unbelieving eyes another picture was shimmering across the one he was looking at it. It wasn't enough for the subject matter to be serious. These page gurus had to make animations, full fledged flash media stuff. It showed the title. "High Rise Shoot Down Conspiracy." The words rolled away revealing the image again. The glass flying out of the first two stories of the building as a fireball rolled out from the sides.

It had to be fake. These guys just made the stuff up just to generate hits to their sites and there were plenty of links to follow the fun flash thing. The next image appeared again. The building was crashing down, splinters and pieces of it flying out in a slow motion sequence of several successive pictures taken one right after another.

What would he find next? A movie file? He froze still when he saw one. These had to be made up. He clicked the link and the viewer popped up on the screen. High speed had its advantage. The download bar zipped across the screen. Then it played. It was news footage.

But it wasn't the report. No this particular anchor was doing sound checks and straightening out her clothing asking the camera man how she looked. He didn't recognize her either, all he had were the local stations and he knew all the reporters by face and name. Was she just new?

"How do I look?" she asked.

"You look fantastic." The camera man told her from beyond the camera's view. She played out her skirt.

Then it began to rain. "Ah crap." The guy muttered.

"Are you taping this?" she asked.

"Yes, sending a signal back to the van." He replied.

"Well now it's raining is there really any point to being here now? I think it's a bust." She said.

"Guy said 8 AM." He said.

"I don't trust your guy." She said. She was frowning now.

"Biggest story, Ange. It'll put you on the network."

"All I see is a bunch of suits going to work, this is boring." She complained. The camera moved focusing in on the people headed into the building. Then it zoomed in.

"Hey you're on candid camera." The man shouted. A woman with long auburn hair and blues eyes turned to smile at him.

Trace's heart skipped at beat as he caught sight, the last possible image ever to be taken, of his beautiful German woman. She turned at the last and walked in through the revolving door. "Well it's quarter past." The would be reporter said. The camera came back on her and she smiled, "It's a bust."

"You gotta be somewhere?" he asked.

"Class."

“When?”

“Nine, if we blow more time here I am going to be late.”

“Skip it.” He said.

“And stand around in the rain?” she offered.

“You look fabulous.” He said, “I...”

His voice was drowned out by a sound.

Trace’s shaking hand clicked to pause. He was breathing hard now as the still image of the girl falling down, arms out stretched, she’d been screaming, was stuck on the screen.

Trace’s shaking hand finally clicked play again. The window filled with fire, then nothing but black. But there was still time left on the video and he let it run.

“Kip Klue here.” A guy said. Flying above his image it was spelled out. He was wearing a black bandanna over his face and all Trace could see were his eyes coming up just underneath a black, southwestern style hat. “No actors were paid in the making of the footage you just saw. These were real people just trying to smoke in a scoop, Angela Highs and Mica Santos. After receiving a hot tip they went to get the story, the story of the Marcease Building, before it collapsed. How did they know something was going to happen if it wasn’t planned? Who let this slip? Was it a mere coincidence? Were they looking for the latest sex scandal?”

“See here the truth, with your own eyes.” He said. He held his hands out and a smaller square appeared in the main window and flashed forward as if he’d tossed it at the viewer. It was slowly moving images with Angela turning her head against the sound and coming behind them, for three solid still frames was the image of something traversing the air and going into the front of the building. “That’s right People, what you are looking at is a Rocket. Not only was it directed, it was clearly meant to destroy.”

“The fire that followed the explosion ripped the inner structure of the building apart and it collapsed there after.”

This is the truth people. Put this file on your server, put as many copies out there on the web as you can before they stop us.

“Steve if you don’t hear from me in three days assume they killed me.” He said.

The image faded out and then an image of a laughing clown appeared and slowly melted away as if by acid revealing a skull and the words danced across the screen, ‘Kip Klue gets the scoop!’

Then it ended. “Jesus.” Trace said.

‘How the hell do you save these damn things?’ He wondered. He tried to remember how she explained it. When you clicked normally it just played and wasn’t saved to where he could have it on his computer, he’d have to go back to the site to see it again.

His memory came back. She was frustrated with him at that point, after getting the computer in working order again after he’d done something to break it. He didn’t know what then nor did he now. She was trying to show him how to get a link to down load instead of just open. He hovered the mouse over the link and clicked the right button. Sure enough there was an option to save the file. He clicked it and directed it right on to his desktop. The progress bar flipped across the screen.

He brought the desktop back to the front and clicked the file to make sure it was actually there. It was and he ended up watching it again, pausing indefinitely on the image of Heather.

“What’s that?”

“Jesus H Christ!” Trace shouted.

“Sorry, wasn’t intended to be this quiet.” Darrin said. “Don’t want to bother you, really, but you’ve been in here a long time now and I was wondering if you wanted to get somewhere else, the bathroom or the couch...or your bed?”

“It’s only eight o’clock.” Trace muttered, “Been asleep most of the day. I’ll holler at you when I am done. Don’t come in here again without knocking.”

“Sure.” He said. Trace caught the tone. He turned to look at the man as he stood beside him. Then the bastard smiled. “All you need now is a little bell.”

“You can leave if you want.” Trace barked, “I have yet to ask you stay.”

“Not with your words.” He said as he pulled Trace’s keys out of his pocket and dangled them within his reach. “Up to you.”

Trace turned back to the screen ignoring him.

“Okay.” He said. “I’ll just kind of doze then. So you might have to shout. Something tells me that won’t be a problem.”

“Why are you so tired?” he asked, but right after it came out he didn’t really want to hear an answer.

“Habit.” He said, “Never know if I’ll be wearing a suit all day or out fighting fires and saving lives. Getting in early makes it more likely that I’ll have had some sleep if something happens during morning rush hour.”

“You’re available every day?”

“Yes.” He said, “No rest for the wicked, plus they don’t need me all the time. If I have something serious going on I call in and say I’m unavailable. But then when the radio squawks at me anyway I just leave whatever it is. I have yet to side with something over an emergency that required me.”

Trace wasn’t really listening anymore. He was clicking links on the computer. When he stopped focusing in it he realized the other man had left, without a sound again. Or maybe he wasn’t hearing because the drugs had him so relaxed.

He clicked on another page out of the list of links and the entire screen turned black and red blood started dripping down it.

“Jesus.” He complained. He tried clicking and messing with the keyboard, but nothing responded. It could have been a virus. He just wasn’t that clever with computers and sometimes set things in motion he knew nothing about that Heather had to come in and fix and try and fail to explain to him how or why.

You computer has been infected with the Luminary virus, please stand by while we attempt to remove the worm and save your data from extinction.

What the hell was this? He knew what a virus scanner was. He knew the screen for it and it never took over the whole computer or dripped strands of blood over a black screen. He thought about turning the whole thing off and starting over, but he paused just shy of it when he saw the scanning files list off to the left in green slime.

The files were rolling up the left side of the screen. Words he’d never imaged came up it. ‘Keywords.’ He thought. Why was that stuck in his head? These were not files. No this thing was searching his files for keywords.

He slammed the power button in and held it until the computer went off. He took another deep breath and leaned back. He waited a moment, how long was he supposed to wait? A minute or two? He clicked the power back on. He’d lose track of all the sites he’d just been to, deep out in cyber space. Heather had once showed him how to bring all of it up to go back to, but he didn’t recall that either. He could surf. He was good at going forward. If he wanted to keep a page up he went to a new window with a link and he was ok. Going back, clicking back and finding out where he had been was lost to him.

The computer booted into the desktop. Then the image of bars slammed across from both sides of the screen slamming together with a clanging sound coming out of the speakers.

“Now what?” he asked aloud.

“Good question.” A voice replied coming out of the speakers. Was that possible? Someone speaking to him over the computer? Yes, it was he remembered, but it didn’t do it automatically. “Please don’t turn your computer off, or you may as well leave it off.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Not important. You recently downloaded a file. You have just placed a bull’s-eye on your system. It’s sending out a signal. I am fixing it.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to know.” He replied. Trace watched as the screen turned black again with the blood. The keyword search resumed.

“How do I know your not just stealing my files?”

He heard a laugh. Could they do that? Laugh over your computer. Then he realized it was a like a phone, once connected you could talk back and fourth with a mic and speakers. “You have nothing I want.”

“I have things...” He said. He stopped though. Was it really a good idea to tell the hacker what might be good on his system?

“Your credit cards are maxed, your checking account is like 500 dollars, and the rest of your money is not accessible from your computer and bound up in secure savings and bonds.”

“How do you know that?”

“Two clicks away from me.” He explained.

“Okay so why hack me then?”

“Your not alone there mister.”

“Mister?”

“I’d rather not say names right now.” He said, “Let’s just call me a friend of a friend of a friend.”

“Why?”

“I am telling you, you don’t want to know.”

The screen began brightening in the center on the bottom. The blood drained away and the keyword list stopped scrolling and faded out. The sunrise blinded out through the black screen and faded back into the image of the desktop.

The file to the movie was gone. “There you go, no more bull’s-eye. Have a good night.”

“That’s it?” Trace asked. He got no response. The hacker was gone. He messed with his computer some more and got the antivirus running. Maybe the hacker had just loaded him up with crap. He waited impatiently. When it was done it said his system was clean.

He tried vainly to get back to the site he was on with the link to the file, but it was gone, too. He couldn’t even get close to it. He was coming up with the usual stuff, not the link that brought him to a site with the latest news from people like you. He shook his head. He’d found something though, an idea, one that looked totally fake until he saw his wife on the screen.

How many other people had seen it?

He gave up on it then. He leaned back and relaxed and after a while of watching the fishbowl screen saver, an amusement worthy of an hour the first time it ever came on, until he’d had enough. He was tired, ready for sleep and he’d get back to it the next day. Try harder, try again. More people had to have seen it and would be posting things. He’d find them.

He looked back. Darrin didn’t just happen to be standing there this time. He then remembered he was on wheels. Sort of like a wheel chair. He kicked off the desk and rolled backwards. Then he began pushing backwards along the floor with his feet. He made it all the way to the door. After that the nice hard wood floor in the office turned into carpet. He might just flip over backwards just getting it onto it. That would be more trouble for him.

“Darrin.” He called out. He gave him plenty of time to respond. He didn’t want it to be like a child whining for help. Eventually the man came. He smiled again, wiping at his eyes. He’d fallen asleep already.

“Done?”

“Yes.”

“Bathroom?”

“No.”

“Bedroom?” he asked. Trace thought about it. Maybe the guy was right. Maybe he should venture back in there at some point.

“No.” he said. That could wait one more day. The big empty bed would feel like a wasteland. At least the couch was suited to one person.

Then the idea of a complete stranger sleeping in his bed managed to run through his mind the wrong way. He’d taken it over. Even if Trace had told him to use it in one of his bad moments, he hadn’t really meant it. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“You going home?”

“You think that’s the best plan?”

“What do I know?”

“It’s just as well for me to stay here, check in with you in the morning before I head home and change.”

“You didn’t wake me up today.”

“I tried, but you were out, that’s why I came right back at ten instead of waiting until lunch.”

“Oh.”

“Uhm, the chair maybe?”

“Just take the bed.” He said again, getting irate about it all over again. He’d still prefer the guy left. He still didn’t know him. The idea that a complete stranger was sleeping in his house with him was creepy. It made more sense to have the computer completely taken over by a hacker than to have this man in his house.

Darrin offered his arms. Trace grabbed a hold of them and pulled himself up. He had to wonder how much of a strain it was on him. Sure he had big arms and he slung him around, but what about his hands gripping him just so? Did it hurt?

“Jesus.” He complained more to himself about his damn thoughts.

“Hurt?”

“Not at all.” Trace said finally getting all the way up.

“Want to walk?”

“Maybe tomorrow.” He replied, “Hell at this point you could carry me the whole way and I wouldn’t complained.”

“I can actually do that.” He said with a grin, “A guy’s gotta be able to carry a man during a rescue at times.”

“What do you do when you get like a three hundred pound guy?”

“Call for help.” He said with a sly smile, unlike all the ones before it.

“Yea, whatever, your not giving reports to anyone are you?”

