



BOOK 3 IN THE PASSION SERIES



MERCY IN

*Passion*



SHIELA STEWART





# Mercy in Passion

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Mercy in Passion  
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*To every woman who has ever loved a bad boy.*

*This one's for you.*



# Prologue

What the hell was he doing? This was wrong. It was criminal. He couldn't go through with it.

Justin took a step back while his best friend knelt down on the ground, jimmying the lock. He didn't want to break into the store. He'd thought Wes had been kidding, but when they'd arrived at the store, Wes had begun picking the lock.

He had to stop this before it went too far.

"I'm in."

Justin looked down at Wes, crouched on the ground, a wide grin on his face. He had to stop this. "We can't do this."

"What?" Wes stood, taking the flashlight from Justin.

"This isn't right. We shouldn't be doing this."

"What the fuck are you talking about? We agreed to do this; we planned it. And now you're getting fucking cold feet? Screw that, Justin." Wes gave the back door a shove then stepped over the threshold. "It's too late to stop now, my friend. The deed is done."

Justin's throat went dry when Wes stepped further into the shop. Sure, they'd talked about breaking into the local Gas 'N Gulp, but shit, it had been talk. How the hell had he gotten from talking about it to actually doing it? "I can't do it."

"Fuck you, man. You agreed. Now get your ass in here and help me loot this place."

Justin took another step back. "I can't. You shouldn't be doing this either, Wes."

"Don't go getting all holier than thou on me now, man. Get the fuck in here and help me."

"No." Justin took a deep breath, then walked away.

"Don't you dare walk away from me, Justin. I swear, if you don't come back here and finish this, I'll beat your fucking head in."

Justin waved a hand at him and kept walking.

"You'll regret this, fucker," Wes spat at him in a low growling whisper.

No, he wouldn't regret it, but he would have if he'd followed through. Hearing the sirens of the police car in the distance, Justin quickened his steps.

Wes was going to be in deep shit now.

The house was quiet when he entered through the back door. His mother and sisters were away, visiting her parents for the week. Justin hadn't wanted to go along, though now, he regretted not doing so. Climbing the steps down to his bedroom, Justin thought about Wes. Had he been caught? Served him right if he had been. Idiot.

Climbing into bed, he dozed off the second his head hit the pillow. He was abruptly awoken not long after by his father looming over his bed, calling out his name.

"Wake up, Justin."

"I'm awake. What?" He rubbed tired eyes while sitting up.

"Where were you tonight?"

"Out. Why?" The light flicked on and he cursed. "Jesus, Dad, that's bright."

"What were you doing and who were you doing it with?"

Fuck. "I was just hanging with my friends. What's the big deal?"

"Were you with Wes tonight?" his father demanded.

Oh, shit. "No."

His father glared down at him with sharp blue eyes that always looked at him with disappointment. "You're lying to me."

"No, I'm not. What the hell is this all about?"

"Were you with Wes Donnelly tonight and did you have any part in breaking into the Gas 'N Gulp?"

Shit! Shit! "No!"

"Wes says differently."

"Well, he's lying."

"I don't think he is. I think you were with him tonight, and I think you took off the instant you heard the sirens."

Furious, Justin threw back the covers and stood. "You're always so quick to think the worst of me."

"You've given me no reason to think otherwise."

"Great, fucking great."

"Justin!"

"Whatever. Believe what you like. You won't listen to me anyway."

"Why should I when all that comes out of your mouth are lies."

"I'm not lying. Fine, I was with him, and yes, I was there when he broke into the place, but I didn't help him. I left before anything happened because I didn't want any part of that. But you don't believe me, as usual, so why bother." His father grabbed his arm so tight it actually smarted.

"I'm fed up with your lies, Justin, fed up with your behavior, and fed up with dealing with your crap all the time."

He shook his father's hand loose and snarled his response. "Fine, you're sick of dealing with me, then I'm out of here."

"What are you doing?"

He stuffed as many of his clothes and belongings into his duffle bag as possible. "Packing."

"Oh, so now you're just going to run away?"

"Yes." And he couldn't be happier.

"And where will you go?"

"Anywhere that's not here."

"You can't leave."

Justin squared his shoulders and glared at his father. "I'm eighteen, you can't stop me."

"Fine. Do what you like, but don't come crawling back home when you have no place to go and no money to live off of."

