

My Boyfriend Has a Scar

By M. Raiya

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as part of a charitable donation for the It Gets Better Project.  
It is now available on my website as a free read.  
Enjoy!

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Rain sheeted so hard down my windshield, despite the frantically flipping wipers, that I almost didn't see the figure lying in the shelter of the overpass. If he'd gone way up under the girders that supported the bridge above us, I'd have never noticed him. As it was, my headlights just barely picked up his dark form. Or perhaps what made him visible was the flash of lightning that chose that moment to split the heavens, which were ripped farther apart an instant later by the loudest crash of thunder I'd ever heard.

I wasn't bold enough to pick up strangers normally, but this storm was of a caliber I'd never experienced before. It just felt humanly wrong to drive on and leave someone exposed to its terrible fury. Besides, in the brief glimpse I'd gotten of the guy, he wasn't looking too good. He'd been sprawled out just barely under cover, as though he'd dragged himself to the edge of shelter and collapsed, not caring that the windblown rain drenched him.

Even though it was summer in Vermont, the temperature had plummeted to the low fifties in the last half hour. I stopped and put my car in reverse just as the rain abruptly turned to hail, bouncing on the pavement in the beams of my headlights. The staccato slamming of it against the car suddenly stopped as I backed under the shelter of the overpass. Keeping my eyes in my rearview mirror, I pulled over to the edge of the road and stopped, hitting my emergency flashers, though I knew that traffic here, only a few miles from my destination -- home -- was pretty rare in the middle of the night.

Quickly, I powered down the passenger window and leaned over, trying to see out. Another flash of lightning obliged, showing me the man sitting up and turning toward me. Then everything went dark again.

"Get in!" I shouted. Another crash of thunder drowned out any answer.

A moment later, the door opened, turning on the overhead light. In its glow, I saw that the man was tall, had long, dark hair, and wore jeans and a black sweatshirt. His clothes were ripped and muddy, as though he'd been running through the woods when the storm hit. A blast of wind chose that moment to buffet the car so hard it made a swaying, sideways, bounding movement. I heard some mail I'd tossed onto the back seat blow over into the far back area.

The man dropped heavily into the seat beside me and fought with the wind to close the door. As he got it shut, I powered up the window, toning down the sounds of wind and hail. The guy's clothes and his long, loose hair dripped everywhere.

"I am so sorry," he said, apparently realizing he was soaking the seat, the floor, and the inside of the door. Even distressed, his voice was low and pleasant. His long hair looked most interesting.

"Oh, it's okay," I said, turning up the heat all the way. He must be freezing. Get a grip, I told myself. I hadn't felt -- intrigued -- like this since... for a long time.

I was starting to ask him what the heck he was doing out here on a night like this when he raised his head. My words froze.

A scar gouged across the right side of his face. It was red and puckered, pulling at the corners of his eye and mouth. It seemed healed over, as though it had been done a while ago -- definitely a scar, not a wound. The first image that came to my mind was of him going face first through a car windshield.

He watched me. I flushed. He probably got this reaction all the time, but that still didn't make it okay.

"Sorry," I said quickly, horribly embarrassed, and then plowed on. "It's a bad night to be out. Are you okay? Did your car break down? Where can I take you?" Too many questions, I told myself, face flaming even more.

He gave a little smile. That was all the scar allowed him to do. "It's okay. Some people would just toss me back out of the car, especially after dark."

Was he serious? Yeah, the scar made him look dangerous, but, God!

I guess I shuddered, or something. His eyes flinched. I flushed even more, realizing that he thought I was reacting to him, not to how he'd described people treating him. I was going deeper every second here.

The overhead light chose that moment to go off, leaving us in the dim green light from the dashboard. That was actually not a bad thing, as far as I was concerned. Another blast of wind rocked the car and made me take a firmer grip on the wheel despite the fact we were in park.

Take a deep breath. Start over. "So, where are you heading?" I asked. Vermont's largest city, Burlington, was an hour or so behind us -- longer in the storm -- but there was a scattering of smaller towns lining the river valley. I knew everybody around here and I'd never seen him before, obviously, but he might be a friend or distant relative of somebody, coming for a visit. Or maybe he was just a hitchhiker passing through. Odd, though, that he wasn't carrying a pack, or anything.