“No.” he said and laughed.

“Fine, carry me.” He said. “I’d rolled out on my own if it wasn’t carpeted though.”

Darrin pushed the chair out of the way. He got Trace’s backside and he leaned into him. In the next moment he was walking sideways down the hall with him.

“Heavy?”

“No more than the potato sacks we practice with.” He replied. “I’m actually being nice against your injury. Normally we sling them and people, right over our shoulder.”

“I appreciate that.” Trace said.

Darrin brought him over to the couch and set him down. “You’re getting better at this.”

“I can see it ending now.” Trace said, “I’m not going to be this bad off for the rest of my life. What do you think four or five more days?”

“Yes, that might be good.”

“I should pay you for your time.”

“No.”

“What the fire department doesn’t pay you?”

“No, Trace.” He said, “That’s why they call us the volunteer fire department.”

Trace thought he’d been insulted, because he left the room quickly after that. He stressed for a whole minute then lay back and put it out of his mind. What was he really going to do? Keep complaining?

It took him a while to go to sleep, the image of the rocket brushing past that girl, headed almost for the way it played, right after his wife, going into the building began to haunt him.

He had to wear it out to get to sleep. He was desperate to know more, anything that anyone else knew. It didn’t sooth him at all and he’d lost track of how many hours he just lay there before his eyes actually closed.

Trace woke from a noise. He popped his eyes open and it was still kind of dark outside. He’d misplaced his watch and didn’t no where it was. If he had to guess by the light level it was sometimes just after five AM. He pulled himself up and saw light coming from the hall. Then, taking in just a bit of breath for the unfamiliarity, Darrin appeared coming out into the living room.

Was he sleep walking?

“Morning.” He offered. Nope, not asleep.

“Whatever.” Trace said sagging back down. Who in their right mind got up at five Am to go work in an office? He pulled back up. Maybe he was headed to something else?

“Bathroom?”

“Yea.” He replied. As Darrin crossed through the beam of light Trace noticed he was just in his boxers. He had difficulty with that. It was the idea the guy was sleeping in his bed, not fully clothed like he had been the night before

when he started out in the chair, but dressed down and sleeping, perhaps, under the covers?

He decided he hadn't really thought it all through. He just wasn't thinking about these things when his mind was drowning in other thoughts and feelings. He'd come back around to it, the same idea. Who was this guy and what the hell did he want?

He offered his arms and Trace began to pull himself up. He didn't think he'd been comfortable, but he must have been because pain shot out through him and he lost his momentum, slapping back down, so much for getting himself up.

"I'm sorry. You probably need another does of meds." Darrin said, "I should have just lifted you up."

Trace's response would have been bad, all the way around ugly even, so he didn't say anything. Instead he just waited for the stabbing pain to ease up. Darrin seemed to take a cue from his facial expression. Even in the dim light he'd seen it. He then lifted Trace all the way up to his feet.

Trace thought he was standing. Those pain killers sure sounded good to him for that experience alone. But he wasn't standing at all, he was leaning. It dawned on him slowly. Had he flashed passed out? He must have had something happen, because he was stood up and then for all he knew he'd fallen over, he was leaning against the other man, arms dropped down with his head against his shoulder.

"You going to barf?" Darrin asked. Trace lifted his hands and pushed himself off him.

Then it happened again. He wasn't standing. This time Darrin helped him back down onto the couch.

"How many pills did you take?"

"I don't know, four or five." He replied.

"You allergic to anything?"

"To pain pills?" Trace asked like it was impossible.

“Maybe.” He said, “I have medic training, but I certainly don’t know everything about allergies, we hope the person can tell us in most cases.”

“No.” Trace said. Darrin began turning on lights. They both didn’t really want all that just then, but he suffered through.

“Show me your side.” He commanded. Trace realized he’d slipped into work mode. The same tone as he’d had before when he was calling him ‘Sir’. Trace leaned left and pulled up his shirt. The man inspected his bandages. “Nothing obvious, does it hurt more than it did before?”

“When I tried to stand myself up, yes.” Trace said, “I keep thinking there cannot be a new level of pain and then it hits me like a brick.”

“Your lightheaded, you passed out on me.” He said.

“Ok.”

“Your color looks fine, actually better than the day I brought you home.”

“What then?”

“You don’t feel like your going to barf?”

“No.”

“Alright let’s try this again.” He said. He picked him up again. Trace was looking along the floor as he moved and then he was seeing the ceiling. How did that happen? He then felt Darrin shift him, manually getting him to his side. The ceiling turned into the carpet and then a wall and then he was in the bathroom. “You’re not going to be able to stand for this.”

“Hun?”

“You’re slipping in and out when stood up.” He explained. In another strange moment he was sitting on the toilet and the room righted itself. Darrin was leaning down towards him, hands on his knees, inspecting his face. He then trailed his finger in front of Trace’s eyes. “I’m going with your not reacting well to the meds.”

“I was fine last night.”

“That was then, this is now.” He said.

“I need at least one before you leave.”

“Half.”

Trace moaned.

“You could still be allergic, Trace. You want to get worse?”

“No.”

“Alright.” He said.

“Why didn’t I sleep them off then?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a doctor.” He replied. “You want me to help you use that or would you rather struggle through and keep your dignity.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you’re reactive.” He said, “Never know when you’re going to bite instead of bark.”

“I’m fine with your help.” Trace said.

“Ok.” He said. He got him up and helped him get sat down again. Trace was in and out for the duration staring at the ceiling for a moment then he got blinded by the light. A few moments later he was sat down and the room was settling.

“Food poisoning.” Trace finally said.

“What?”

“That can of carrots, it was old.”

“Yea, but I feel fine.”

“And you’re like some kind of man-ox.” Trace said. He realized immediately that the other man had taken offense again. “It’s not the first time I had that happen. Just need to flush it out.”

“Which would make more sense if you wanted to barf.”

“You keep asking and I just might.” He said. “Done here.”

He got him back up and settled against his side. Trace was still shifting in and out. A moment later and he realized the big man was carrying him again. Since he wasn’t

standing up he wasn't fading out. It only made him more aware of how much bare skin he was in contact with. He was returned to the couch. "If you're not over this by lunch I might just take you in to get checked up."

"Fine." Trace said feeling defeated. He wanted to get back on the computer first thing...well maybe not first thing as in before six AM, but he didn't really want to wait until noon.

Darrin left and came back with the whole jug of water. "Drink as much of this as you can."

Trace started immediately, he'd been through the routine. The water diluted the poison and allowed his body to flush it. If he drank all of it before the guy came back he'd be hurting to go though.

"Okay I am thinking if I can just get a shower I don't have rush home." Darrin said, "I've got a change of clothes in the car. Never know when you're going to need them for what I do."

"You want to use my shower?" Trace asked.

"Yes, save me some time." He answered. He really wanted to say no. He paused to drink more water before giving him permission, because once he said yes then the man would be officially living there.

"Fine." He said as he thought about him carrying him around the house when it was easier than struggling to walk. The next thing he did, though, didn't improve his mood about it.

Darrin headed for the door immediately, barefoot and in boxers he went right out the front door. Trace rubbed his face, trying not to think too much about it. Someone was going to see him. Although he wasn't a favorite among his neighbors, none had stopped with their condolences yet, he didn't need them yapping about him either...it would get back to Louisa.

"Jesus." He complained to himself.

Darrin came in with a bag. It may have been packed the day before for all Trace knew. The idea wouldn't settle either way. He was more than suspicious now. The other man didn't even glance at him as he went into the bathroom.

Trace kept drinking the water. He wanted to be over the poisoning, if that's what it was, as soon as possible. He hadn't started to sweat yet. That would be another sign then. Vomiting, too, but he wasn't sick feeling, really. Maybe it was the meds. He thought about that then. He didn't want to forget that. The bottle was out of his reach.

Would he bring them to him or just a half a pill? Trace sighed and put the jug down next to him. He closed his eyes for a moment. Not much room to nap with all the lights on now. He'd want them all off, too, but by then the sun would be up. He rolled his head looking at the TV. He'd want the remote, too. He was running a list.

Eventually Darrin came back, hair still wet, not combed. Maybe he hadn't packed for the night, because if he had he might have remembered that. He was only dressed up to his waist so far.

He was organizing his clothes from the day before, switching them out with a clean shirt in the bag. "You work in an office dressed like that?"

"Every day is casual day." He explained. Then he smiled, "Well for me anyway. I did the shirt and tie thing once. Then I showed up like this and said fire me if you have to."

"That's not very smart." Trace said.

The other man seemed to be playing with his shirt, prolonging putting it on. "Depends on how useful you are to someone."

"And everybody else where's a shirt and tie?"

"I don't enforce it." He explained. Trace closed his eyes then, not wanting to wonder how long he was going to finish what he should be doing. "You got everything you

need?” Trace opened one eye, saw the shirt coming down on him and opened the other one.

“Phone, meds, TV remote, Water.”

“You got a bucket encase you have to barf?”

“Under the sink in the kitchen.” He decided.

“You wouldn’t happen to be hungry, would you?”

“No.”

“You’ll be okay till lunch?”

“I think so.”

Darrin rounded up all the things making sure they were all in easy reach. He then stopped suddenly, half approaching. He made a face of confusion, squeezed his eyes tight and then stepped back. “I need coffee.” He decided.

“Yea, haven’t seen a cup myself in days.” Trace agreed.

“Well I’ll bring you some. If you’re feeling okay you can drink it.” Darrin said.

“Ok.”

“Alright I’m out of here.” He said slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Try not to go anywhere.”

“You got it.” Trace said. That would be the last thing he’d been doing. Maybe two more days and he’d try again on his own. Not much else would force the issue.

Darrin left without any other kind of goodbye. Trace was breathing easy. He snapped on the TV, cruised through all the channels and stopped on public television where he was sure Bert & Ernie were not going to offend him.

He watched TV until noon. His eyes got dry and he finished the last of the water. He had barley moved at all, except for shifting his legs a few times and curling his arms over his head. It got warm for him and the blanket was thrown over the back of the couch. He was actually very mellow just then. He hadn’t been thinking about things none stop. The world still existed outside he just wasn’t part of it.

The phone rang. He looked at the display. “Jesus.” He moaned then clicked the button. “Hello Louisa.”

“Trace Johnson what on Earth is going on over there?” she asked.

“I’m fine right now, how are you? Just a little self inflicted food poisoning.”

“What?”

“Bad carrots.” He added.

“Who was that man, Trace? The one who’s wandering around out front this morning?”

“You mean in his boxers.” He added, because she could almost just say it herself, but stopped just shy of it. It only served to amuse him, finishing her unspoken words.

“Yes, I guess the same one that was there yesterday?”

“That would be him.” Trace agreed.

“Who is he?”

“You know what? It’s really none of your concern. I’m sorry I yelled at you again.”

“It is my concern, Trace. You’re my concern, you’re my family. Your going through something, you need to stop pushing me away.”

“Hmm.”

“Trace you need to start dealing with this. We need...we...” she got stuck there, emotion breaking through her voice and he found himself with his thumb over the button ready to hang up. She spoke, but not without the emotion. “We need...to see about her funeral.”

He pushed the button. Then the phone was flying, a left handed throw even. It sailed into the kitchen where it smashed against the wall.

It rang again immediately. But he could do nothing about it. It was now out of his reach. The answering machine picked up in the office. He could just make it out for his and Heather’s voices playing back the recording, sing song voice and all ‘The Johnsons are not home right now, leave a message.’ He squeezed his eyes shut in response to it. He’d be changing that soon. Just like the flowery desktop. It

wouldn't help him at all. Louisa voice came through loud and clear, shouting at him to answer the phone.

She might just follow that up with a visit. That wouldn't help her though if Darrin wasn't there. He was locking the door and it was also out of Trace's reach. She tried until the message timer ran out on her, hanging up on her.

She didn't call back and Darrin hadn't shown up yet, before he knew, it was already one thirty and he was just beginning to strain for all the water he'd guzzled. The jug was empty now.