"Trust me, I won't." Justin slung the pack over his shoulder, shooting his father a nasty glare before walking past him. "Tell Mom I'll call." He stormed out of the house, vowing to never come back.

# Chapter 1

The sounds of heavy metal music blasted in the car, vibrating not only the speakers but the windows, as well. Beating his hands on the steering wheel to the drumbeat, he drove along the highway to his destination.

Passion.

Justin Davis was on his way home.

Oh, Lord!

The last time he'd traveled on this particular road, he'd been heading as far away from the town as possible. He'd vowed to his friends, on more than one occasion, that he'd only come back when Hell froze over. Looked like things were about to get chilly. Justin wondered what sort of reception he would get when people found out he'd returned. He hadn't exactly been a pillar of the community before he'd left. If there was trouble, Justin had been in the middle of it. He fancied his booze and he did what he could to prove to everyone he wasn't the sweet blond-haired, blue-eyed, good boy his looks implied. He liked to have fun and had done it as often as possible.

Man, he'd been an ass in his day.

But mostly when he'd been with Wes Donnelly.

Hammering his palms on the dashboard to the strong bass, Justin looked back at his past.

He'd been a good kid most of his life, up until Wes had come to Passion when Justin had been fourteen. Wes had been from the big

city, and Justin had envied anyone who lived in the city. Not that he hated Passion; it was just too damn small and so often boring. The city had bright lights, lots of activity, and plenty of breathing room. So Justin had clung to Wes and every story he told of big city life.

Before Justin knew it, he was emulating his friend, including getting into trouble.

It had mostly been minor stuff: vandalism, rowdiness, drunk and disorderly conduct, fighting, disobedience. The instant Wes found out Justin's father was chief of police in Passion, he'd ribbed Justin about it every chance he got.

"Cop's son can't do no wrong with daddy looking after him," Wes had always said.

But Justin had proven him wrong. When he'd gotten in trouble, his father had been right there, breathing down his neck. Victor Davis claimed to love his son dearly, but wouldn't stand for his shit.

What choice had he had but to rebel? Justin was the stubborn type and so often butted heads with his father. The last thing Justin wanted was to follow in his father's footsteps, and he hated it passionately when he was compared to his father. He was his own person, yet no one seemed to recognize that.

Well, except for his friends, the Healy's.

Living next door to Beth, Tyler, and Kevin had been great. Anytime you were bored, you could hop the short fence and drag one of them out for a quick game of b-ball or hockey or whatever else you could think of to do. Justin had thought of Tyler and Kevin like brothers, and Beth as his best pal. He had two of his own sisters; he hadn't needed another one. Beth was the oldest by two and a half years, he and Tyler were six months apart, and Kevin, the baby, two years younger.

He loved his sisters, Donna and Abby, dearly, but having two younger sisters had often been a pain. So he'd latched on to the Healys. Sure, Beth was as female as his sisters, but she hadn't been a girly female. She loved getting dirty and playing as rough as the boys did.

His earliest memories ran back to constantly hanging with the Healy kids. He even considered their parents his aunt and uncle, though they weren't any relation what so ever. Victor Davis and Thomas Healy had grown up together and were life-long friends. Tom and his wife, Cassie, were a great pair, and Justin loved hanging at their house. Tom was a famous artist who was filthy rich and built like a wrestler. Cassie had her trinket shop on Main Street that did very well. It was his little secret, but he'd always had a tiny bit of

a crush on his Aunt Cassie. She was a blond bombshell with a lovely personality.

His Uncle Tom had given him more than one talking to in his rebellious youth. Not that it did much good. Justin had still been a trouble-maker.

But he hadn't been a thief. That was where he drew the line.

His father hadn't believed him, no news there. Victor Davis rarely believed his son.

Sure, Justin gave his father cause to doubt him, but that last time, Justin had actually thought his father would trust him and believe that he hadn't taken part in the robbery.

Boy, had he been wrong.

Now here he was, on his way back, and why? Because he'd made a promise.

When he'd run away, his destination had been his grandparents' home in Mississauga. Justin knew his mother and sisters had been there, visiting. He thought he could go, hang out with them, maybe give his mother the sob story that his father had thrown him out, and she would take pity on him and give him some money so he could live on his own for a while.

It had been a nice plan, except... By the time he'd arrived, his father had already called ahead and informed them that Justin had left home. Of his own accord. Justin hadn't known that, though, when he'd shown up at his grandparents' home two days later, distraught and pleading with his mother for help, claiming his father kicked him out.

