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*To all those who think that love has let
them down...*

*Please never stop believing in love's
power to heal all things.*

*In God's eyes, the light of hope shines
eternal*

*where love is concerned... and so it is
for you.*

~*~*~*~

Chapter 1

"You're never going to believe who's coming to Denver!" Lynn Isley squealed as she streaked into the empty restaurant from the kitchen doors.

Standing at the cash register counting change, Beth McCasland barely even looked up. "Who?"

Lynn dropped her voice conspiratorially although there wasn't a single soul in the place to overhear her anyway. "Ashton Raines!"

"65.82." Beth dumped the pennies back in the register and frowned. "Ashton Raines? Isn't he that country singer?"

"That country singer?" Lynn asked in disbelief as she tied her blue-and-white Harry's All-Night Diner apron around her waist. "Are you kidding me? Ashton Raines is *the* country singer. He not only won Male Vocalist of the Year three years in a row, he won Entertainer of the Year last year and Song of the Year, Album of the Year, and... Beth!"

Somewhere just past one of the 'of the Years' Beth had tuned Lynn out.

"What?" She looked up from the drawer innocently, and when she saw the look on Lynn's face, she repeated, "What?"

"Where'd you go?"

"The drawer's ten cents off." Beth looked back at it in consternation. "What do you think we should we do?"

Lynn shook her head. "Who cares?"

"I do." A moment of thought and Beth pulled a dime out of her own pocket and dropped it into the register.

In disbelief, Lynn surveyed her friend, her dark eyes flashing. "What'd you do that for?"

Beth shrugged and slammed the drawer. "It's either that or hear Harry yell for two hours."

"But..." Lynn began just as the bell on the front door sounded.

"Customers," Beth said, indicating the door and signaling that the conversation was over with one word. She tucked a wayward blonde wavy-curl behind her ear, grabbed three menus, and started toward the door without bothering to wait for Lynn to so much as exhale.

"Ashton, what in the world are you doing up there?" Barry Braxton yelled to the stonewashed jean-clad figure leaning perilously over the edge of the top row of bleachers.

"These bleachers have to be up by seven," Ashton yelled back over the din of workers surrounding him without so much as looking down at his manager.

"They will be," Barry called, "but if you fall, we won't be needing them anyway."

Irritation at being treated like a three-year-old crawled through Ashton's chest as he twisted the wrench on the bolt he was working on with three more quick jerks. "I'm not going to fall, Barry."

"Well, why don't you come on down anyway?" Barry set his hands on the rolls of excess weight just beneath his off-brown, button up shirt. "Really. There's no reason for you to be up there. I'm sure the crew can get it."

"Look around you, Bare." Ashton waved the wrench angrily. "We go on in three hours. Does it look like they're going to be ready?"

Barry shook his balding head in disgust. He really couldn't argue with that as much as he

obviously wanted to. With the concert set to start in three hours, Ashton knew his manager would've preferred him to be in his dressing room getting ready rather than tightening bolts on the bleachers for their latest venue. However, here he was twisting bolt after bolt tighter and tighter, wrenching his anger and frustration into them as if that would somehow make everything better.

After a full thirty seconds Barry stalked off leaving his golden egg hanging off the edge of a set of bleachers that looked like it might fall any second. Ashton didn't so much as watch him leave. Barry, of all people, knew Ashton's stubborn streak ran a mile deep and just as wide. And the fact that he had acquired a death wish in the last year didn't help matters.

Trying not to think lest the memories swarm him again, he bent his head and body into the work. If he could just keep working, keep moving, keep going, somehow he would find a way past the hurt. If he didn't, Humpty Dumpty would look easy to put back together by comparison.

"So, do you want to go?" Lynn asked as she walked up to the counter where Beth stood during a slight lull in the afternoon lunch chaos.

"Go where?" Beth asked, tallying up three tickets at the same time.

Lynn leaned on the counter. Her freckled arms created a triangle with her waist. "The concert."

Wishing Lynn would leave her alone so she could concentrate, Beth bit the pink lipstick off her bottom lip. "What concert?"

"Hello, Beth...? Is anybody in there?" Lynn waved her hand in the air.

The bells on the front door jingled. Without bothering to uphold her end of the conversation, Beth stepped around the counter. "I'll be right back." She heard Lynn growl in frustration, but there were other things in the world far more important than concerts and having fun. On top of that priority list was eeking out a living. She met the two customers at the door. "Good afternoon. Would you like a booth or a table?"

Ashton heard the familiar music the second it poured down from the enormous speakers three stories above him. The roar of the crowd that followed the music never ceased to amaze him. On the outside he looked ready—calm, cool, professional, but inside he was a disaster waiting to happen. This was the hardest part of every show. Right now she would've been with him, holding his hand right to the stage steps, telling him good luck, and kissing him. What he wouldn't have given for one more kiss.

He could feel her even now, and every part of him wanted nothing more than to walk away from it all—walk away and never come back. Without her, everything had become too hard, too draining, too overwhelming. Just as the pain threatened to take him over the edge, he heard it—the four notes—his cue, and in with one giant shove, he stuffed all the hurt back down and stepped up the stairs and onto the stage as the entire arena exploded in lights, music, and screaming around him. In fact, it was so loud that not one person in the entire arena heard his heart snap right down the middle.

"You going home?" Lynn asked as Beth grabbed her coat from the rack.

