

ROMEO, ROMEO

By

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For Mary,
sorella mia, amica mia

CHAPTER 1

The hand cupping Maggie's breast piqued her dormant perceptions. Gian's hand, she knew. Strong yet gentle, possessive but giving, his hand brought a dreamy smile to her lips as she opened her eyes and saw the pearly gray of dawn polishing the windows behind the sheers.

Her smile widened when she realized it had happened again. They slept in a king-size bed. As often as not, however, she awakened to find they were sharing the same pillow. This morning was no exception.

The steady tide of Gian's breathing wafted over her nape, winnowing the tousled array of her hair and warming the shell of her ear. His muscular arm held her close; his bare chest mantled her satin-sheathed back; his long legs were bent at the knees to accommodate the curve of her buttocks. A hint of the soap he'd used in the shower last night, a subtle blend of old world spice and new millennium man, teased her nostrils.

A morning person, Maggie liked to start her day with a power walk. It got her blood pumping and her brain going. Better, it put her in the right frame of mind for taking on the bad guys. This morning, though, she wanted to stay right where she was. Wanted to press her cheek deeper into the pillow she shared with Gian and float on this cloud of sensation just a little while longer.

She slid her heavy-lidded gaze to the nightstand. The glowing green digits on the clock-radio read 5:50. Stifling a yawn, she debated her options. If she got up and into her exercise clothes, she could get in a half-hour walk before the alarm went off at six-thirty. But that would mean forfeiting these few extra moments with Gian, a real crime given the kiss-and-run nature of their schedules this last week. And besides, she reasoned hazily, every good attorney knew the value of a timely continuance.

It took her all of about ten seconds to make her decision.

She would walk this evening when she got home from work, she promised herself. Right now, though . . . she insinuated one of her legs between Gian's and ran the sole of her foot down the hairy length of his calf. Cocooned against time, she emitted a small sigh and closed her eyes.

Then opened them again when Gian began fondling her breast through the bodice of her nightgown. The friction of skin on satin roused her entire nerve system. A soft moan of pleasure flowed from her lips when his thumb flicked over her nipple.

"You're awake." The rough texture of his voice, combined with his smooth

caress, stoked the slow burn he had started in her belly.

She rubbed her bottom against his erection and said in a silken tone, “I was having the most erotic dream.”

He nosed her hair out of the way and nuzzled the side of her neck, priming her pulse. “Starring anyone special?”

Lying spooned against him, Maggie couldn’t see Gian’s face. No matter. Every feature—from those striking Venetian blue eyes surrounded by thick black lashes, to the nose that was as slightly off-center as his sense of humor, to that crisply etched mouth—was forever engraved in her heart.

“Good morning”—she reached behind her and closed her hand around him—“man of my dreams.”

“Turn over.” He issued the order on a near-groan.

Maggie released him and rolled over so that the tawny strands of her hair became tangled with his wavy black ones on the pillow. Gian bicycled his legs until he’d worked the sheet down to their hips, then kicked it to the foot of the bed where it joined the floral tapestry duvet they’d neatly folded back the night before. They lay just a breath apart, she wearing the short green chemise that matched the flecks in her hazel eyes and he clad in nothing but taut, tanned skin.

“Good morning, yourself . . .” He looked down at the ivory swell of her breasts above the piped V neckline of her nightgown, then leered up at her comically. “Ms. *Prosecutie*.”

“Says every dirty rotten defendant’s last best hope?” she challenged pertly.

“Guilty as charged,” he agreed, flashing a not-so-innocent version of the smile that had helped him sway a fair number of female jurors.

The laughter in her eyes belied the sigh she expelled. “Romeo, Romeo—”

“Sounds like the perfect name for a law—”

“Objection.” She laid her index finger vertically against his lips before he could renew his long-standing argument for forming their own firm.

He kissed her silencing finger contritely, though his expression was anything but. “Sustained.”

“As I was about to ask,” she continued in a wry variant of her crisp, courtroom voice. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Well, for starters—” He worked her nightgown up and over her head.

“Good start,” she murmured approvingly as he tossed it aside.

“And then . . .” He skimmed his palm up her thigh to find her, already wet.

The cool metal of his ring sizzled against her heated flesh as she danced on his fingertips. After all their shared hours in bed, he knew her rhythm. Slowly at first and then faster . . . faster!