She'd let him have it like she'd never done before.

Normally his mother was a softy when it came to him. She always babied him and stood up for him. Not this time. This time she lit into him like a woman possessed. Man, had she been angry. And hurt. Hurt because Justin had tried to play her against her husband with a lie.

She'd left the next day, giving Justin an ultimatum. He either shaped up or he would not be welcome back home until he had.

That had shocked him and gave him pause for thought.

Then his grandfather had lit into him. And he hadn't been as kind. He'd told Justin it was time he acted like a man and did something with his life. "Stop being such an ass and grow up." And that had been the mild part of their conversation.

Justin had been so shocked that he had agreed to everything his grandfather had said, including getting a job and paying his own way in life.

The first job he'd gotten was as a busboy at a fancy restaurant.

He'd lived with his grandparents for a year before moving out on his own. His grandfather showed him how to invest his money wisely, and so Justin had. It didn't take long for his money to grow, and after two years of saving and investing, Justin opened his own nightclub.

Just In Time.

His parents knew how he was doing, not because he called them to tell them, but because his grandparents kept them apprised. Justin had still been smarting with both his parents.

Then six months ago, his grandfather had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. Within weeks he was deathly ill and everyone knew he wouldn't make it. On his deathbed four weeks earlier, Leo Wilson had made Justin promise he would go home and smooth things out. Justin hadn't wanted to, but his grandfather had guilted him into it.

So here he was, heading home.

God help him.

Remnants of the winter's snowfall still lingered in the ditches along the road. Spring had sprung, but winter wasn't giving up the fight just yet.

The flash of police lights in his rearview mirror caught his attention. Checking his speedometer, Justin cursed heavily. Slowing down, he pulled to the shoulder and hoped it wasn't his father who was pulling him over. When he saw the officer step from the vehicle, he let out a long breath. It wasn't his father, unless he'd had a sex change. No, the officer approaching him was all woman. Tall, lean, and built like a goddess.

Pressing the button on his door, his window slid down, and he tilted his head towards the beauty before him. "Afternoon, Constable."

"You were speeding," she said in a deep, breathy growl that rang a bell in his mind.

"I know. Guess I wasn't paying attention to the speed." Her face was as stunning as her body was.

"Mind turning your music down?"

Damn, that voice was sexy. "Sure." He shut it off, then flicked the glove compartment door open and pulled out his license and registration. "I know the drill. Here you go." As he handed her his ID, he saw the name plate over her left breast. "Constable Healy. Beth?"

"Justin?"

"Yeah, it's me. Jesus, look at you, all copped out." Pushing his door open, he stepped out and had a good look at the woman he'd

grown up with. "Holy hell, look at you." He swiped the hat off her head and whistled as all that blond hair tumbled free.

"Give me back my hat, Justin." She yanked it from his grasp, then pulling her hair up, slid the hat back in place.

He couldn't get over how much she'd changed. When he'd left she had been tall, thin, shapeless, with a short crop of blond hair. Now... well, she was gorgeous, complete with plenty of luscious curves. And she looked pretty hot in that uniform.

"You look incredible." But when he leaned towards her, ready to take her into his arms for a welcome hug, she pulled away.

"I see you haven't changed much. Still breaking the law." She pulled out her pad and began writing.

"What is that?"

"A ticket." She snapped it off and held it out to him. "Slow down."

Looking down at the paper in his hand, Justin chuckled. "Funny." He tore it in half, then looked up when she gasped. "What?"

"You can't rip up a ticket." She proceeded to write out another one.

"Give me a break, Beth." He took the second one and repeated his action with the first.

"Fine, have it your way."

She pulled out her handcuffs, and he looked down at them with bewilderment. "What the hell are you doing with those?"

"Cuffing you."

She spun him around so fast, he didn't have time to protest and the next thing he knew, she was slapping the cold steel onto his wrist.

"You have the right to remain silent—"

"You can't be serious." But when she yanked him up, and pushed him toward her cruiser, he got the feeling she was perfectly serious. "Beth, don't do this."

"You should have accepted the ticket. Watch your head," she advised, opening the door to the back of the cruiser.

He ducked as she shoved him into the car. "I didn't think you were serious."

"I'm always serious when it comes to my job." She slammed the door then climbed into the driver's seat.

Apparently, she was. "What about my car?"