He cleared his throat and said very softly, "You don't recognize me, do you, Kyle?"

I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. It had never occurred to me that I might have known him before the scar. God, I was such an idiot! I reached to turn on the overhead light again, wracking my brain to remember who I'd lost touch with, if I'd heard about anybody going away and having been in an accident. I came up blank. I thought he was around my age, late twenties, maybe somebody I'd known during my four years of college in Burlington?

Fumbling, I found the switch and turned on the dome light. This time, I tried to see beyond the disfigurement, wishing he'd just fill me in. But he said nothing. I searched his deep blue eyes, and...

Then I got a whiff of his smell, like wild herbs mixed with moonlight and rainwater. It had always clung to him, and hadn't come out of any bottle.

I sank into my seat. "Gage," I whispered, or cried, or moaned -- I have no idea which.

"Hi, Kyle," he said. Then he turned and faced straight ahead, looking hard out the windshield into the storm. The only sound was hail slamming onto pavement.

Another bolt of lightning seared the night. For an instant, the fields and wind-tossed trees appeared in a pinkish glow, and then all went black again beyond the reach of my headlights. The thunder was instantaneous and mind-numbingly loud. The hail turned back to rain as abruptly as it had changed before.

I was beyond words. But Gage -- *Gage!* -- cleared his throat. "Um, if you could just drop me off at my folk's farm, that would be great."

Shit. I found my voice. "Oh, Gage, they -- they don't -- they sold and moved years ago."

He closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Oh. Fuck."

"I -- how did you get here?" I gestured to the side of the road.

Gage shrugged, not looking at me. "Not really sure, actually. I have seizures now. After I have one, I don't remember a lot about right before. Think I was probably walking out from Burlington to the farm. I took a bus as far as the city this afternoon."

Another bolt of lightning and crash of thunder split the darkness, but the storm out there was nothing compared to the one inside me. Gage sat still, gazing at the downpour in the light from my headlights.

If I'd come home after ten years and found that my parents had sold the farm and moved without telling me, I'd... well, freak would be a mild description. Gage acted like he didn't care. On the other hand, after the way Gage had left, I guessed it wasn't too surprising that they hadn't stayed in touch. After all, we hadn't, either.

"Right," he finally said heavily. In that one word was a whole wealth of meaning. Then he started to open the door to get out.

"Whoa, hang on!" I cried.

Gage hesitated. It was so hard to see past the scar, to see what he was thinking.

But I'd been good at it once, and it was coming back. "Gage, you aren't going to hitch to Burlington tonight in this storm. Come stay with me."

He glanced at me then, finally. "Kyle -- do you mind?" he asked softly. I wondered how I had not recognized that voice at once.

"It's okay," I said. "It'll be fine." Without giving him the chance to disagree, I put my car back in gear and drove into the storm again.

And I just hoped that it really would be fine, this time.

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Getting home was more difficult than I'd anticipated.

The storm didn't encourage conversation. I had to focus on the road to avoid fallen branches and puddles that were deep enough to eat a tire. The rain pounded down. Still, the lightning had moved farther away and the wind had dropped. As we rounded the last bend, I saw the light on my front porch, up on the hill.

What would we say to each other when we got inside? I had changed, and clearly, he had, too. Was it too late to say what should have been said ten years ago? And what should those words have been? I hadn't known then, and I certainly didn't know now. I'd been hurt and furious -- he'd left, not me. But I'd had the chance to go with him. I hadn't. Did that make him worse than me? I didn't know.

Almost there, I thought, starting down into a dip where a normally placid brook went under the road in a round, metal culvert. But tonight, my headlights showed a raging torrent filling the culvert with angry, swift-flowing, muddy water. The road, which had been built up directly over the culvert, was still intact there, but about fifteen feet farther along, water waiting to go through the culvert had backed up and formed a pond. This pond was now spilling over the road beyond the culvert, creating a twenty-foot washout from water hurrying to rejoin the main brook downstream.

"Oh, shit," I said, hitting the brakes. The brook did this every couple years or so, but I hadn't thought it had rained that hard tonight. I actually hadn't been home for three weeks -- we must have been having a wet spell to saturate the ground.

Beside me, Gage laughed. "Look at that. I think the brook's making a statement about me coming home."