He was worse by three, turning the TV on and then off, then turning back on to drown out his thoughts. He looked down at the bucket. He hadn't had to vomit. He was good there. He digested all the food and it was all just in his blood stream. He'd only had the whole of one pain killer by then, just incase Darrin was right about that.

He sat up. Once he was sat up he felt mostly normal. He felt like he could stand up. But it wasn't worth the risk. He might just teeter, fall over and smash his head on the coffee table. With that unpleasant thought he used the bucket as a bed pan.

Once he was down with it, sighing from relief, glad that it had been there, he pushed it to the side and lay back down. With the TV off and his mind wandering a memory came back to him. It was a flash at first, but then it congealed. He'd blocked it out somehow. He'd only remembered wearing his coffee.

He was headed east, just bit more gas than usual trying to make up for lost time. He was actually smiling about something, about Heather's last words to him. Her smile, the one he got every morning. He'd meet up with her once he got there, just to let her know he'd come in. He used the Explorer rarely. They'd ride in together with her driving that beat up old orange car. He'd wanted her to trade it in and she'd put it off.

He'd humored her, making a secret plan to get her to a dealer and see what she might fall in love with. He was thinking about just that when something glinted in the sky. Something had gone past and sent a blinding glow across the cars along the highway. It was quick, but with people doing in excess of sixty-five miles an hour that's all it took. Someone up the line had stumbled, the light blinding them, a swerve and then a chain reaction.

Like dominos. His part was the sudden deceleration of the tanker in front of him. Only one hand on the wheel, the other navigating his cup of coffee to his mouth and he was slamming on the breaks and wearing his coffee. He looked down like a fool. Like a kid would, oops I spilled something. Ten seconds tops and when he was looking ahead again the silvery tanker was sliding sideways off to the left driving cars off the road that way.

It all happened so fast. With him swerving to the right to keep his own space, but in front of him was the front end of the tanker, which bounced, locking, or was it jack knifing and it was skittering along with him, pushing towards him.

The breaks weren't going to save him, because the whole line of cars were all stopping at the same time, loads of them out of control and just out of the corner of his eye he saw a green car fly up in the air above the tanker.

Then he hit the guardrail. Then the tanker swung his way and smashed the Explorer scraping it along the guardrail, squeezing it so tight. Something strange happened then, because he had an impulse with all that was going on to pop off the seatbelt. In any accident you'd want it on. He'd lost control of the truck, he wasn't steering or breaking, he was being squished and if he didn't get out of the way he might be wearing the contents of what was in the tanker.

He popped the lock and reached for the passenger side, reaching for the handle on the door and pulling himself across. He'd been right. The Truck finally popped upwards,

with the tanker smashing down on the right side and the guardrail gave way pushing him off the highway.

He rolled then. Holding himself in place as best he could with one hand on the passenger door handle and the other one on the steering wheel, which was now facing left instead of back.

When the Trace finally stopped rolling, landing on its roof he had passed out.

He turned towards the TV again, it was off. He was looking at the gray screen. Like death, he decided. It all just turned back into one color and the vibrancy of life was over, the color gone, the movement, and the sounds.

He closed his eyes then, almost comfortable with being so still. Something horrible and ugly, the pile up had been the thing that saved his life.

He woke up hungry. It was dark. His mind ticked off the things he should be aware now that he was no longer asleep. He was injured, he was alone and his wife was dead. He winced against the recollection, but he didn't gush on about it. There was no point, just like the funeral, he just didn't see the point.

He remembered his friend's funeral. They were all crying and saying goodbye. Trace had dropped a rose into the grave like everyone else, but it all lacked meaning for him. He didn't understand their need to grieve. It didn't do anything, it was selfish.

He sat up. He reached for the lamp and turned it on. His back was throbbing again. The couch wasn't doing him any favors there. But it paled against the pain on his side he'd been experiencing. He pulled up his shirt and ran his hand over the bandages, nothing external there, just the skin under the padding. He'd have to have it changed out, or just plain removed. It wasn't like he was bleeding. He was just thinking it keep his side with stitches from catching on his shirt. With that thought he left it alone and let the shirt drop.

That was when he began to wonder. Where the hell was Darrin? He'd forgotten to reclaim his watch. The clock in the kitchen was glowing on the stove just out of sight, but the clock in the living room could only be seen during the day, or when all the lights were on, not just the one lamp. He'd guess it was seven, because it was already dark.

He couldn't just keep sitting there. His logical mind protested, but his need to move was pretty compelling. He wanted at least something more to drink. Maybe if he could make it to the kitchen he could have that beer. It wasn't like he'd had another pain killer, just the one in the morning. He had no urge to have one then anyway. A beer would be better. It would be soothing and cold.

He didn't want to end up smashing the coffee table though. He'd need to account for that. He experimented lifting his right leg, no problem. Then he shoved against the table pushing it as far as his leg stretched. With that mostly out of the way he made a plan to roll up, both hands on the arm of the couch and if he tossed right back down, he would fall down on a clear spot on the carpet.

The only problem was he'd be twisting to the right. Going straight up was better logic, but he wouldn't be able to hold on. He turned to the right, no immediate pain and grabbed a hold of the arm. Then he pulled himself up and turned.

By some miracle he was on his feet, but he was arched fully and basically holding himself up with his hands and arms. He tried to walk forward, and then he lifted even more. For a brief moment it was all good. He was going up, the entrance to the kitchen in sight, lining up and he could see where the phone landed. He was standing up.

Then he was watching it all flash by, scanning along the wall up towards the ceiling and then along the ceiling. Now he was flat on his back and he had the wind knocked out of him.

At least he hadn't smashed the coffee table. He laughed. He couldn't help it, it was funny just then, flat on his back and all he could think about was that damn old commercial, 'I've fallen and I can't get up.' He laughed some more, verging on hysteria versus all the stress he'd been through.

When he was done there were tears streaming out of his eyes. He wiped them away. "Oh Heather." He said, "I hope your laughing with me right now. I'd like that better than thinking your only worried about me."

He took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling. After recovering from, and yet, another self inflicted blow, he tried to sit up. With both hands to his sides he pushed himself up. Then for the lack of not having something to grip, using more of his muscles on his side, it ripped through him with pain and he fell back down.

Maybe being flat on his back would straighten the back problem out. He chuckled again. He'd felt foolish for the thought and managed to roll over on his left side. He then went over again, both hands on the floor and like a toddler might, he tried to walk up.

More pain and he was flat on his stomach, his mouth tasting the carpet and his nose full of the smells in it, still lingering from the previous owner's dog. He pushed himself back over onto his back, spitting as he went.

"Trace, crap, you ok?" Darrin asked. Trace hadn't heard him come in. He might have been busy tasting just then to hear the door. Or maybe his ears were still ringing from falling over backwards.

"No worse no better." He answered.

"I'm sorry, big fire, been at it all day." He explained. Trace smelled the smoke then. It had to be trapped in his hair or something. "You just can't stay put."

"Dieing of thirst." He explained. Darrin came around behind him, pushing him up to a sitting position.

"Got that?"

“I think so.” He replied. He wasn’t sure of anything at that point. Darrin went back to the door where he’d dropped some bags. He came back with a jug of water.

“I figured you’d already been waiting to long, so I went ahead and got some stuff.” He explained. He handed Trace some bottled water. Trace emptied it. “I’m sorry. Maybe I should have called, haven’t stopped to get your number yet.”

“I’m fine.” Trace said, “How about a pain killer?”

“Sure.” He said and managed to get that. He kneeled down next to him and even got a pill out of the bottle. He handed it to him first and than asked, “How many you had?”

“This would be number two for today. I was fine until I decided to try and get up.”

“I was thinking you might have made it.” Darrin said. Trace looked at him.

“To?”

“The kitchen.” He said, “Maybe if you were really forced to do it, you would.”

“That was where I was headed.”

“Still dizzy?”

“Maybe, to busy falling on my ass to tell.”

“Alright let’s get you on your feet and find out.” He said.

“And you?”

“Nothing.” He said, “Been fine all day.”

He got behind Trace and pulled him up to his feet. Trace heard him take a deep breath.

“Exhausted now.” He admitted.

“Not dizzy.” Trace said.

“Might still be the pain killers.” Darrin said, “Try and take as few as possible, how’s that sound?”

“Ok so far.” He replied.

Darrin’s hands to his sides suddenly came around his front. The shift in position didn’t last long, but for the moment Trace had no other idea about it. Aside from

physically holding him on his feet, he was holding him. He then pulled back. "Sorry."

Trace didn't say anything. What the hell was he going to say? He had so much going on then he didn't need another issue. Especially with Louisa calling him up and demanding he tell her about the fireman, although she didn't know he was a fireman. Trace could still smell the smoke. "You need to get cleaned up."

"Yea, aside from the supplies, I rushed over here afterwards." He said.

"How about sitting me down in the kitchen?"

"Sure." He said, "Full weight or do you want to step?"

"I'll step." Trace said.

It took longer, but he needed to do it. Every time he lifted his right he was reminded of his injury and he leaned against Darrin when he did. He made it all the way to the chair. Then he allowed Darrin to get him sat in it.

Then he went back in the other room to get the rest of the bags. He set them on the table. He pulled out a whole cooked chicken and then two salads.

"I figured the green food would be good if you're still feeling sick."

"I think I'm fine, but I'm no stranger to a good salad." Trace said. He pulled one over and got at it with his fork. While he was already starting in on that Darrin got plates and loaded them with some chicken.

The phone rang and Trace looked down at it where it was on the floor.

"That's probably my mother." He decided, her regular night to call even. Darrin went and retrieved the phone and handed it to him. He said nothing about where it was. "Hello."

"Hello dear."

"Hi Mom."

"How are you?"

"Not good." He replied, "I got in a car wreck."

“Are you hurt?”

“Yes Mom, got injured, that usually happens when your car rolls off the highway into a ditch.”

“Do you need to be in the hospital?”

“I was in the hospital. I’m...I’m on out patient care.” He said. He eyed Darrin while he picked at the chicken. “Got me one of those orderly type guys helping me get around the house until I get better.”

“Does your medical cover that?”

“Yes Mom, don’t worry about that. I have something I have to tell you.”

“Ok.”

“Are you sat down?”

“Do I need to be?”

“Yes Mom.” He said. He waited for her. She could be anywhere in the house just then.

“Ok, I’m sitting.”

“Mom, Heather is dead.”

“No.”

“Yes Mom, same day I wrecked the car. She was at the office when the building collapsed.”

“No Trace.”

“Yes Mom.”

“We’ll...we’ll see about coming down then.”

“No Mom, I don’t want you to do that. I’m not having a funeral here.” He said.

“Well then we’ll just come to be with you.” She said.

“Mom, you and Dad are getting on in years. It’s not easy to just get up and fly across the country. I don’t want you to do that. I don’t need to be worried about you right now. What I want you to do, Mom, is stay there. When I get better I’ll come out there and see you guys.”

“Is Louisa with you?”

“She’s around.” He lied, well sort of.

“I just can’t believe this.” She said.

“Mom, I need to eat, foods getting cold. I’ll call you later.”

“Are you sure? We can be on a flight tomorrow, Trace.”

“I know Mom.” He said, “Stay home, be safe, I have a lot to deal with here.”

“Ok.” She said, “I love you, so does Dad.”

“I love you guys, too.” He said. He hung up. He then had an urge to toss the phone again. He was gripping it tightly. Darrin came up and took it from his hand. He relaxed his grip. Trace looked off at the corner near the refrigerator.

“You going to eat or should I just put this away?” Darrin asked. Trace forced himself to look at him.

“I’m still hungry.” He said. They locked eyes for a moment, because no matter what Trace’s issues were Darrin was eating steadily. Trace decided he’d missed lunch. He finally stabbed a piece of chicken. He went back to thinking it the same way, getting outside the thinking loop of his no longer existing life, telling himself he was just a guy eating, like anyone else, like Darrin was.

He cleared his salad and went back for more chicken. When he was finished Darrin cleaned up, shelving the leftovers in the frig and rinsing off the plates.