"It'll be towed to town."

"I didn't lock it up." He could just see it now, a beauty like his Porsche 911 wouldn't stay on the side of the road long unlocked. He

jerked forward when she slammed on the brakes. What the hell was she doing now? When she backed the car up and stopped beside his, he was sure she'd come to her senses. Then she slid from the car and headed to his. She locked his doors, grabbing his keys before heading back to the cruiser.

"Happy?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Tough."

"Look, I'll pay for the ticket."

"Yes, you will."

His eyes narrowed in on the back of her head. A few tendrils of blond hair had escaped the hat. "I'd heard you'd become a cop. I had no idea you'd become a hard-ass."

"I'd watch what you say to me if I were you."

*"I'd watch what you say to me if I were you,"* Justin mimicked quietly. Sitting in the back of the police cruiser, he saw the sign as they approached Passion. "Hasn't changed one bit," he grumbled, watching houses drift by while they drove, and when she stopped in front of police headquarters, his thoughts were only reinforced by the familiarity of the building before him. "Nothing's changed."

"Watch your head now," Beth advised, opening the door for Justin.

His eyes narrowed, he slid from the car. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

She simply took hold of his arm and led him towards the brick building.

They pushed through the door to the familiar scent of strong coffee and cinnamon rolls. Millie, the receptionist and dispatcher, was still sitting behind the same desk at the front of the office. She hadn't changed much aside from a little more gray hair.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in."

"Complete with claws and a hiss," Justin nudged Beth with his arm but she failed to see the humor in his joke. "Hey, Millie, long time no see."

"Justin Davis. My, my, look at you. What a handsome man you've become."

So he was often told. "You're looking pretty hot yourself. Lost some weight?"

"A little. So, what's our girl bringing you in for?" Her eyes shifted to Beth.

"Refusal to pay for a speeding ticket," Beth informed her.

"I didn't think she was serious," Justin proclaimed.

"He tore up two."

Millie clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Not smart."

"I didn't think she was serious," Justin insisted.

Millie shook her head. "Our girl is always serious when it comes to her work."

"So she told me," he muttered under his breath. "I said I'd pay the ticket." He heard the sound of the front door opening and, when he turned, saw his father enter the building.

"Would you look who just walked in," Millie announced, her voice sounding hollow in Justin's head.

His eyes caught those of his father, and once again, all Justin saw was disappointment. Would things ever change? "Hey, Dad."

# Chapter 2

The silence that filled the space between them was a mile wide. Justin could well imagine what his father must be thinking right now. *Well, the bastard finally came home.*

"Justin."

And there was that silence again.

They'd practically said as much a month ago at his grandfather's funeral.

"I brought him in for refusing to accept the speeding ticket I wrote out to him," Beth piped in, breaking the silence.

"I didn't think she was serious." How many times did he have to say that? "I'll pay the damn ticket."

"Millie, write up the file."

"Will do, Chief."

It was nothing new for Justin when his father walked past him without even batting an eye. *Oh yeah, he was ready to make amends.* "What's the damage?" Justin asked, giving his attention to Millie. He was going to do his best to ignore the hurt he felt.

"You want me to fine him just for speeding, or for refusal to comply?" Millie asked Beth.

"Just the damn ticket." Beth shot him a nasty glare.

"It's my lucky day. Hey, you wanna remove these now?" Justin held his hands up, still cuffed in the steel. With a snarl on her face—and what a pretty face it was, Justin thought—she obliged. And not

with an ounce of compassion, either. "You're too kind," he grumbled while rubbing his sore wrists.

"I'll be on patrol if you need me," Beth told Millie, then stomped out of the building.

"Isn't she Mary Sunshine? Okay, Millie, hit me with the damage." He paid the fine, which wasn't all that bad, gabbed a bit with Millie while she filled out the receipt, then headed to his father's office. "Send in reinforcements if you hear shots fired." Taking a deep breath, he raised his fist and knocked on his father's door.

"Enter."

Taking another deep breath, Justin pushed the door open and was hit with a blast from the past. The office was still the same. The large metal desk was still near the back and facing the door, one filing cabinet to the right and a window to the left. Two chairs were placed in front of the desk, and his father sat behind it. The palm tree his mother had brought to the office eight years ago had grown some, but looked a little sickly.

"Love what you've done with the place." Justin took one of the chairs. "So...."

"Did you pay the ticket?"