"Don't be stupid," I said, inwardly cursing the brook for choosing tonight to flood. "This isn't the first time we've had to wade." I backed up to the top of the hill and pulled over, getting my car as far off the road as I could.

"I don't know. It looks pretty high," Gage said. "Listen, why don't you drive to the Shelby's, or somewhere? I'll sleep in the backseat and head out at first light, if you don't mind."

"Are you kidding me?" I asked.

"I really don't want people to see me." Gage shifted uncomfortably. "But there's no reason you can't have a dry bed."

"Look, my house is right there." I pointed at the light. "We've done this a hundred times when we were kids. Come on."

"You've got good clothes on," he said, gesturing to my dress shoes and dark suit.

Clothes were the last thing on my mind. I took my cell phone out of the center console and put it in my jacket pocket, found a small flashlight in the glove compartment, then gave a nod. "Let's go."

Gage hesitated a moment more, then sighed. "All right," he said. Together, we got out into the storm.

After the initial blast, it wasn't so bad. The hill blocked the wind as we walked down into the dip. My bright little flashlight brought out the puddles and small stones of the gravel road in sharp relief. Ahead, the roar of the water grew louder. I could smell that unique, rich, muddy smell that flood water always carries, a smell it picks up from the fields it flows over.

By the time we reached the brook, I was as wet as Gage. Ignoring the chill sinking into my bones, I played my light over the water.

"Looks okay." I started walking along the section of road over the culvert, sensing the roaring rush of water below us. Gage hesitated, glancing down into the vortex that the water made at the edge of the road. The surface showed the tension of the current sucking it down through the culvert, hidden beneath the dark water now. Gage and I had played inside it as kids during summer droughts. It was almost large enough for an adult to stand up in, and it made a wonderful, cool, dark, echoing tunnel.

"Not a good night for trolls," I said over my shoulder, joking.

"Remember the time we almost made Mr. Shelby fall in?" Gage asked, gazing down.

I laughed. "How were we supposed to know he was coming over on that crazy old bike of his just when the troll came out of the water with a roar?"

We'd both caught it from our parents after Mr. Shelby had complained. In some ways, now that I thought about it, that had been a dress rehearsal for what had come a few years later. I noticed that Gage's laugh faded quickly, too.

Damn, he'd been a good troll, though. I'd played under there with a few other kids, mostly my cousins, but Gage's roar had been the best ever. I wasn't surprised that he'd wanted to become an actor.

God, what had gone so wrong after he'd left?

After he'd left me.

We crossed the culvert and approached the flooded section of road in silence.

I checked out the water with the flashlight beam. It didn't look more than knee deep at the lowest point, since it had only started raining a little while ago. The hidden road shouldn't have washed much. I wasn't stupid enough to risk it with the car, but there wasn't much current, and the water would probably feel warmer than the air. The worst that could happen would be that we'd fall and wash downstream into some trees. It wasn't like there was a waterfall we'd get swept over, or any way that we could be sucked into the culvert. This was more of a headache than anything dangerous.

Though I'd never done it in the dark before. If I dropped the light, it could get a little interesting.

"It's going to be waist deep," Gage said, beside me.

"Actually, no," I said. "I had a couple loads of fill dumped here a few years ago." Which he would have known if he hadn't run away, I didn't add.

"Oh," he said, and it came out a little bleakly.

I took a firmer hold on my light. "Coming? Remember, stay to the left." Oddly enough, the current always washed away the downstream edge of the road first, eating it back upstream, much the way Niagara Falls eroded on a much larger scale.

"Yeah," was all Gage said, and we stepped into the water together. He was bigger, taller, and stronger than I was. Instinctively, as we'd done when we were kids, he took my right, closer to where the unseen, underwater edge might be. He'd always protected me.

Until he'd left me.

Well, I didn't need protecting now, by him or by anybody else. One thing I wanted him to know from the start was that I was all right. I had survived the hell he'd left me in, and come out just fine, in more ways than one. I plowed through the water boldly, getting ahead of him, ignoring the surprising coldness of it. My dress shoes had perfectly smooth bottoms and no traction whatsoever. But I ignored that, too. Gage wasn't just going to come waltzing back in here, reminiscing about old times, and think nothing had changed.