“You want to move before I hit the shower?” Darrin asked. Trace looked at him. He wasn’t asking to use it. Maybe he had some stray thought he’d go home then, to clean up. He’d told him he needed to clean up. Maybe he got the message as ‘use my shower again and get cleaned up’. The thought only brought him back to what he could only consider to be a quick hug. He shook his head. He didn’t want to be that close to him again so soon.

“No go ahead, I’m fine here.” He said. Darrin left, right out the front door from the sound of it, getting more clothes? When did he find the time to do that? The answer wasn’t clear, but he could guess he might of done that before he got called off to the fire, or before he even went in to work,

he'd left early enough, which meant if he had gone home anyway, then there was no need for him to have used Trace's shower to begin with.

He was making himself comfortable and for a solid ten minutes Trace was not liking the idea. It had him scratching his head. He needed to figure out how to get him to back off some.

When he finally came back in the room he hadn't even bothered getting dressed. He was back to just his boxers. Trace turned his head towards the wall. He didn't want to look at him. He wasn't even going to entertain the idea that aside from what Trace actually needed that he was giving him, he really didn't want the guy there.

"What about you?" he asked, "Before I get dressed. You want a shower?"

Was he responding to Trace's reaction to his appearance? "I'll skip it." Trace said.

"Couch, office or bedroom?"

"You'd just leave me in the office?" Trace asked. His voice came out annoyed, it was partly intended, but the man's reaction was just too reactive. He was reminded of Louisa, getting hurt so easily.

"I wasn't actually leaving."

"I really think that's a good idea." Trace said. "Like you said you're exhausted, you should go home and get some sleep. It's closer to nine now and you fell asleep at eight last night."

The moment was tense while the man looked at Trace. He seemed to be weighting it. Trace was having a hell of a time trying to say it the nice way, because all he really wanted to say was get the hell out of my house you.... "Alright." He said, nodding. Something shifted in his tone of voice then.

He didn't move Trace right away either. He went to get dressed first and Trace was glad for it. His nerves were raw, did he or did he not just tell his mother his wife was

dead in a conversational tone? Without a sob or a sniffle even? “Jesus.” He complained to himself. He lowered his head onto his arms for a moment. He could still smell chicken and smoke.

“Alright.” Darrin said coming back in dressed in clean clothes.

“Bedroom.” he said as he turned on his chair to face him.

“That’s good, Trace.” He said.

“My back can’t take the couch anymore.” Trace admitted. Darrin offered his arms and let Trace do the work. It was just a little easier, especially now that he wasn’t dizzy.

Saying he was going to the bedroom and going into it were to different things. He stopped in the hallway well before the door. He had his hand on the wall as he did. He was spinning again inside, but not from having a light head for lack of food, food poisoning or a bad reaction to the meds. He started breathing hard, too. He was finding it more than difficult. Like a kid’s first solo on a bicycle. The moment when he’d either ride or he wouldn’t.

“Do I need to force you the rest of the way?” Darrin asked. Trace gave him a cold stare. “Let’s just get it over with. I need to go home and get my beauty sleep.”

The word ‘Bastard’ hung in his mouth, just waiting to be spit out at him. Some part of him held back, because if he became that callous he might just be left standing in the hall. “Whatever.” He finally said, “I don’t care, sleep on the couch.”

“You just told me it was a good idea for me to leave.”

“I mean it, it’s a good idea, but right now I don’t care.” Trace said with his voice going up again.

He felt Darrin give a push then. No more pussy footing, the big man let him hang back long enough and now he was pushing him towards it. The pain in his side was nothing. It was insignificant to the sudden rush of fear and

anxiety that washed over him and he was struggling somewhat against the strong arms.

The struggle came to another stand still when Trace began wincing in pain. The big man eased off completely. "Let's just get you to the couch for tonight."

"No." Trace said with determination, "You want to push and shove a guy like me around...maybe you have a reason." He had no conviction about it. He was just shouting again, angry, not even at Darrin then, but everything, absolutely everything in life and there was nothing good left, nothing made sense and he wanted it all to just ... "Jesus." Trace said as he began to crumple. He wanted it all just to be blown away. "Christ" he added as he realized there were forces stronger than one's will. A constant battle inside against a force of darkness, it came from the pain of loss, the feeling of injustice. From believing in right and wrong and no longer caring which was which.

Darrin let him sag some, but finally pulled him up, pulling him more firmly against his side. "We'll go together." He said, like it was something that would be hard for him, too.

Trace didn't respond with his voice, he just moved a little bit more forward, the door opening coming up fast now. The light was on. Trace could only assume that Darrin had gone in there to change.

He turned them both in to it. Trace got one solid look at the room, the bed, the shared space of two people in love who deserved it, who worked for it daily and she just wasn't there. It was the final point to settle in him, it was why he was avoiding the room, because once he stepped foot into it he'd be accepting it. He turned to head back out in reaction.

He ended up turning in towards Darrin, bumping him, like a blind man in the dark. His right hand came up in reaction, his left still holding on. He looked for a moment like he was going to thump him, which wouldn't help him any at all. Darrin was on his left side to keep his right side

from doing the work of holding him up favoring his right arm. The arm came down and so did his head. It landed on the other man's shoulder and what he'd been fearing would happen if he'd allowed Louisa anywhere near him, did. He began to grieve.

He wouldn't need a councilor after all, because he'd been broken somehow. All he needed was someone to match his stubborn streak and know when to say no and when to push. He was all over him now, sobbing with the ferocity of a tormented man.

The big man's arms came around him slowly, lightly at first. His left still over Darrin's shoulder Trace grabbed on with his right, going up under his arm and pulling on him while he drove his face into his shoulder. Darrin's arms tightened around him, holding him up and still while Trace let loose his emotion.

He lost track of time while he gave into it. Sooner or later he'd have to pull away from it, be manly again, not this whimpering sack of a human being. Failing to control the emotions right away he settled for pulling away, or pushing, because those big arms didn't want to move when he tried, because he hadn't stopped crying yet. Trace got his hands on Darrin's shoulders and pushed himself free.

He was standing alone then. The other man still near, but no longer touching. Trace managed to turn around on his own, going turtle slow. He was not wining the battle with his emotion though, it only spurred him on to gain control of the physical of himself, left foot forward and then his right and he'd taken three steps alone.

He stopped there. "Help me." He said weakly with the pain coming right through his voice. Darrin came up beside him and held him up while he finished getting to the edge of the bed, the left side, his side of it. Sitting on the night stand on his side was a picture of her. Darrin sat him down as he looked at it. Once settled with the other man sitting beside

him, arm still behind his back Trace leaned forward and grabbed the picture.

He looked at it for a while, eyes drying finally. His rational mind went into a disagreement with his heart. His heart told him she deserved Heaven, while his rational mind said that it wasn't likely to be there, it wasn't real, and it wouldn't be until he saw it with his own eyes.

He sighed heavily then. He turned to the night stand and opened the drawer. He stuck the picture in it easily, and then closed the drawer behind it. He then stopped trying to stay sat up, leaning back and Darrin's arm slowly retreated letting him fall over onto his back. "She's really gone." He said.

"Yes."

Trace looked at him. He was getting back to himself. His eyes would dry, so would his running nose, then he'd wake up on a day when he'd be past it. He'd deal with it. He'd start doing what needed to be done, like making arrangements for her body.

"Why don't you get settled and I can leave."

"I don't want you to leave." Trace said with more emphasis with his emotions, "I don't want to be alone."

"Ok, I'll sleep on the couch." Darrin said, "But really, I do need to sleep, it's not really a joke, it's important, Trace, it could make a difference in someone's life."

"Sleep then." Trace said. Darrin started to get up. "Just don't leave me in this room alone." The fireman looked back at him. He sighed some himself and then looked over at the other side of the bed. Trace's head was on it. It was the sign in his eye he saw then, of just how tired Darrin was, he'd seen it before.

He finally walked around the bed, sitting down on the other side he pulled off his shoes. He then turned to where Trace's head was somewhat in the way of his wide body laying down. He lightly lifted Trace's head, swung his legs up and lay down, letting his head rest against his side.

Trace didn't move. He supposed he could finish righting himself on the bed if he wanted to. He just didn't want to move. His could just feel Darrin drawing breath with his side rising and falling against the back of his head.

He pulled himself onto the bed more. Then when he laid his head back down it was even more on top of the other man. Trace was staring forward, the wall and the ceiling depending on whether or not he was breathing in or out. He couldn't imagine he was bothered or he wouldn't have put his head there to begin with. Trace was struggling still and while that was going on he realized from the man's breathing he'd fallen asleep.

Trace finally rolled his head to look at him. He had his right hand up on his front out of Trace's way while his left was wrapped up and over his head. His head turned into his own arm and he was out cold.

Trace closed his eyes, but he didn't think sleep would be coming soon. He was however able to drown out his thoughts by being lulled by the other man's breathing, moving his head up and down as if on a wave, like floating on a raft on the lake.

When awoke he'd been moved, or he'd moved himself. He didn't always wake to move around. He was all the way on the bed though, head on the pillow feet on the end of the bed. The lights were off now, too. He looked at the alarm clock, probably still set to go off at 7:30. It was on low volume, so it hadn't bothered him when he'd slept on the couch. It was only 4:30 just then. He reached over and clicked the light on.

Then he pushed himself up, with just a bit more ease than he'd been able to move since he'd left the hospital. The pain killers they gave you in house were way better than what came out of the bottle from the drug store.

He looked over at Darrin. Dead asleep, but he now had his shirt off. It was still in his right hand which was

hanging over the edge of the bed as he slept facing away, showing Trace his back as it came out of his pants with them slightly away from the way he was laying, exposing just the band of the boxers.

Trace turned away, sat up all the way and put his feet on the floor. With both hands on the sides of the bed he still felt okay, normal even. He'd imagined that the pill he'd taken the night before had expired.

Then he stood up, easy as pie even, just like he'd done millions of times before. He pushed himself off the bed and was standing on his own two feet. It still was not painful to him. Maybe he just wasn't fully awake then, because he thought it should hurt.

Not really thinking about what he was doing all the way around, he took a step forward. He'd made three the night before, but just the one step quickly following getting to his feet caused another twinge, a small little unhappy muscle cramping which threw him off balance in reaction to it.

He crashed down on the bed, almost sliding completely off. The activity startled Darrin awake. "You ok?" he asked. Trace slowly looked at him. The conscious mind was there now, because he couldn't ever remember sleeping in a bed with a man before, not his own bed, not as an adult.

"I stood up." He replied, like it was amazing.

"Then fell back down." Darrin finished. He moved his shirt to the bed and got up, coming around to get at him. He lifted him to his feet. He was holding him again. "In pain?"

"No, just a twinge, like a cramp, but shorter lasting and more intense."

"I think that's a good sign, the muscles are patching up, but they still need be stretched back into place." He explained. Trace felt him breathing behind him just then. Sort of like his head on his side. Had he not been so focused on himself before he might have felt it then. Then he felt his

forehead touch the back of his head, resting there for a moment. "Too early."

"Yea, don't know where I was going." Trace said. He took a deep breath wondering if the guy was even aware of what he was doing or if he cared.

"Bathroom?" he asked, his head coming away.

"Not yet."

"Back to bed?"

"Yea." Trace replied as it got caught in his throat. For some weird reason he was totally focused in on the other man's shirt splayed out over the bed. Darrin's hands came back to his sides. He then just guided him as Trace turned around. They stopped when he was turned. The big man was glancing intensely into his eyes for a moment.

"I think I'll sleep on the couch now." He said as he guided Trace back onto the bed. "Maybe you can get undressed now and sleep in."

"No." Trace said, "I don't want to be in here all morning."

"Okay, I'll help you out of here before I leave."

"Alright." Trace agreed. He then watched Darrin as he went back around the bed just far enough to grab at his shirt. He then left the room, closing the door behind him as he went.

He didn't bother with getting undressed, that would mean in only a few hours he'd be getting his clothes on again. That might indicate the need for a shower more. He realized he'd already been through it once, but he wasn't as clued in then. It would make him more uncomfortable for knowing.

He settled with getting just his shirt off. Grabbing at the neck of it and pulling until it came over his head without having to get his arms all the way back. Not his normal move, but he was thinking of a new one. He was learning. He then turned out the light and just fell back down, moving his legs back up and closing his eyes.