Straight to business. "Yep. I really didn't think Beth was seriously writing me up a ticket."

"Were you speeding?" his father asked soberly.

"Yes, but—"

"Then what made you think you wouldn't get a ticket?"

"We used to be friends."

"Friendship or not, an infraction is an infraction. What are you doing here?"

His father seemed stiffer than usual. And sitting this close to him, Justin could see his fifty-plus age showing in his face. His hair was still blond and cut short around a handsome face. But there were more wrinkles, especially at the corners of his blue eyes. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd pop in for coffee." When all his father did was stare at him with a blank expression, Justin cut the humor. "I made a promise to Grandpa that I'd come home and make amends."

"So you do it by breaking the law?"

Here we go again. "I wasn't paying attention to my speed."

"Have you seen your mother yet?"

*Look, I really don't want to be here either, buddy.* "Not yet. She was going to be my first stop, but, well...things happened."

"Then I suggest you head over there now. She'll be leaving for work soon."

His mother worked at the local eatery and had for a number of years now. "I guess I'll get going, then." He knew when he wasn't wanted, always had. "Catch you around."

Justin left the office feeling much the same as he had years before. Glad to be gone.



There it was, his boyhood home. Two stories high, it was still white with brown trim with a white picket fence around the property. There were plenty of memories here. Good and bad. Barbeques in the summer, snowball fights in the winter. Christmases, birthdays, Thanksgivings, incredible food, lots of presents, and plenty of fun.

And then there were the bad.

Arguments, fights, silent treatments, and bitter words.

Shrugging them all off, Justin walked to the front door. It felt weird to knock, but it wasn't his home any longer and hadn't been for six years.

When the door opened and his mother answered, he held his breath. "Hi."

She looked up at him, her soft green eyes drinking in her son. "Hi, yourself."

They'd seen each other a month ago, and they'd been civil, more so than he and his father had been. But there was still tension. "I straightened out my life, can I come in?"

She stepped aside.

That was a good sign, and he could admit to himself that he'd worried she'd close the door in his face rather than let him in.

Not much had changed on the inside of the house, either. Had he expected it to change? Maybe a little. The living room was still set up the same, with the same cocoa brown sofa and chair and the family pictures still lining the fireplace mantel. The scent of food—probably from lunch—was still prominent in the air. "I was told you don't have much time before you have to head to work. Got ten?"

His mother shut the door and nodded. "I've got that. Want a drink or something?"

"I'm fine. You look good." His mother was not a stunning beauty, but she was beautiful. She had short, red hair that framed a delicate face that still looked as young now as it had years before. If she ever

gained an ounce, he'd never seen it. She was, and probably always would be, stick thin.

"So do you. Come, sit." She led him to the sofa and they sat down, each on one end. "When did you get into town?"

"About half an hour ago. Beth brought me in. I was speeding," he explained.

"Oh, Justin," she sighed.

"It was stupid, I know, but I wasn't paying attention—" He shook his head. "Let's not get into that. I saw Dad." He watched her face for a reaction.

"And...?"

Didn't get one. "I live to tell the tale. It was short, not sweet, and, well...now I'm here."

"How long will you be staying?"

"Not sure, yet. I guess it depends on you and Dad."

"So you're keeping your promise to your grandfather."

Justin cocked his head to the side. "How do you know about that?"

She shrugged, picking some unseen lint from the arm of the sofa. "Grandma told me. Are you serious about this? Because if you're not, get back in your car and go home."

His heart felt that statement with a heavy thud. "Well, nothing like feeling the love."

She took his face in her hand and tilted it up. "I do love you, baby. I have and always will love you. But you have to make an effort to change, to fix what's wrong and want to fix it." She laid her hand on his heart. "Truly want to fix it. Because if you don't really want this, then all you're doing is hurting those that love you most." She kissed his cheek, then stood. "I have to go to work. You're welcome to stay here while you're in town."

"I don't think that's a good idea." He stood with his mother and walked to the door, feeling like someone had cut out his heart. And when he climbed behind the wheel of his flashy red Porsche, Justin actually contemplated heading back home and forgetting about making amends.

Then he saw Beth strolling down the sidewalk, and he halted his plans momentarily. Slipping from the car, Justin leaned against the hood and waited. Damn, she looked hot in that uniform.

"Fancy meeting you here." She barely looked up at him before heading to her parents' house. Sliding off the hood, he hurried to-

wards her. "Hold up," he pleaded when she kept walking. "Beth, wait up."