Except, I realized as the water climbed to my knees and beyond, he hadn't come waltzing back in the way he'd waltzed so proudly out. He'd been hiding under an overpass, bruised, torn, soaking, and ashamed to show his face to anyone.

I slowed. Actually, according to him, he'd had a seizure not long ago. Wading this brook might not be such a good idea. What if he had another one now?



I turned, shining my light back toward him. To my surprise, he wasn't as close as I'd expected. He was standing still, ankle deep. Shit, I thought. He was afraid to cross, and I'd just bulled ahead like some insensitive jerk. He was going to think I was a total bastard.

Then I realized he was looking back to where I knew the culvert was lurking, filled with rushing water.

Gage was staring at the water piling up against the edge of the road, hiding the death hole. What was he thinking? No, he couldn't be! But I knew him too well, knew what that slump to his shoulders and bowed head meant. No, I had to be wrong! He wouldn't. Not now that I'd just found him again!

"Gage!" I called.

He jumped as though my voice had jarred him out of a dark trance. In the beam of my light, I saw his face twisted in agony. I couldn't look at him. I swung the beam of light over the water upstream so I wouldn't have to see that expression. His pain hurt me so badly. I opened my mouth to say something, anything.

But Gage cut me off. "Kyle!" he yelled. "Look out!"

I followed the flashlight beam with my eyes. I saw the tree rushing downstream an instant before the trunk hit me. I fell. Everything became dark water and clutching limbs and tangling leaves and cold, airless pain.

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We were making love in the hayloft, lying on an old patchwork quilt Gage's grandmother had given him a long time ago. It was thick enough to keep the sharp prickles of hay from poking through into our bare skin. All around us, the darkness smelled of fresh, sweet hay. The only light came from the thunderstorm going on outside, soft flashes in the distance. The answering rumbles of thunder came low and quietly. Gentle rain falling on the metal roof high above only added to the sense of warm, dry safety in our quilt-lined nest.

I felt like one of the kittens we'd discovered nearby in a shallow cave of hay, all nestled up with their mother, eyes not even open yet. I lay on my back with my arms stretched over my head. Gage knelt between my legs, which wrapped his waist. He was sliding into me over and over, slowly and rhythmically. My eyes were drooping shut. I half watched him and half dreamed of kittens and quilts and how much I loved him. His hands played with my nipples, slipping me higher and higher and deeper into the trance that he always cast over me. One finger slipped inside my mouth. I sucked on it, letting my eyes close all the way, giving myself up to him and his rhythm and the pleasure that grew and grew and exploded in a flash of light that wasn't lightning.

And everything went wrong. Gage's father hit us, pounded us, over and over, screaming and swearing. All the men hired to help with the haying poured in. Someone pulled the man off us. Gage screamed and cried and swore back at his father and at them and at the whole fucking town. And he was going away, right then, right now and fuck this place and fuck all of us! He was going to Hollywood and be in movies and no, he didn't fucking care that there were only a few months left before high school graduation! He was eighteen and he didn't need fucking school or this fucking town or this fucking farm, and -- and was I coming?

I was afraid to.

And so he left.

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I lay in Gage's arms on the bank of the brook, feeling cold and wet and bruised. The lightning and thunder went on and on. My throat burned from throwing up water. Gage kept crying, "Kyle, damn you, don't you dare die on me!"

But he was the one who'd been looking down into the culvert and imagining... Not me. Then I remembered the tree and the stream and limbs and no air, all cold darkness--

A flash of lightning lit his face. I saw the terrible scar so close to my own cheek that I could almost feel the pain.

"How'd it happen?" I asked, touching it with one finger, feeling the rough lines.

"Oh, God, Kyle! Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. Tomorrow, once I thawed out, I knew I'd hurt all over. Right now, I was fine. "How'd it happen?" I asked again.

Gage drew a shuddering breath, holding me close. "Broken beer bottle. And a tire iron, right here." He brought my hand to the other side of his head, then let go. "That's what the seizures are from. Wrong time, wrong side of town for gays."

Oh, my poor Gage, I thought. I kissed the scar, his cheek, and the man I loved inside. He began to cry. We probably would have stayed there forever, if a crash of thunder hadn't split the air around us again.