It was light out when he woke again. He took in a deep breath and looked around the room until he spotted the clock. Six fifteen. Had Darrin left already? He didn't have a clue. He didn't know his office schedule, but what if he had gotten called away for his other duties? He might not have bothered with Trace depending on the urgency. Trace would live, but who knew what the other people would need from him?

He sat up easily again. He looked down at his side and pulled the bandage away to get a look under it. After that inspection he taped it back against his skin. It would need to come clean in the shower. Then he'd just have to be careful not to rub against it with his shirt to much.

He moved to the side then pushed himself to his feet. Part of the mystery was solved versus climbing off the couch, both his bed and the one at the hospital were higher up, less distance for him to go, once stood he might last there for a while. He slowly lifted his arms up and out to the sides, seeing how far he could raise them straight out before his side complained. They almost went up past the height of his shoulder when the twinge came. He was prepared for it then. He dropped his arms back down and didn't lose his balance.

Maybe he could manage the shower alone? He sighed again because his rational mind won out, by asking him what if he fell? Being in the bathroom alone, even with the other man just outside, he wouldn't be able to catch him.

Trace turned to head towards the door. Then he took a few timid steps. He was inching his way across the floor when the door suddenly opened, no knock.

"You're up." Darrin said sounding excited.

"Dinky little steps." Trace complained, "Like freaking Morticia." The other man laughed.

"No hurry?"

"No you?"

"I do like to get out as early as possible." He said, "But I'm not that far from the highway."

“How do they reach you?” Trace asked while he continued forward, slowly. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a beeper. He displayed it. Trace was thinking they stopped making those things.

“Automated even.” He explained, “They push a single button and we all get beeped and call in for directions on our way out.”

“In your car.” Trace decided.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this will take me forever and I think I’d rather just get to the can and be done.”

Darrin finally approached, giving him his side and letting Trace decide how much support he wanted. He wrapped his arm around his shoulder again.

Darrin got him into the bathroom. “I think I can do this alone.” Trace decided.

“Sure.” Darrin said. As he pulled away Trace could feel his hand coming along his bare back. As soon as he was out of the room, door left cracked, Trace shook his head. He was getting more and more obvious. Sooner over later he’d have to say something. He couldn’t be that unaware of what he was doing.

While he stood there doing his business someone else came across his mind. The guy Louisa never let up about. He’d done something. Something she saw and it set her off on him about him forever after. What was it she had seen? A touch not quite right? That’s right, Trace remembered, he put the initial conflict idea out of his head telling himself she was just being crazy like always. Because the guy, Frank, had come up to Trace and done something similar. He’d taken it as a bud type contact, with his hand on the back of his neck, sticking there while he stood at his side saying something about something.

Then he remembered how she was describing it. He’d told her she was wrong and to stop worrying so damn much about him, because she said that Frank was caressing him.

What the hell? It was all in the wording and he failed to be uncomfortable about it for liking the guy from the get go and welcoming him.

She'd wore him down, little by little, one remark here and one there and the no peace between him and her. Then she dragged Heather into it. Once there was a conflict between him and the two of them about anything, he backed off, two against one then. Heather was on the fence, but was telling him to just listen. "*Hear* her" she said. He hadn't. And if he spent the whole day thinking about him he'd never have a memory to where he done something to Trace he didn't like, except...

"You done?" Darrin finally called through the open door. He'd been done and he was just standing there thinking. He'd even closed up his pants for thinking about it too much.

"Yea." Trace called back. He turned slowly and began to inch his way to the sink as the fireman came in. He made it all the way and got the water running.

"Need to scoot." Darrin said.

"Okay, office." Trace said.

"Drink?"

"Water."

"Ok." Darrin said. He then rushed back out confusing Trace. He thought he'd be moving him just then. He went back to washing his hands and face. He was looking at himself in the mirror when the other man came up behind him, almost a half a head higher than himself, standing directly behind him it sectioned off his eyes.

He wiped up on the towel.

When Darrin got him to the office, he'd put everything in there. The bucket he'd totally forgotten about, now cleaned out, just incase. Water, pills, the phone and a bag full of snack food. "You should be all set." He said, "I'll be back for lunch, get you showered, but you should be okay if I don't make it till later."

“Fine.” Trace said.

There wasn't even a goodbye again. Trace was just looking at the computer screen coming on when he realized he was gone.

The day was spent scoring websites. Darrin failed to show for lunch and Trace ate the snack food. He also made use of the bucket. He might have ventured all the way to the bathroom taking his time, but he just wasn't willing to risk getting up against a chair on wheels, it wouldn't be as simple as the bed was.

He'd rather be stuck in the chair than laid out on the floor. He was busy this way, trailing site after site and closing out one bad webpage after another. He ended up on 'The Paranoid Man's Delusions.' site. It didn't spam him. He was looking at the categories of the forum. 'Bad Gov – Weapons – Unsolved – Terrorists – Aliens – Men In Black.'

“Aliens.” Trace laughed. The unsolved board was showing the name of his office building as the last post though. It was enough to gather his interest and he clicked the link. A sign in screen came on and he took a breath. 'Guests are not allowed on these boards, don't be a hosier and just login. Click here to get a login.'

'Canada?' He wondered. The only thing he could think of for the hosier term was the Mackenzie brothers and their great white north. He clicked the sign up. Easy enough, type an e-mail, username and password. He filled it in. As he was typing out his name he got as far as the C and finished with 'Tracker' Heather had told him he lacked imagination when creating a screen name, not that he did that often. And he used the same password every time which she said he needed to change, use variations at least. '1234fool' he typed. It required no thought to remember, because only a fool would type in the first four counting numbers as a password.

It logged him in and the page filled with thread after thread about the Marcease Building. “Jesus.” He complained.

‘Blasted by a rocket? Has anyone seen the vid?’ one read.

He clicked it and it came up. The first reply was forwarded by ‘Ha ha ha.’ It went on to describe that it was fake. Four more posts with the same tone and then there was one that said he’d seen it.

Trace hit reply. He typed in that he’d seen it, too and knew for a fact it wasn’t fake, he *knew* it. He had no proof though. He tried to have proof. If he’d been quicker, if he’d been Heather, if he’d known someone would hack his computer and remove it right afterwards, he’d have burned it to a CD.

He brushed down several other threads and found one of the same tone, had anyone else seen it, had anyone else been *hacked by a black screen with blood* after seeing it?

He replied to that. Yes, he had. Then he asked if they had heard someone talking through the speakers. He hit post. He then went on to read some more, loads of weird theories as to who and why someone would axe that particular building. One poster claimed it housed a secret laboratory that did experiments on humans and aliens. Trace shook his head back and fourth and laughed. He then hit reply. ‘I don’t think so’, he typed. ‘I’d have noticed that I think, especially after being in the basement a few times, back when I was still smoking behind my wife’s back.’ He posted that.

When the page reloaded he saw a small demon animated on the left side of the page spitting fire that then spelled out ‘You have a new message!’ He clicked on the linkable animation and another window of private messages appeared. He had three already, from three other posters. That fast?

Jiffer Sniffer was the first one and he opened it. ‘Dude, shut up, your going to get scammed.’

Trace hit reply, ‘Why?’

He then opened the next one from Kill Bill Vol. 8. Trace shook his head at the name. It only got more ridiculous the names they came up with. 'I heard a voice, too. I swear man, it was Carol Ann, "Mommmmmmmmiiiiieeee"'

Trace hit delete. He actually realized he was smiling, because it was kind of funny. Next one was from Dog Seeker. 'What did the voice sound like?' he asked.

Trace left that one open and went back to the thread. There was a reply there, too. Not the private messages he was getting, when he got a new window up, back on the main board page the demon was breathing fire again. He ignored that and went to the thread.

One reply was some serious laughter, ROFLMOA, etc. Then the next said, 'I didn't hear a voice, but I did hear something, like some sound was coming through my speakers. I leaned close, but couldn't make anything out.'

Trace hit reply again. 'It was a guy's voice, twenties maybe, we had a two way conversation.' He typed out and hit post. When the page came up he hit the demon again and got three more messages.

He opened Jiffer Sniffer's reply. 'They are watching Man, don't turn around. They know who you are they are going to get you. They don't just get in your computer, they get in your house, they are invisible. They can shimmer in and out of the physical world, man. Be careful.'

Trace shook his head again and went to the next message from Shifty Fat. 'Dude didn't speak, but he coughed! I said hello, but he maybe couldn't hear me because my microphone is broken. I should get that fixed.' Underneath were four separate hyperlinks. Three of them were selling, the fourth wasn't.

Trace opened the fourth one up in a new window and minimized it going back to the last message from Dog Seeker again, not waiting for a reply in reaction to the post he put up about the voice. Trace saw a single link in the message. He clicked it.

“How many times do I have to tell you, not all hyperlinks are safe.” Heather was saying, “They bring up pages that can give the computer viruses, don’t just go anywhere clicking any link. I do not want my computer barfing all over me.”

“Oh well.” Trace said. The link popped up a player, a small one, not the fancy do it all master media player, but just a little one, an older one, hidden in the bowls of the system, called up with the right command. It began playing.

“Did his voice sound like this?” it played then ended and disappeared. Trace leaned back. It did, he decided. He then leaned forward and typed a reply, ‘Yes.’

He went back to the PM list and opened the next one from Dog Seeker, ignoring the other ones piling up in reaction to him claiming to be in the building’s basement. ‘Don’t say much more. Really, it’s best you leave that alone.’

Trace minimized that and looked at the window he’d opened from Shifty Fat’s post. It showed a full image of the Marcease Building, completely whole. He then scrolled down to see a snap shot of the fire ball. There was a single caption underneath it. ‘Massive Fire Ball.’

Trace closed the window. He didn’t need to see that. He went back to the forum page and saw a reply to his post about his claim of being in the basement.

They kept posting asking if he worked there? Was he maintenance? Was he in the building when it blew up?

He stopped there, not sure how much he wanted to say then. To what? A bunch of people who loved conspiracies? And he was a direct link to part of one, he was someone who’d been inside the building, been in the basement.

He hit reply. ‘I worked in the building, not maintenance, 8th floor. I was not inside when it collapsed...but my wife was.’

He hit post and the messages came back up. The demon was blowing an even larger flame now and out past

the ‘you have a new message!’ was the number 10. “Jesus.” Trace complained. They were sucking it all up.

He opened the inbox and saw three more from Dog Seeker. He opened the first one. ‘Last chance, Trace. You need to slow down here, read more, post less. Not everyone here is on *our* side.’

‘Ok.’ He replied. The other two from him were just as concerned, but after he went through them he got another one from him. He opened it.

‘Good, you’re welcomed here by some of us, but at least 80 percent here are wanna bes, don’t be slumming.’

‘Fine.’ Trace replied. He leaned back. He finished up the water and then finally looked at the clock. Four PM.

How come so many people were just on their computers waiting to post replies just then? The answer came in slowly, because the kids were home from school. Hence the cool names and Dog Seeker’s reference to the wanna bes.

He clicked the first thread he’d talked on claiming he knew for a fact that the video wasn’t fake. They were asking him if he knew the girl or the camera man. How in the heck did he know for sure? His hand hovered over the keyboard and the mouse. All he had to do was click reply and tell them why he felt so sure, but what would it do?

He clicked reply, ignoring the warning from the hacker, who was obviously the same person he’d spoken with. What did he really care about computer nerds being paranoid anyway? He wanted answers. He wanted others to speak up. They were either laughing at him or warning him off. That was because he was new. That was because he was posting like he knew everything.

‘I saw the video clip.’ He typed, ‘I watched it with horror, because the woman the man calls out to the one he tells that is on candid camera. That woman was my wife.’ He clicked post.

The page reloaded and the PM demon burlled out a flame again, 18 new PMs. He clicked that again and watched them load up. Still from the same small group, another retort from Kill Bill Vol. 8 and Jiffer Sniffer, all caps this time, 'MAN ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND? THEY KNOW YOUR NAME MAN, THEY KNOW WHO SHE IS , THEY HAVE IDENTIFIED HER, HEATHER JOHNSON, IF YOUR REALLY HER HUSBAND, YOU DAMN FOOL, THEY ARE GOING TO BE COMING AFTER YOU!'