She spun around, stopping short, and he nearly rammed into her. "What?"

"Hi." He flashed a wide grin, only to have her pivot and walk away. Letting out an exasperated breath, Justin went after her. "Come on. What's your deal? Why are you pissed at me?" She spun on him again, only this time he was prepared for it. But not the cold stare she shot back at him.

"Why am I pissed? Got a year? No, you don't," she interrupted him when he opened his mouth to speak. "Because you'll be out of here before sunset and back to your own little world, forgetting about all the people you left behind."

She stomped up the stairs to her home, and he hurried after her, nearly losing his nose when she slammed the door in his face. "Jesus, Beth." As he'd done so many times in his past, he simply opened the door, feeling right at home, and followed her inside. "Will you just stop for one second and talk to me. Oh, hi, Uncle Tom. What's shaking?"

"Go away, Justin," Beth barked at him, then darted down the hall to her room.

"Hello, Justin," Uncle Tom finally said, standing to greet Justin with an outstretched hand.

"Sorry to just barge in." He took his uncle's hand in a solid shake. "Man, you haven't changed one iota. You're still as big as a house. Did I ever tell you how much I envied your muscles?"

"A few times. When did you get back?"

"An hour ago. Great to see you again." Darting down the hall, Justin didn't bother to knock on Beth's bedroom door and threw it open.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screeched, pulling her shirt against her breasts. "Get out!"

"Sorry. Damn, sorry," he repeated, shutting the bedroom door with a snap. Leaning against the wall next to her room, Justin let out a long breath. That had been quite the sight to behold, however brief it had been. When she threw the door open and stomped out, he bolted right after her. "Damn it, Beth, just talk to me." He grabbed her arm and what happened next totally shocked him.

Not to mention knocking him flat on his ass.

She sucker punched him right in the nose.

"Elizabeth!" his uncle hollered, rushing to Justin.

"He had it coming," she justified.

"Grab a damp cloth and some ice," he ordered her, then knelt down in front of Justin. "You okay, son?"

"Been a while since I've been knocked silly. Yeah, I think I am." He wasn't about to admit his face throbbed like a bitch and he was seeing stars. "I think she's pissed at me."

"What was your first clue?" Beth snarled at Justin, then handed her father the ice and cloth. He barely had it in his hands when she stomped through the room and left the house.

"Yep, she's pissed at you." His uncle nodded, pressing the cloth to Justin's nose.

Justin hissed through his teeth, not from the cold but from the pain. "Damn, she has a tough fist."

"Yeah, she does." Tom grinned like a proud father.

"So, what's new in your life?"

"Became a grandfather." He dabbed at the blood under Justin's nose.

"No shit. Beth?"

"Tyler."

"Ty has a kid?"

"And a wife."

"Jesus," Justin hissed again when Thomas laid the ice back on his nose. "When did all this happen?"

"A year ago. Tommy's three months old."

"Tommy?" Justin smiled. "Names his first son after dear old dad. Must make you proud?"

"It really does." Tom beamed.

"What about Kevin?"

"He's going to university in the city, comes home on the weekends."

"And Beth? Besides being pissed at me." He never expected her to sucker punch him in the face. Sure, in their youth they'd slugged each other in the arm now and then, but it was a far cry from getting slammed in the face.

"Still single and living at home. Well, I stopped the bleeding, but you'll have a shiner."

"Been a while since I had one. Adds to my charm. Thanks a bunch, Uncle Tom."

"Anytime. Good to have you back, Justin."

With a nod, Justin left the house. He'd give it time to see if he was glad to be back.



Her fist was throbbing like a son of a bitch and she regretting popping Justin in the face. But damn it, he just brought the nasty out in her. And really, she should give herself credit for waiting so long to do so. There'd been several opportunities since she'd first seen him that she could have popped him. He should be lucky she held herself back for so long.

Damn it, why had she hit him?

She'd promised herself not to care if he ever returned. Yet...

Why was he home now? Why did he have to look so damn good? Why did he have to affect her the way he did?

Why? Why? Why?

Agh! She was going to rip her hair out.

"Afternoon, Officer Healy."

"Afternoon, Miss Della. Lovely day we're having." Beth smiled at the elderly woman as they met on the sidewalk.

"That we are. You enjoy it while it lasts." Miss Della waved as she departed.