"We've got to get out of here," I said, struggling to sit up. I had no idea which side of the brook we were on now, but either my car or my house seemed like a good idea.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

"Think so." I let him pull me to my feet, both of us shivering from the cold, and something else.

"This way," he said. My flashlight was long gone, but the next bolt of lightning showed me that we'd made it across the brook. We fled up my driveway. We both knew this land in the darkness.

In a few minutes, we made it into the circle of light coming from the front porch and dashed up the steps to the door. "Have you got your key?" Gage asked.

I had a bad moment, but my keys were still in my pant's pocket. My suit jacket was gone, and my cell phone with it, not that I cared very much at this point. But I was shaking too hard to get the keys out. Gage reached in for me, and tendrils of desire swept through me at his touch. Gage's hand!

"Your parents aren't home?" he asked, fitting the key into the same old lock that had always been there.

"No," I said, teeth chattering. "Got a condo in Florida. Come up for a little while every summer."

He grunted.

"Wouldn't matter, though," I shivered out. "Be cool with you. Everybody's okay with it now."

"You know from experience?" He finally got the door open and led me into the blessed quiet and warmth of home.

I snorted. "You kidding me? I'm out, but," I hesitated, then said it. "Never anybody but you, Gage. Not for me."

He flicked the light on. The switch was in the same place it had always been. "Damn, Kyle," he said in a low voice, easing the door shut. "You make me feel like shit." He pushed me gently in the direction of the nearest chair and let go, turning to look out into the darkness through the window over the sink. I had no choice but to cling to the wooden chair back or I'd fall over, I was so shaky.

"No, Gage, don't ever feel that way! You're the most awesome, incredible, wonderful--"

"Kyle, I fucking left you!" He half turned. In the light, he was torn, bruised, beaten. "I went to Hollywood and ended up on a street corner! How could I get an acting job like this?" He gestured to his cheek. "And not having a high school degree didn't help. I finally couldn't stand it any longer, so I came home to try to make peace with my folks before I... but they aren't even here, so I..." His voice trailed off. I saw the agonized expression he'd had while looking into the water above the culvert. It went straight to my heart.

"Don't," I said quietly. "If life didn't matter any more, you wouldn't have just pulled me out of the brook."

He looked at me. In the soft light from the small chandelier, the scar blurred gently into shadow. His blue eyes lit with the faintest spark of his old humor. "Not sure your logic holds on that one, Kyle."

God, I loved him. I wasn't even sure when I'd started to again. Or maybe I hadn't ever stopped.

"Listen," I said. "It'll be okay. I'll get you help. A therapist. And a surgeon. And a seizure doctor. Whatever they're called. And we'll--"

Gage shook his head firmly, making his lovely long hair send water dipping down his shoulders. "Kyle, that takes money, and I've got nothing. You don't need to... I'm sure hanging onto the farm must take an incredible amount of..." He broke off, realizing I was laughing. Slowly, he looked around for the first time.

The layout of the farmhouse might not have changed, but there wasn't much inside that he would find familiar. There were new hardwood floors, new cupboards in rich, soft maple, new counters of dark marble, new appliances. Off to the right, the living room had plush carpeting, lush furniture, a flat-screen television, a wall of new windows that looked down over the valley, and my favorite -- a sunroom dripping with greenery around a large, in-ground hot tub.

"Holy shit," he said as it sank in. "What do you *do*, Kyle?"

"Oh, some consulting." I shrugged. "And -- I wrote a novel. It's kind of a bestseller, and then the movie rights, and--"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Everybody in town has read it, and they're totally okay. That's how I know they'll be fine with you. I hoped you'd run across it, Gage. It's about two guys who get caught and beaten, but they get married and live happily ever after."

He started to speak, but I cut him off. "But I'm glad you didn't see it, because now I know you came home on your own, not just because I wanted you to. I'll show it to you in the morning. Right now I want -- I need -- to get into that hot tub and get warmed up. With you."

"This can't be real," he said flatly. "This doesn't happen to me. Kyle, it's great that the old dreams came true for at least one of us." He faced me, turning the scar full toward me. "No doctor is going to be able to fix this. I'm never going to be able to act again. It's not that I don't care about you -- you're the only one I ever think about, but--" He shrugged helplessly. "I just can't do it any more."