"Jesus." Trace complained, because there was some logic to what he was telling him. The trick was, don't be paranoid. And this particular poster was really out there. Trace finally shook it off. No one else mentioned her name. But the hacker already knew his.

He wasn't exactly invisible to the world. He took a breath and gleaned the rest of the PMs, no more from Dog Seeker. He decided he'd done his part and moved along.

He opened the last one from KBV8 again. 'You like the color orange Man? The color orange is rad. If you liked the color orange, would you like drive around in a car with that color?'

Trace tried not to react. He didn't like the tone of the poster, but the idea was deductive. If someone knew his name, they might find his address, they might see her car, and they might have seen the unique car from pictures of the parking lot.

Trace flipped back to the message from Shifty Fat and opened it again. He went down to the link and pulled up the picture again.

It was different now. It may have recognized he'd seen it and was now showing him a shot of downtown, where there was a fire raging, his downtown? They had to have local interest, or was it nation wide already? It was the web which was world wide he reminded himself.

He went back to PM Shifty Fat. 'Is that downtown of the same town as the Marcease Building?' he asked and hit send.

He reloaded and got three more messages, but not an immediate reply. He waited and reloaded again. He saw his reply and opened it. 'Yea man, downtown Bakersfield. The bank's been burning all afternoon.'

Trace popped up the image on the webpage. He looked at the quote under it, 'Bakersfield burning again?'

How did they get these images so fast? He could only guess. He could guess they were not all just a single freak sitting behind a computer working alone, they were networked and working together.

He brought up the home page of his local service. It brought up the local news channel which was affiliated with the server and site. He clicked on it and sure enough there was a spread of pictures from the fire in downtown west.

There were firemen everywhere. Well he didn't have to wonder where *his* fireman was anymore. He was busy getting smoked out again. He then clicked another link from the fire from the day before. This was a hotel that had burned down.

Trace sighed. He was just hyper aware of it now, between associating with a fireman and all he'd been through. There were fires all the time. He sent that window away, leaving it open and went back to the board.

He wondered how long he'd be stuck there if Darrin wasn't cut loose anytime soon. He looked back and thought maybe he could try to get the chair across the carpet. It couldn't be that hard. With that idea he looked back at the screen.

He opened another thread and watched as the page came up different. Now on the right side was a blue demon, facing the red message demon, hurling out a blue flame and it was typing out 'Level 2'

The threads were now clearly marked. The old ones were plain colored, gray or back ground, then mixed in with them were ones shaded blue. He also saw an option to show only the highest level. How high did the levels go? Why was he up to level 2?

He clicked on the red demon again. He saw another message from Dog Seeker. He opened it. 'At least post only to blue. It's not at all safer, but you keep announcing yourself and these freaks will be at your door if for nothing else, begging for your autograph. I removed all the post you've made so far.'

Trace flipped back to the threads and checked. Sure enough all the ones he'd made were gone. Was it any wonder why people got paranoid? They'd see messages and then they'd vanish? See a video file and then have it be removed from their computer if they had downloaded it?

Trace sighed. How had he gotten on the site to begin with? Then he remembered, he'd been searching for the video, just a glimpse of the file's name before he downloaded it and he'd typed it in the search site and it had pulled up the page.

He saw a post on level one, someone asking where all the threads went about the guy who knew about the video and claimed to work in the building. Trace clicked it and watched as even in each thread were post shaded blue, talking in between the level one posters about what they were posting about and they wouldn't be able to see it.

The level one posters were recapping his claims, retelling his story and others were saying it was a scam. Someone was messing with their heads. He saw how quickly it got dulled down.

He hit reply. In the window he saw two check boxes, one for level one and one for level 2. He realized if anyone had never been bumped up they might never know there was a second level to posting. He could reply to either or both.

“Hey.” Trace flew forward almost with his head to the keyboard and looked back. His heart was thudding in his chest. Maybe he had gotten just a bit paranoid then, because standing behind him close enough to breath on him was Darrin. How the hell could he walk up to him without a sound? And he was wearing his gear. Trace looked down at the boots and then back up at his face he was still wearing the hat, too. How could he not make a sound in that?

He smiled, catching Trace’s bewildered looked.

“Yea, decked out.” He said, “Wanted to make sure you weren’t on the floor before I got cleaned up.”

“I’m ok.” Trace said.

“Alright, I skipped the station house. I can go back there and get changed and showered. You’ll be okay while I do that?”

“Yea, can’t you change here?”

The other man paused. Trace had to recollect the whole of the events from the day before to figure out why he was reluctant to do that after making himself at home. “Up to you.” He finally said.

“Do you need to take the gear back?”

“No, the outer wear stays in my trunk.” He explained.

“You get the fire out?”

“Yea we did.”

“The whole bank burn down?”

“How do you know it was the bank?”

“On the internet, news page.” He explained.

“Ah, yea we got it out, no one hurt either. All the people got out on the alarm, it was a small fire at first, and then the whole building went ablaze, going to be a while before they figure out why.”

“And the Marcease Building?”

“Haven’t heard, they think the fire started there after the collapse. They think the windows shattered out because the building was already falling and the pressure of it coming down blew it outwards.”

“Really? Nothing like maybe... a bomb going off?”

“No, no ones said anything like that.” He claimed.

“Alright.”

“Okay going to get cleaned up and maybe order out something.” He said. He then left the room. Trace watched him go and had to keep asking himself, why was he still wearing the hat?

He didn’t figure it out. He looked back at the computer, but he wasn’t into it just then. He was caught between the idea that someone had identified his wife from the video. They knew who he was, they knew who she was, and they knew her car and his house. Trace reached over to the phone and dialed a number.

“Honest Ernest’s Auto.” A voice answered.

“Yea, hi. My name’s Trace Johnson, I started the paper work on an old red truck a while back. We talked about trading in an old Duster for it, orange in color.”

“Let me find you then.” He said. Trace listened to him grumbling as he did something, possibly getting on his computer there. “Yes, here we go. Mr. Johnson, you never gave a definite, we are still holding your deposit, but the red truck is gone.”

“You got anything else like it?”

“We don’t claim to have a hundred and one trucks for no reason.” He said and laughed.

“I’d like you to come pick up the Duster.” He said, “Then when I get a chance I’ll come in and pick up a truck. That be okay with you?”

“I think we can handle that, may I ask why you don’t just drive it here?”

“I was in an accident and I can’t drive yet. I want the car gone...it...it was my wife’s and she...she died.” He said.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So you can come wrecker it?”

“Sure?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Sure I can Mr. Johnson. I’ll send the kid up there. I’ll see you in here when your better.”

“Thanks.”

“Remember Ernest Say’s ‘honesty is the best way to sell them cars.’” He said. Then he hung up. Trace was still holding the phone when it rang. He looked at the caller ID. It was Louisa again.

He swore he was ready to deal with life, but he just couldn’t deal with her yet. No longer an issue about his grief, it would be an argument about the man coming and going from his house. He had to deal with that by himself, first. He didn’t need her compounding the issue.

The answering machine picked up and she didn’t leave a message. Trace just sat there, almost peaceful for the moment. He’d be stuck to the chair by then. Normally he got up and walked around when he worked in the office. It wasn’t comfortable sitting there the whole time, even for a few hours and he’d been in the seat all day.

He dozed until Darrin came in, fully dressed this time. He’d figured that part out. Trace wondered how much more he’d have to explain himself.

“You want to deal with food or a shower first?” he asked. Trace took in a breath. He could use a shower. He was just beginning to smell himself. It might have been worse for his *quest*. He wasn’t that hungry yet.

“Shower...but I think once up and in it I should be fine.”

“I’d love to agree with you.” Darrin said, “Unless you got something you can sit on in it, bars in it, then I’m not going to put you in at all just to leave you to slip and fall.”

“Jesus.”

“What’s the problem?”

“You.” Trace said and swiveled the chair away, pretending to look at the computer screen.

“I’ve made you uncomfortable about me.”

“Yes.” Trace said, regaining his voice he swiveled back to look at him. “I think...I think you should be...less affectionate.”

He got a cold stare for that. It was masking a bit of hurt. Never mind the suspicion, Trace was decided about it. He'd either get past it or he wouldn't. He couldn't even give over to the idea that if he hadn't been just a little affectionate, holding him for a few moments without being asked, then Trace wouldn't have felt like crying on his shoulder, he might have had his own guard up higher. Then where would he have been? On the floor hugging himself?

After that, well he didn't want to think about it to much. He just wanted to get past it. And the last thing he wanted to do just than was be standing naked in front of him. “I'm sorry.” He said, “I'm failing here. It's not anything your doing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just wanted to help out, but I'm not used to holding back. You look at me and probably think I should be some kind of brute, like you said a man-ox. That's not me. It's actually been difficult for me to hold back at all.

“When it comes to helping people in my work, I'm that person you met out on the highway. This, this is new to me. Trying to be stand offish while being in your home, helping you deal with things that I wouldn't normally help someone with. I stepped into it. I got into to it without thinking against it. I probably should have done that, but I didn't. It didn't take me long to just want to be me around you.

“That means I'd think of you as a friend, even with you just wanting me gone. I'm not unaware of that coming from you. That won't keep me from wanting to help you. I'd have...well it might have been something else for you if you had let your friend comfort you. But you didn't. I'm just not the kind of person to stand there and watch you go through that and not...reach out.

“I know it’s not about me, but I’m here, I’m a person too. I don’t know what you think you see, but watching what you’re going through...I...I have been through it myself.”

“Jesus.” Trace moaned and looked away.

“And really, I’ll try to keep off a bit, but as far as you in the shower, I shower with the guys at the station house all the time, it’s nothing coming or going.”

“So they know about you?”

“No.” he said. Trace spun back around and looked at the screen again. The fishes were swimming back and fourth filling the screen with color and variety.

“It might be different if they knew.”

“I don’t think it matters in that regard. There’s no point in creating conflict where there isn’t any.”

“Well there’s one here now.” Trace said. He turned back again, “I appreciate your help, Darrin. I really didn’t ask for it, but it’s the way it is. So thank you, but no thank you.”

“I wasn’t offering anything else.” He said. This time he just left. Trace realized he wasn’t helping himself in what he was doing. He could have ignored it still. But did he really want him hugging him again? It was just so casual, and not like his friend before, *caressing* him, at least not in his own mind.

“Jesus.” He complained.

He sat there for a while, until his rational mind asserted itself. He began shouting out the other man’s name. Darrin came back in.

“You think you could get me on my feet?”

“Yes, sorry. Two days of fighting fires and I’m just not with it, whatever the conflict...sorry.” He came forward and put his hands out, but stopped just shy of getting them under Trace’s arms. He was still not wearing a shirt then. He hadn’t given it a second thought himself until just then when the other man seemed indifferent.

Trace grabbed his arms and began pulling himself up. The hands finally got under his arms, but Trace was doing all

the work, using him like a walker even. A tool he could have been sent home with if he hadn't been such an ass to the damn doctor about his condition.

Darrin moved to his side, lightly holding his left arm. Trace began walking himself, slow steps at first, but then getting braver. "I shouldn't be here to many more days." Darrin said, "You're almost walking now."

Trace didn't reply, because each step was successively harder and more painful. He hadn't reached for the pain killers all day. He stopped halfway down the hall. "Okay that's all I have." He said. Darrin's hand came around his back, this time not rushing over his bare skin like before. Maybe he knew what his screw ups were? Trace got an arm over his shoulder and forcefully pulled himself up to almost hang off him.

One glance to the left and he saw the hint of a smile on the fireman's face. He chose to ignore it, because he didn't know where it was coming from and it wasn't really meant for him.

They made it to the bathroom and Trace was now standing on his own again. It wouldn't be that hard to just get his pants and briefs off. But then he'd be undressed where he didn't want to be. Which was more important, being clean or saving some more of his dignity?