“Gian!” Maggie practically sobbed his name when she came.

He rolled her onto her back and rose above her. Feeling his fierce passion graze the sensitive insides of her thighs, she opened them wide. But he didn’t rush to penetrate her. Instead, he held himself immobile and smiled down into her radiant face.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said huskily.

Maggie knew better. Having lived with her face for thirty-two years, she could easily enumerate its flaws—the nose that was a shade too long; the mouth that tended to be a mite too stern at times; the jaw that was just a tad too square. But when Gian looked

at her the way he was now, through eyes that shone with love, she felt like the most beautiful woman in the world.

“It’s you.” She reached up, her ring catching a ray of the growing light filtering through the sheer-paneled balcony doors, and brushed her fingertips over his lips. “You make me beautiful.”

Gian’s mouth came down hard and forcefully then, but Maggie was ready for it. She wreathed her arms around him and parted her lips to taste the raw passion of his tongue. A swell of longing rose inside her, a glorious wave of heat that threatened to suck her under, and she wondered for a fleeting instant how it was that he could still make her feel the urgency of the first time.

As their kiss deepened, heightening their need for each other, her hands smoothed over his taut buttocks and sinewy back. Her heart ached for him as her fingers traced the small raised scars from the rotator cuff surgery that had ruined his chances of becoming a major league baseball pitcher. Then she moved on, as he’d had to, taking pure female pleasure in the bunch and flow of male muscle under her palms.

The tiny protest that escaped her throat when his mouth left hers turned into a purr of pleasure as he bent his head to kiss her breasts. She drew in a long breath as his lips nibbled one hardened nipple, then the other. Exhaled that breath on an encouraging moan when he branded her exquisitely receptive flesh with hot flicks of his tongue.

“You taste good, *cara*,” he whispered against her skin. “Like gardenias.”

“Bath gel.” She sighed, half-plea, half-protest, when he raised his head.

He ran his finger over the whisker burns his morning beard had left on her skin. “Sorry about that.”

She looked down at the light abrasion, then tweaked his chest hair and pursed her lips in a pretense of pique. “Do you know the sanction for whiskering an officer of the court?”

Masculine pride flexed its muscles in his smile. “You ain’t seen nothing’ yet, Counselor.”

“Oh, yeah?” she challenged playfully.

“Oh, yeah,” he promised, then thrust forward.

Their gazes fused as he fully seated himself in her snug warmth. She could feel him pulsing inside her, hot and virile, becoming so much a part of her that she hadn’t the foggiest notion of where he ended and she began. He filled her and stretched her and made her body sing for more.

“Not bad for nearly five years,” he said smugly.

“Don’t forget the three months we dated,” she reminded him saucily.

“Oh, I haven’t.” And to prove it, he gripped her hips and made a rolling motion, forward and back, that sent sweet spasms rocketing from her belly to her brain.

She closed her thighs around him, hugging him tighter, and responded with a lissome movement of her own. “Neither have I.”

Their eyes met again as they savored the memory of the first time they’d made love. It had happened in his office, and, like lightning, it had shocked them to the core. And left them craving more.

“I love you, Margaret Kelly Romeo.” His voice was deep and dark and full of emotion.

Her heart melted anew at his vehement declaration. After accepting his marriage

proposal, she'd told him that she was planning to keep her maiden name for professional reasons. In response, he'd looked pointedly around her townhouse, filled with mementos of her privileged childhood and Ivy League pedigree. Then he'd turned back to her with a simple plea. "All I have to give you is my name. You have everything else."

She'd changed her mind. And on their wedding day, she'd changed her name.

"I love you too, Gian Luigi Romeo." Her voice held an equally husky ardor as her eyes locked with his. She saw herself reflected there, in that vivid blue, and everything she was focused on him.

Their mouths melded with a fervor that kissed their souls. Their hands, adorned by matching platinum bands, linked tight. And the room shimmered with a pale gold light as they soared toward the promise of a perfect day.

La dolce vita, Gian thought as he listened to the musical splash of the shower in the adjoining bathroom. That's what he was leading, all right: the sweet life.

When the alarm had gone off, Maggie had hit the "snooze" button and drowsed in his arms until it buzzed a second time. Then she had reluctantly slipped out of bed so she could start getting ready for her 9:30 docket call. He, on the other hand, was still lying amid the rumpled sheets, wearing only that night's growth of beard and a complacent smile.