I understood, which was kind of disturbing. A scar like that would be pretty hard to bear. God knew I was a tolerant, accepting person, and I'd reacted badly to seeing it. But I knew Gage was so much more than his face. He'd always been kind and gentle to me when I was painfully shy and quiet. He was a few months older than me, and very smart. My big protector. My favorite

troll. But he had something, a spark, a kind of charisma, a brightness that I'd never seen in anybody else. I'd never wanted anybody else the way I wanted him.

These past ten years had been like being without half of myself.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I do get it, Gage. And I'm not naive or romantic enough to say that my love will make it all better. And I'm not going to say that you'll get over the scars inside if you just get the right help, or that you can learn to ignore the way strangers look at you. I don't know how that feels, and if you really have reached the point where you can't stand it any longer, I don't have right to argue with you over it."

He stood silent, watching me.

I'd never talked anyone down from suicide before. I had no idea how to do it. I only knew what I felt was true.

"So Gage, if you've really reached that point, then it can't get any worse, right?" I didn't give him a chance to answer. "I mean, you're here, you're okay, right now, right? It's not that bad? Can't you just stick around a while longer, at this level, here with me? Because I really want to get to know you again."

"You deserve better than what I did to you." Gage was ignoring what I'd said.

I thought about that, and then said, "I might have been wrong not to have gone with you. But we'll never know. So can we just start again and not mess up this time?"

He finally turned and faced me, shivering as much as I was. "Okay, so you're amazing enough that you can see past my face. But do you want to be seen in public with me?"

"You may have to help me at first," I said with a shaky smile. "You'll have to stop me from clobbering anybody who stares at you."

He was staring himself -- right at me.

"Gage, we let other people mess us up the first time. I won't let that happen again."

He kept staring. I'd said all I could say. Besides, Gage and I had always communicated really well without words. And right now, we needed to get warmed up before we went into shock.

As I took a step toward the hot tub, every muscle in my body protested. I started to fall. Gage's protective instincts took over again, and I suddenly found myself in his arms, being carried across the living room and into the sunroom. Rain streaked down the glass, but all inside was dim and safe. The storm had finally moved away. Gage set me down, and I began stripping off my sopping clothing while he pulled back the cover of the tub and found the power switch. The water moved in a softly hissing swirl inside the dark blue, molded tub. It had plenty of room for two, though I'd never invited anyone else in.

I didn't have energy to spare on lighting the candles I kept around the edges of tub. I just eased into the water, feeling it burning and stinging in an utterly delicious way. With a moan, I sank back into the underwater lounge and relaxed, up to my chin in the gently fizzing water.

"Oh, blessed warmth," I said.

Gage squatted down and slipped a hand in beside me, making slow circles with his fingers. "You sure you're not going to go into cardiac arrest or something? It feels really hot."

"It's not. You're just cold. Come in."

He hesitated. "I don't know, Kyle."

"I think you know Kyle really well," I said, and smiled.

He met my eyes, then gave me his awkward smile. "You always were good with words. I can't believe you really published a book."

"Well, you're going to spoil my happy ever after ending if you don't take off your clothes and get in this tub."

"It's really about us?"

"Well, it has the usual disclaimer," I said. "But yeah."

"And they're making a movie?"

I didn't see where this was going in time. "You're too old, Gage. Most of it is about us as kids."

He shook his head quickly. "I don't want a part, don't worry. But are you going to California as a consultant when they start--" he broke off. "You already have been, haven't you? You said you did some 'consulting.'"

I nodded cautiously.

He looked down. "There are some real bastards out there I'd hate to see get their hands on your work."

"You can come with me when I go back."

Gage pulled his hand out of the water and looked at me skeptically, but I could see the gleam in his eyes. "God, that would shake up a few folks," he said. "It might be kind of sweet. But honestly, Kyle--"

I flicked a handful of water on him.

He jumped back, forgetting he was already soaked. I laughed. Gage, my best friend. Thinner than I'd ever seen him, with longer hair than I'd ever seen. But Gage. I sat up and swept my arm through the water, sending a sheet of it over him. It drenched my plants, the stairs, the candles, and even part of the living room rug.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he asked, shocked.