He pulled off his clothes. He then slowly turned towards the shower and tried to reach in to turn it on. Two hands grabbed at his sides, not gripping him yet, but there if he suddenly fell forward. Trace got to the faucet without a stabbing or a pinch in his side. He got the water going. It wouldn't take long to get warm, the other man had only just been in there and the room was still a bit moist from it.

He could smell smoke again, too. "Ok." Trace said when the water felt right. Darrin stepped in closer, as he moved his knee just brushed the back of Trace's thigh. He realized he was thinking about it too much versus the other day when the man was carrying him like a child.

Darrin lifted all of his weight leaving Trace free to sling his legs in without to much effort. He was even stepping then. He then got stood up and the water was splashing him.

He rolled his head under the water trying not to look back at the fireman. He took a deep breath as he got in his first rinse off. He finally turned his head to see the other man's bland expression. He was trying not to be personal then, when he'd already done that. Trace closed his eyes for a moment. He put him out of his mind, it was easier than he thought it would be because in its absence he saw Heather, laughing while at the sink and Trace had been toweling off. She was laughing at him and not with him just then.

It wasn't so much him remembering her, he'd be doing that the rest of his life, it was the realization with a quick recall that it had been a whole week since she died. She'd been dead for a week and he still lived. The pain of it rushed through him causing him to make a face, because he wasn't about the crying. This pain was another level, another step along the way and it hurt so bad the water works were not going to cut it. He was suicidal then, he was angry. How could he still be alive?

He put his right hand on the side of the shower pressing against it while the pain of it racked him. "You okay?" Darrin asked.

"No." he replied shouting, "I'm not okay damn it." He slapped his hand along the shower wall, hitting the shampoo and it bounced off the shelf and slipped around in the tub. He then turned the water off. That was only serving to annoy him just then. He placed both hands against the wall.

"What do you want to do?" Darrin asked sounding confused.

"You're helping me." Trace said a mix of his anger and pain, "Help me."

The other man didn't do anything. His arm was still available for Trace to grab onto if he needed to. Full support

for what was needed and he was missing the point of his statement.

It wouldn't stop though. Trace was caught in some kind of trap about it, because he swore he'd cried it all out of him the night before. He'd used the man's shoulder when he did and when he looked at him again, he wanted just a bit more of that comfort. His anger doubled then, because the pain was not only pain, it was confusion and the idea that he was wet and naked against what he wanted just then went through him the wrong way. In a burst of anger he brought both hands off the side of the wall and slammed them against it, slipping immediately, not even feeling foolish for that, because it was irrational.

Darrin swung in grabbing him, keeping him from falling down completely and easily getting him back to his feet. Trace didn't say what he wanted then. He just reached for it, getting his arms around him and pulling on him, wanting to draw some of that visible strength towards himself. Had he lied about going through something like it?

The big arms tighten around him again, pulling him back. "You're shaking, are you cold?"

"No I'm not cold." He shouted, "I'm exposed."

Then pain was coming out that way, causing him to shake. The word trauma slipped through his brain, it was too much all at once. The comfort came in full then. Not holding back or standing off which Trace had requested and he'd agreed to. Now it was all just shoved to the side against what he was dealing with.

It was the hand on the back of his head that put an end to it. Fingers slipping through his wet hair as he leaned collapsed against him. Trace finally pulled away. He wasn't held against his will that time either. The hands quickly went back to guiding and giving support. Trace turned his head back looking at Darrin's eyes, hating him for all he was worth for standing there at all, for him being alone and needing him, because she wasn't there.

Darrin's cool exterior faltered and in effort to break the eye contact he looked down like anyone would, then he looked back up. Trace gave him an even more hateful look then. He turned back to the shower and turned the water back on and slamming it to cold. His head was racing again. *He really didn't need this.*

Trace kept his eyes closed while the cold water slowly took affect. He was still shaking, like crying without the tears or the noise. He was hoping that would stop, too. Maybe it would all stop eventually and he lost track of time until the water got warm again. When he opened his eyes he realized Darrin had turned the water temperature back up.

"Shampoo." Trace said, recovering some. Darrin reached down and grabbed it handing it to him. Trace finished that part of the task at hand and then worked himself with the hand soap. He rinsed off, feeling lighter somehow. How that worked he didn't know. He was no physiologist.

He turned the water off and turned fully towards Darrin.

"Can you get me out first?" he asked. Darrin got up under his arms and Trace actually took a step up onto the side off the tub. With all the work on his left leg he pulled himself over the edge, momentarily coming up past Darrin's head with his own.

He finally got out. Darrin pulled away completely and went to find a fresh towel. Trace could have told him where, but like most places there was a linen closet in the hall, he'd find it. When he came back his face was adjusted, no longer stern like he'd been. It wasn't working anyway.

He came towards him and wrapped the towel around Trace's back and pulled it around to give him the ends.

"You want me to get you some clean clothes or go back to your room and pick them out yourself?" he asked. Trace was judging his voice. It had gone back to the quality of the man who was calling him Sir.

“I’m sorry.”

“No don’t be.” He said, “I made a mistake, I’m sorry. I wasn’t implying anything when I did.”

“Just be yourself.” Trace said. It came out weakly and the other man seemed to register that fact. Maybe he realized Trace didn’t give in to anything easily. The proof was in him working against his injury shoveling debris when he should have been in the hospital already. That meant the apology meant more.

Darrin’s hand came towards him and grasped his shoulder, squeezing it for a moment. “None of it means anything right now.” He said, “You’re going through some shit, that’s all. I think you’ll come out the other end just fine. Don’t stay focused on the steps.”

Without saying one way or the other Darrin left while Trace finished with the towel, managing most of it himself, just not quite down to his ankles. When Darrin came back he put clothes on the counter by the sink and took the towel, going down on his knees he finished drying off Trace’s lower legs, coming up past his knees for a moment where he stopped waiting for Trace to take it.

Trace grabbed the towel with one hand and let it hang down his front side. “Clothes.” He said. ‘Yes, why get up when he was already down there?’ Trace thought. He reached for the briefs with his free hand and handed them over. Darrin brought them in front of him so he could just step into them, which he did. He then pushed them up past his knees, stopping at the same place he had with the towel. After a moment he spoke, “Pull them up.”

“I’d rather not.”

“What are you five?” Darrin asked looking at him. Trace took the insult and got just enough anger to toss the towel away. He then pulled the briefs the rest of the way. He wasn’t feeling as exposed then, but he wasn’t unaware of how he was being betrayed by his own body. “Pants?”

“Jesus.” Trace moaned. Him rushing the process, which might actually be taking too long, was only making him angrier. Trace flapped the trousers at him, hitting him with them. Darrin grabbed at them, ignoring the reactive behavior and held them out the same way. Trace stepped into them. Darrin came up with them pulling them up around his waist.

He paused there, hands still on the flaps while Trace wondered about the first go at the same procedure. How much was he getting from it? Trace grabbed the flaps and turned his head away until Darrin moved back. He then closed them in together. Groaning now he reached for the shirt and t-shirt. The big guy must have figured him out there, it was normal for him to wear a t-shirt under his shirt. He’d gotten a button up, not much in the way of leisure clothes in his closet. It was full of business like attire. Although Trace wouldn’t leave the house without one, he left the t-shirt to the side.

He got his left arm in the shirt. “Do it the other way.” Darrin said. He came forward and pulled it back off.

“What?”

“It’s the second arm you have to move, get your right in, pull it up to your shoulder than you should be able to get your left in without a problem.” He explained.

Trace tried it, without any effort he had half the shirt up on his shoulder. It wasn’t his normal procedure either, he was learning again, adapting. He then followed the shirt along his shoulder with his left hand getting it around his back and finally pulled it around enough until he got his left arm back and into it. He then pulled it closed and buttoned it up. “I need shoes and socks, too.”

“Going somewhere?”

“Out to the car.” He replied, “Need to get stuff out of it.”

“You don’t want to eat first.”

“You miss lunch?”

“No, I can wait.”

“Alright, car first, get it done.” He explained.

He sat in the chair in the living room while Darrin got his shoes on. They then went out to the car with a bag for trash and a box for anything else. He had Darrin get him in the driver’s seat with his feet sticking out. He wouldn’t have much mobility, but he could supervise. He found the car keys up under the seat. If Louisa had been the one to pick it up she’d have left them there. But that didn’t explain why the front door was unlocked or did it? Had she gone inside and forgot to lock herself back out. The car was locked, but he had his own set for it. Her keys had a key to the house, too.

He looked up and out and saw his next door neighbor shuffling over towards him. The older man looked suspiciously at the fireman and then focused in on Trace. “She’s finally letting you sell that thing?” asked.

“No, she’s not.” Trace replied.

“Looks like you’re cleaning it out to sell it.” He said.

“I am.” Trace replied, “But she would never let me sell it. She’s not here anymore.”

“Where is she?” the old man asked.

“Mr. Applegate, she was in the office building when it collapsed.”

“Oh.” He said making a face, “When I saw the car...I thought she was okay, came home. Although I don’t know what happened to your truck.”

“I was in the pile up, it’s totaled.” Trace explained.

“I’m sorry to hear about your loss, Trace.”

“She really liked you.” Trace said. The old man looked at him curiously.

“We did talk a bit. Her roses planted on your side of the fence but preferring to only grow on mine.”

“Yes, she thought they liked you too.” Trace explained. The old man wiped his face and nodded. “We’ll all miss her around here.”

“We will.” He agreed, “She only had nice things to say.” That only reminded Trace of the unkind things he had

said to the old man a few times. He was partial of hearing and cranked his TV to loud at times. Trace had no patience for the constant disturbance and finally went over and let him have it. The end results were the little hearing aids in the old man's ears which worked well. He no longer shouted at people for no reason himself. "You take it easy, Trace." He finally said and walked away.

"You too." Trace said to his back. He turned to look at Darrin, still riffling through stuff.

"She was a little bit of car litter bug." Darrin said.

"No." Trace explained, "That's my side of the car, she would never let me drive."

"Oh." He said and let loose a smile. Trace realized it was in good humor, but he couldn't accept it.

"I got a bad habit of stuffing things up under the seat." He explained.

"Okay I think we have everything." He said as he pulled out. He closed the door on that side and came around with the trash bag. Trace looked at the keys he was holding in his hands. He kept thinking about it. They were Heather's keys. How had Louisa gotten them to drive the car back to the house? He looked at them more closely. They were clean. If she'd had them on her during the collapsed why wouldn't they be grimy? Unlike most people she hung them off the side of her pocket book via a clip. She never wanted to have to be digging through her purse to find them. He looked at the keychain with the picture on it. It was a stupid duck, a yellow duck, like for a bathtub. She'd fallen in love with it at a novelty store and she'd had it ever since. Just another way to help identify your own set he decided. Who else would want the dang thing? "What?"

Trace looked up at the fireman. "I can't figure out how her car got home." He explained.

"I might be able to find out." He offered, "Ask around. The parking lot was sealed off the whole time. They have a

fence around it now. So they probably had a procedure for moving unclaimed cars.”

“That would be fine, except there’s something else. Who got the keys? And they used them to go into the house and left the door unlocked.” Trace said, “She had to have them with her, unless she dropped them near the car. That just doesn’t sound likely to me about her.”

Darrin knelt down in front of him. Trace locked his eyes as the big man rubbed across his face. “I think maybe they washed them. I think maybe the police handled it.”

“Yea, but take them to garage or impound or something, not deliver them home.” Trace said. The other man grabbed at his hand dangling the keys between them and slowly eased them out of his grip.

“Don’t spend too much time thinking about it. There’s always a rational explanation for this. They washed the keys after they were recovered, with as many people in the building having cars, they would prefer them to be picked up by relatives or the closest facsimile.”

“Alright.” Trace said, “It’ll be dealt with tomorrow.”

“Have you dealt with anything else?”

“You mean her funeral.” Trace said with an edge in his voice. Was he going to start nagging him as well as Louisa about it?

“There is that.”

“Yea, just trying to figure out how to do it. I want to have her sent home.” He explained.

“Where is that?”

“Germany.” He replied, “I want her to go home to her parents, they can deal with it then.”

“You want me to deal with that?”