She slid her arms into the warmth of the wool, knowing how the early April chill in

Colorado could seep into a person despite all their best efforts. “Yeah, Tori should be here any time now, and I’ve got to stop at my parents’ to get Kenzie.”

“How’s she doing?” Lynn asked with genuine concern.

“Oh, growing like a weed.” Beth laughed softly and pushed the blonde curl that never quite made it into the clip at the back of her head from the edge of her face. No matter how many clips she used, she could never quite get her hair to stay up through a full eight-hour shift. “I can’t believe she’ll be starting kindergarten in the fall.”

“No kidding.” Lynn’s concern sank on the sigh that went through Beth. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Beth ducked so her friend couldn’t see the real answer. “It just hard sometimes.” Buttoning the coat was a good excuse not to look up.

“I know, but I’m sure Kevin would be proud of how well she’s done.”

Beth smiled through the ache, which stabbed viciously into her heart. She grabbed her things from the counter. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, you take care—and drive careful.”

“I will.”

Lynn watched her friend go. It had to be hard to go home every night with a child and all alone at the same time. Worse, the only places Beth ever went were her parents’ house, the diner, and home. The only time she ever went out was when Lynn forced her to, and it had been far too long since their last outing.

The radio behind her crackled. “KGRC, is proud to welcome Ashton Raines to The Pepsi Center in Denver, Colorado on June 12th...”

The concert. Somehow she would find a way to talk her friend into going. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

“Hey, great show, Ashton,” Barry said, slapping him on the back the second he descended into backstage after the second encore.

Ashton forced a smile onto his face. “Thanks.”

“We’ve got some people backstage,” Barry continued as though Ashton hadn’t heard all this a million times before.

“There he is!” someone from down the hall yelled, and in a breath he was crushed by a sea of fans.

Overwhelming numbness took over as he accepted the pieces of paper being shoved in his face. Over and over he signed a name that no longer seemed to even belong to him. It was everywhere. On T-shirts, CD jackets, programs, in lights above the entrance to every auditorium door he walked through.

As he signed the name yet another time, it occurred to him that somehow he had lost everything—not even his own name was his anymore. He wasn’t Ashton Raines, and yet if he wasn’t Ashton Raines, who was he, and when he had ceased to exist as a real person?

“That’s enough!” Barry held his hands up, forcing his way through the crowd to make a path for Ashton to follow. “We appreciate you all coming out! Thank you! Thank you!”

Somehow Ashton followed his manager, somehow his feet worked, somehow... and yet if he had to explain just how, he would never have been able to.

Beth lay on Kenzie's bed, the book in one hand, Kenzie resting on the other arm. "'Open the door,' the prince commanded, and the guards obeyed. When the door opened, there stood Katrina in her dress of rags. 'Hello,' said the prince kindly. 'Hello,' Katrina said. 'May I have this dance?' the prince asked, holding out his hand to her. She took it, and they danced the whole night away. The end."

Beth closed the book and then looked down and smiled. Kenzie. The soft little face. The rosy cheeks. The most beautiful child in the world. Her last precious gift from Kevin. At times it seemed she was almost past the pain, and then at other times, like tonight, the thought of going to a bed devoid of his spirit threatened to fling her into a pit of despair.

Five years. Five long years, and still she missed him, and at that moment, watching their daughter sleep, the soft baby blonde curls fanned out on the pink pillow, she knew she would miss him forever.

"We've got some new material in," Barry said as Ashton put his feet up on the coffee table, leaned his head back against the couch, and closed his eyes. "Meredith thinks one of them is a keeper."

"Hmm."

"Anyway, I thought maybe tomorrow on the way to Atlanta we could give it a once over—just to see what you think," Barry continued, going over his checklist. "The concert in Tucson sold out yesterday in under two hours. They're thinking about adding a second show. What do you think?"

"Fine," Ashton said without ever opening his eyes.

The to-do list went silent. "Ken called. He's wondering how you're doing?"

Ashton was really tired of answering this already age-old question.

"How are you doing?" Barry asked pointedly. "Really?"

Slowly Ashton exhaled—knowing full well that the truth and what Barry wanted to hear were two totally different things. "You know me, Bare." He opened his eyes to a reality he now hated.

"Yes, I do, and I'm not the only one who's worried about you."

Ashton smiled at that. Barry was worried all right—for himself mostly.

"I'm fine." With no small amount of effort, Ashton pulled himself off the couch. "Just a little tired."

Barry followed him up off the couch without taking his gaze off him.

"What time are we pulling out in the morning?" Ashton asked, stretching slowly, the starched shirt he still wore from the concert stuck in weird angles to the dried sweat on his back.

"Ten."

"Then I'd better get my beauty rest." Ashton yawned. "I'd hate to be sick for Atlanta."

"Yeah," Barry said unenthusiastically. "I'll be here to get you around nine-thirty?"

"I'll be ready." Ashton followed Barry to the door. "And I promise we'll go over the new stuff tomorrow."

"That's great."

He held the door open for his manager. "Well, good night, Bare."

"Night," Barry said, but the closing door cut off the word.

Ashton exhaled and let his eyelids fall shut. It was true he was tired, but this tired had nothing to do with his work on stage. This tired was something he had never experienced in his life until now. It had nothing to do with sleep and everything to do with the hole he found every time he looked into his heart. He shook his head to clear it of the disturbing thoughts and went to take a shower.