I just laughed. I was so cold, exhausted, stressed, freaked, in love, and confused, that I couldn't begin to think any longer. All I knew was that he'd been my best friend for years, long before we'd become boyfriends. Maybe we had to start back there again.

"Nobody's going to yell at us for getting the floor wet," I said.

Gage leaned down and gave me a tentative flick. In the face.

I drew back my arm again.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I'm getting in."

"Hurry up, then." I made room on the lounge, squishing myself up against the side.

In the dim light, he slipped off his torn clothes. He moved swiftly, efficiently, revealing a body familiar to me, though older and worn. Naked, he slid into the water, taking the seat on the far side of the tub.

"Ah, God," he groaned and stretched out. "Can you imagine if this had been here when we were kids?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't it have felt good after an afternoon of sledding?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Remember the year my toboggan went under the barbed-wire fence and I ripped my jacket?"

"You scared me shitless. I thought you'd shredded your back, too. But that wasn't as bad as the time you fell down the hay chute. Head first."

"I jumped on purpose," I said. "I just didn't know they'd moved the pile of hay I was going to land on."

He laughed. "I can see you're still disaster prone."

"I don't know how I've survived ten years without you," I said. And let him interpret that any way he wanted.

He took it the way I'd meant it. "Kyle," he said, looking directly at me. "Tell me honestly. You don't care?" He pointed to his face in the dim light.

I thought I'd already answered that. But I was glad to make my point perfectly clear. I slid over into his lap, put my hands on either side of his face, and boldly pressed my lips to his scar. All I could taste was the cool, wonderful taste of Gage. I let my tongue play with the new ridges of his skin.

"I can't feel it," he said softly. "Numb."

I moved to his lips. "This?" I murmured.

"A little," he said.

I pressed his lips open and slipped inside, not giving him the chance to stop me. He let me in, but passively, not responding when I touched my tongue to his. I remembered kisses that had left me melting into him. Kisses stolen out in the woods, in the darkness on the porch, in the hayloft of his barn. The day... I shuddered as the memory of our last kiss slammed into me.

"There," he said, pushing me away. "I repulse you. That's proof. I'm going." He was out of the tub and grabbing his clothes before I could even react.

"You son of a bitch!" I shouted. "I was remembering our last kiss! My last kiss! Ten years, Gage! I've been waiting ten years for you!"

He whirled. "Look at me!" He pointed to his face.

"Look at *me!*" I shrieked, beyond caring.

He looked.

And then I was in his arms and we were kissing, kissing the way I remembered. Our bodies molded to each other's. We sank down on the soft, thick carpeting of the living room, wet and aroused and--

A little common sense reasserted itself. I murmured "Wait," around his mouth that was so alive against mine again. I didn't have a condom in the house.

"Believe it or not, I'm clean," he said, lips brushing my ear. "Been tested, and nobody's touched me in a long time."

I hesitated. Of course I was glad, but the way he said it made me hurt, as though he didn't think he was worth being touched any longer.

Well, I wanted to touch him. I slid my legs around him. Wet and slick with hot water, he pressed against me awkwardly, tentatively. I cried out at the sheer emotion of it, of *him*, again after so



long. I pressed back. In a moment, with a moan, he was inside me. We both froze, savoring the moment. Then passion began to build, and he moved deeply inside me.

I knew that he liked me to lie as still as I could for as long as I could. He remembered how to tease my nipples until I was on fire and begging him to let me move. He remembered how slipping a finger into my mouth meant I could. I did, just as his other hand grasped me and caressed me, stroking and pulling and circling my tip over and over with his thumb. My blood roared in my ears as he drove me fast to the edge, and over, and over, and...

I was weeping when he collapsed forward, down onto me.

And we lay still.

Outside, gentle rain. No blows fell. No anger, no fear, no shame. Just Gage and me. As we should have been then. As we finally were.

"You remembered," he whispered.

"So did you," I said. I gazed up at his long, soft hair, his shadowy scar, and his deep blue eyes. "It's going to get better, Gage," I breathed softly.

Tears blurred his eyes, too. I thought for a moment that I hadn't made any difference, that the hurt was too deep. Then he grinned his old, familiar Gage grin. I could see it, past the scar.

"No, Kyle," he said. "It already *is* better."