“I don’t think you can.” He said, “I have to. I’m ready to even. It’s Louisa that’s going to cause a ruckus when I tell her I am not having a funeral here for her. To me there is no point. I’ve been to a funeral, it does nothing.”

“What about her other friends?”

“You mean besides Louisa?”

“Yea.”

“Co-workers mostly. Darrin I don’t even want to know who else is gone from that. I don’t want to be crossing over other families and their losses along side my own trying to get that in motion, trust me if they aren’t all dead, then they will be occupied enough.” He explained.

“Ok.” He said, “You want up?”

“Yes, let me see how far I can get on my own.” Trace said. He grabbed both sides of the door frame and began pulling himself up. He stumbled once and Darrin’s hand was close, but not yet grabbing him and Trace managed to get on his feet by himself.

If he had bars near the toilet like the hospital, he could handle that alone, too. It was an odd flash in his mind. He took a few steps away and closed the door. He then began walking slowly up the driveway. He got close, but then the cramping came at him and he keeled over as the muscles reacted. Darrin had him then. He might not have gone all the way down that time, but he was done walking alone. “Pizza, Chinese or something else?”

“Chinese.” He replied. Darrin got him back in the house and brought him to the couch. “Let me see if I can get down now.” Darrin loosened his grip. Trace grabbed the couch arm and tried to get himself down, he fell the last part, but he was sitting by then. “Okay.”

There was no conversation beyond Trace giving him the phone number to order their food. They both sat their waiting for the food watching the TV. Just before the bell rang Trace saw the fireman nodding off. The bell snapped him up though and he went to the door.

“Is mista Johnson no here?” the guy at the door asked.

“Yes.” Darrin replied, “He still lives here. I’m his friend.”

“I speak with him?” the guy asked. Darrin looked back.

“Let him in.” Trace said. Darrin stepped back and the oriental man came in nodding some. Then he approached the couch while Trace watched him. He seemed to waver some. Trace took a deep breath. The old man had only been the first of many perhaps.

“My sorry for you loss.” He said. Trace slowly inclined his head towards him, “Will miss Miz Johnson much.”

“She liked you too.” Trace said.

“House meal, you call all the time.” He explained handing the food towards Trace. Darrin came over and took it while the man looked up at him.

“He’s not walking so well.” Darrin explained.

“Glad you have friend.” He added.

“So am I.” Trace said. He couldn’t have said it to the man himself though, not even if he was pressed.

“Good night.” He said and shuffled back out the door. Darrin set the bag down and went and closed the door.

“I don’t have people like that.” Darrin said as he began unloading the contents of the bag.

“Neither do I.” Trace said. Darrin turned to look at him, questioning him, “It was her.”

“Oh.”

“Oh come on.” Trace said and found himself laughing, this caused the other man to look at him again, “Your opinion of me has to be ‘What a bastard’ by now.”

The big man smiled. “Yea, but I’m not against that.” He said. He handed Trace a box of food and a plastic spoon. Trace accepted it and looked at him until he turned away. After that it was the processing of eating, still the same thing, telling himself that was the whole of everything for the duration.

They were just starting to dig in when Darrin got up.

“Drink?”

“Beer.” He replied. The other man left to go in the kitchen and came back with bottled water for himself and he handed Trace a beer. Trace decided he’d won that argument.

It didn't matter that the other man didn't know he hadn't had any pain killers all day. Or what if he did? What if while wandering around out of his sight he went into the office and counted them. Trace shook his head, he was getting paranoid. He sucked down half the can after a single bite.

"You want a little food with that beer?"

"Maybe." Trace replied smiling and he finished off the box before finishing off the beer. He then leaned back.

"You seem to be doing ok." Darrin said, "I think I'm going home tonight. I can put you to bed, maybe you can read or something."

Trace looked at him. It was getting on in the evening, but it was still early. He wanted to go back to the computer actually. He tried to be accommodating though. He'd been through enough for one day. "Alright."

"Unless you think I should stay." He offered. Trace was groaning inside, because he should have just stuck with his decision. He took a deep breath and the annoyance came out in his voice, sharp and hard edged.

"I don't need you." He said. He didn't even check himself after he'd done it. He just looked off to the side waiting. The fireman got up and cleaned up the mess from the meal and put it in the trash bag they'd half filled from the car. He dragged that out of sight and came back with another beer. He handed it to Trace.

"Are you trying to say something?" he asked.

"Finish that and then I'll get you to bed." He said.

Trace shook his head opening the can. Truthfully he hardly ever drank more than one in a sitting. If it was some kind of plan to get him drunk it wouldn't work. He wouldn't have another. He wasn't a drunk. He just liked to have a beer with his meal. Heather had stressed over it in the beginning, but after seeing one was really his limit she bought beer along side everything else in the grocery store for him. It only confirmed to him that Darrin had the wrong idea about it.

He gulped it down, just to end the moment. Then he tossed the can at the fireplace.

Darrin helped him up and got him into the bedroom and sat down. "You really are kind of ornery." He said looking at him.

"How do you expect me to be?"

"I don't know." He said and laughed just a bit, "You're true to one form so far. At least you're not...well your not saying it out loud even if you want to."

"You think I'd do that?"

"If the situation wasn't requiring me to help you, in a heartbeat." Darrin replied and without any more word he left, leaving the door open.

Trace lay down and felt the beer come into his head just a little. After a while he curled up on to the bed and shut the light off, ready to sleep or not while the day's events rolled back through his mind like a tape playing at fast forward on a movie.

He woke up early. Well, he didn't have much choice about it. Darrin was in the room turning on the lights. Trace looked at him and then the clock. "Jesus."

"Need an early start." Darrin explained, "This might be my last day at this."

"Why?"

"Can you get up?"

Trace sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. He then stood up. He looked at the big man as he kind of smiled. Was he happy that Trace was better?

"Yea, today's the last. After you get dinner in you, you'll probably walk all the way back in here on your own. After that...well you'll just have to call your friend."

"And you think she's going to be able to lift me into the shower?" Trace asked.

“You’ll manage.” He said, “You’re okay there for today I think. Maybe one more tonight with assistance if you like, if not by tomorrow morning you’ll handle it yourself.”

“I can’t reach my feet.”

“You’ll figure that out.” He said.

“Fine, whatever.” Trace said. He started walking towards the door, getting more lift from his right then before and his side failed to pinch. He made it to the bathroom door alone, Darrin was at least three steps behind him. Was he just going to let him fall? Trace had to say yes to that question in his mind, unless he was just that fast. He didn’t want to be anywhere near him then. Maybe he’d gotten uncomfortable with Trace’s reaction versus his words.

He helped him the rest of the way and left Trace standing to handle getting up and down by himself. He was challenging him instead of babying him. Trace was undecided about the turn around, it started with the beer. That was him giving Trace back his own control about it, and then him not wanting him to stay the night was the next step.

He managed half the distance then flopped the rest of the way. It stung his ass, but he didn’t fall all the way off. Was this some kind of test? If he passed then he’d stick to it and not come back? And if he failed, well Trace might just have to call Louisa. The thought annoyed him.

The rest of the morning went the same. If he had crashed and burned at least he could call him for help. He had a hell of a time getting up off the can, but somehow he made it, pain and all. Those pain killers might fix that up.

After Darrin left, not hardly saying anything at all Trace realized he was all the way in the office and the kid would be coming to pick up the duster. He experimented with getting off the chair. The wheels moved just a bit, but his more natural reaction straightened him up and he was standing along side more pain. He managed the pain killers and just stood there for a while.

After he was sat back down he called and told the guy to tell the kid to give him plenty of time to get to the door. The guy agreed and Trace went back to his surfing. He didn't even look for the fireman during lunch. At least it was Friday. He'd be home for the weekend, recovering from his fires and helping out the bastard. Trace laughed at that thought.

He went back to the web page forum. It was still open, the computer never went off, it just went to sleep and when he woke it up everything went right back where it was. He spent some time there reading the theories, but he had yet to post again and he ignored all PMs. He would only answer one from Dog Seeker, but he wasn't there today he decided.

Eventually he reached for the phone and dialed it. "Hello?" Louisa said, her voice with an edge on it.

"Hi." He said calmly.

"What in God's name is wrong with you Trace?"

"Louisa, this has not been..."

"Sit on it, Potsy." She hollered at him. "I've had it with you. How can you do that? Shut me out, had it ever occurred to you I might need you?"

"Louisa."

"No, you want to be silent towards me, then listen. This is not just your loss. It's her families, that's you, me and her parents. Have you even called them yet?"

"I thought you did."

"I damn sure did." She hollered again, "I know your hurt, but I had to identify her body. Had you any idea how hard that was on me?"

"Louisa."

"No, don't you Louisa Louisa me. You are...you're a...damn you Trace."

"Louisa I need to know what funeral home she is at."

"That's it? That's all you called me for."

"Yes, that's the point of my call." His voice getting stern and firm, "Just give me the number."

“And then what?”

“Then I make arrangement to have her sent back to Germany.”

“Are you out of your mind? Trace you cannot just ignore the need for a funeral. We need to have that for her and ourselves.”

“No, I don’t. This is my decision. Her parents need to have a funeral for her, not me. That doesn’t work for me. I am sending her back home where she would want to go for not being with me in life anymore. She never got over being home sick.”

“Then we’ll all go.”

“No.”

“Trace I swear, I am two steps away from coming over there and kicking your ass.”

“Louisa.” He said getting stern again, “Calm down.”

“You calm down. You started this you... you...Ohhhhhh.” she groaned, “I have put up with you all these years, do you not know why?”

“Yes.” He answered, but she went right on as if he’d said no.

“It’s because I love you. You have no idea what it’s like to be so close to two people and love them for who they are without thoughts against how you treat me. I knew you first, Trace. Who was there for everything for you when your friend died? Who?”

“Jesus.”

“That’s right you sorry... Arrrg.” She started huffing then, no longer able to form words against her anger.

“The number please.”

“You need to talk to me first. Tell me what is going on with you. You need tell me who that man is.”

“Louisa, he’ll be gone by tomorrow, you can stop worrying about me. He was part of my physical therapy.”

“Oh is that so? Do therapist always stay the night?”

“Around the clock care.” He said.

“What are you not telling me?”

“It’s not your concern, Louisa, just give me the number.” He hollered back. She spat out the number and hung up.

Trace opened a clean page on the computer and typed it before he forgot it. Once that was done he was trying to be calm against her ranting. He’d wanted to ask her about the car, but it didn’t slip in so he went without that information for the time being.

The door bell roused him. It took a long time for him to get to it, keys in hand. Eventually he opened the door and the kid, a 19 year old, was still there. “Mr. Johnson?”

“Yes.” Trace replied. He held out the keys, “All yours, the title is signed and in the glove compartment.”

“Ok.” He said. He began to hook up the car to the wrecker. Trace leaned in the doorway resting from the long haul across the house and watched the kid hooking the car up. Eventually he pulled out and Trace’s eyes trailed after it, just another part of her gone now, one more sign that she wasn’t in his life. If Louisa knew how he was dealing with it she might have more to say about it.

He rolled back inside and closed the door. He only had enough energy to get to the couch. At least he’d managed all that. It might not be great for a few more days, but was walking and getting up on his own. He’d have to think more about how to get clean, standing in the shower might be a trick.

He was still sitting on the couch when Darrin blew through the front door. No volunteering then, because he looked fresh and clean in the same clothes he’d been in when he saw him last. He came in with a bag from a Deli. He set that on the coffee table. “I see your getting around.”

“Barely.” Trace said.

“Well here’s your dinner, no struggle with that tonight. And here are your keys.” He said setting them down beside the food. He took one more long look at Trace who

wasn't saying anything and then turned. He headed straight for the door. Trace opened his mouth to say something, not really knowing what yet, but in the next moment the fireman was gone, door closed behind him. After he was gone Trace realized he hadn't given him any money. He rubbed his face as the week flash forwarded through his mind again.

In the end, he decided, he'd just been an asshole to the fireman. He shook his head against the idea, waiting a bit longer before eating his dinner. He'd managed somehow, Darrin had to be right about that.