"I will. Have a nice day." She waved back and the sting in her knuckles reminded her of her fury.

Justin was damn lucky she only popped him once.

Six years was a long time to not see someone you once called your best friend. It had taken every ounce of willpower she had not to throw her arms around him when she'd pulled him over on the highway. Maybe if she hadn't been on duty, she might have—no, she still wouldn't have. Her pride wouldn't have allowed it.

She would not let him know how much she missed him. The louse deserved to be in pain right now. He'd done nothing but cause her pain for the past six years. It was time he felt some of what she was feeling.

She just wished he felt the ache in his heart like she felt in hers.

Hands in her pockets, Beth walked the streets of the town she called home.

Heartsick.



He had a mound of paperwork to go through and about a dozen emails to read, but Vic sat simply staring at his computer screen. His mind, obviously, was not on his work.

His only son was back, and he wasn't too sure what to think about it.

Vic knew he was doing well for himself. He and Julia had been kept up to date on their son, thanks to Julia's parents. Justin owned a night club and was making enough money to live more than comfortably. And, he'd stayed out of trouble.

But the reason for him being home was what bothered Vic. A promise to his dying grandfather, but did Justin actually mean to make amends, or was he simply fulfilling part of his promise in hopes it would appease his own conscience.

Time would tell, he supposed.

"Daydreaming?"

Vic looked up and saw his wife standing in the doorway, a smile bright on her lips. She was his light, his world, and he loved her as much now, if not more, than he had when they'd married twenty-five years ago. "Only of you, doll."

"You'd better be. Busy?"

"Oh yeah." He shut his computer down and stood to take her into his arms. "But it can wait. Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I'm on a break. Our son is home."

He held her, just savoring the feel of her. "Yes, he is."

"You think he'll stay longer than tonight?"

"Not sure. He come by to see you?" he asked, releasing her to sit on the edge of his desk.

She nodded while she took the chair. "I didn't have long to visit with him, though. If he's still here tomorrow, I was thinking of having a family meal. Would you be up for that?"

"I'm up for it if you are."

"I want him to stay home for good, but I know that's not going to happen. Hell, I want so much of what I can't have."

"Like a normal son who didn't run away from his problems and stayed home to be with his family?"

She nodded solemnly. "He's doing better for himself, but..."

"You have to wonder if he's sincere in why he's here."

"Yeah. I'm a bad mother, but I just don't know if I can trust him."

Vic stood and took hold of her hands.

"Doll, stand in line. You're not the only one."



Well, here he was, back in Passion and staying in a crummy hotel. The last time he'd rented a room in the Passions Inn had been the night

of graduation when he'd convinced Leanne Monroe to let him ease her out of her virginal burden. They'd been dating for three months and Lea had promised she'd sleep with him when they graduated. She kept to her promise, though it hadn't been the greatest experience. The first time never was. For women at least. But he'd shown her how beautiful the act of lovemaking could be plenty of times after that. Then she'd dumped him for a city boy and Justin never saw her again.

He'd left shortly after that anyway, so it all worked out.

Dropping his bag on the bed, Justin looked around the room. It consisted of one queen-sized bed draped in a horrible hue of pea soup vomit which matched the drapes. One round table sat near the window with two chairs beside it, and the twenty-inch TV on the rustic looking dresser looked like it had been there since he'd brought Leanne to the room six years ago. Stepping into the washroom, he noted that nothing much had changed here, either. Dull white walls with a yellow marble sink, and a mustard colored tub and toilet. At least it was clean.

Pulling out a drawer, he laid his clothing inside, then hung up the shirts he didn't want wrinkled. He tossed his bag in the closet, then stripped out of his black leather jacket and hung it over a chair.

Home sweet home.

Grabbing the remote, Justin made himself comfortable on the bed, then picked up the telephone book to look for take-out delivery. Thank God they still had the same pizza place. Vinnie's Pizza Palace had had phenomenal pizza before he'd left. He just hoped they hadn't changed their recipe in his absence.

Dialing the number, Justin ordered a large loaded and a bottle of Coke to go. They told him it would be half an hour, so now all he had to do was wait. Clicking on the TV, Justin flipped through the pathetic fifteen channels the hotel allowed their guests to view and waited for his pizza.

An hour later, having filled his belly, Justin clicked the TV off. There wasn't anything worth watching on TV.

Grabbing his jacket, Justin decided to head to the bar.