And why not? He was married to a smart, sexy woman who could hold her own with any man—himself included. In the courtroom, they played adversarial roles. She had a winning record that was the envy of prosecutors statewide; he had a reputation as a high-profile defense attorney with a price tag to match. Even now, after almost five years of mostly smooth sailing with occasionally heavy storms, he still believed they were made for each other.

Their courtship had been short and somewhat rocky but spectacularly romantic. Both were extremely busy people, but each had managed to carve out precious time from their schedules to be together, to blend the intellect with the interest, to explore, compare, question, and make love. Though professional ethics had dictated that she recuse herself from cases involving his clients, they'd often argued merit when they were alone.

But love was the greatest argument of all. Feelings couldn't be found in law books. Emotions couldn't be summed up in briefs. So they'd learned to leave their differences at the door to their bedroom, where they became one flesh, one spirit. The tremors that started in him ended in her, rocking them in the tension of their release until they sank into triumphant oblivion.

Memories of their recent lovemaking sent heat surging through Gian's loins. He grinned wolfishly at the realization that he was getting hard again. Then he glanced at the clock, remembered he had an appointment with a new client this morning, and decided it was time he worked up a lather of a different sort.

The plush carpet muted his footsteps as he headed into the bathroom to shave.

Growing up as the oldest of four kids, Gian had never known the meaning of privacy. Had never even imagined an extravagance such as the master suite he now shared with Maggie. His parents, a carpenter and a homemaker, had always understood the value of a dollar. They had seen to it that their children did, too. Now there wasn't a

day that dawned when he didn't look around and tell himself that he was one lucky *goombah*.

Sand-pale walls served as the perfect backdrop for draperies and upholstery printed with rosy blooms. An overstuffed chair and matching ottoman provided a comfortable spot to curl up with a good book or to organize a laptop file the night before a trial. Garden prints framed in antique gold brought the outdoors in, while Gian and Maggie's wedding picture and numerous family photographs beamed lovingly from their silver surrounds.

The combination dressing room and bathroom was as efficient as the bedroom was elegant. His-and-Hers closets allowed them to keep their extensive wardrobes separate, while a marble vanity, indented with twin sinks and topped by a wall-length mirror, guaranteed plenty of elbowroom during the morning rush hour. The whirlpool tub was big enough for two, as was the walk-in shower christened by a skylight.

Not bad for a guy who was playing on an entirely different field of dreams than he'd once envisioned, Gian mused as he stared at his beard-shadowed reflection in the mirror.

He couldn't quite remember the fresh-faced rookie who'd been drafted by the majors straight out of college. The puckered white scars on his right shoulder, however, served as a constant reminder that life had thrown him a curve. All during law school, toward which he'd turned his penchant for debate when his doctor told him that he would never pitch professionally, and clear up to the time he met Maggie, he'd wondered where the next foul ball was coming from.

There was no sense in dwelling on the past, he told himself now as he picked up his porcelain shaving mug and boar bristle brush. He had a beautiful wife, a home that was a showplace by anyone's standards, and a lucrative legal practice that was as gratifying in its way as he had once hoped his baseball career would be. What more could a man ask?

Except . . .

Gian frowned with annoyance when he reached for his razor and came up empty-handed. He turned, knowing what he would see even before he looked through the glass door. Sure enough, Maggie sat on the built-in bench opposite the brass shower tower, shaving her legs with his razor.

Sunshine poured in through the skylight, bathing her with beauty. Wet tendrils of her hair clung to the side of her neck, and water sheeted down from her collarbone to her hipbone. One slim foot was perched on a small ceramic pedestal that jutted out of the tiled wall as she blithely shaved her leg.

A far cry from the first time he saw her, he thought, his annoyance vanishing as he recalled the pinned-back hair and prim black suit she had been wearing when she'd rushed into the courtroom that fateful morning five years ago . . .

"I'm sorry I'm late, Your Honor." Her breathless apology had been accompanied by the brisk click of her high heels on the polished marble floor.

Gian had yet to meet the prosecutor in the drive-by-shooting that he was defending, but he was already furious with her. He'd shown up at 9:00 sharp for the preliminary hearing, only to be left cooling his jets at the defense table while his client, a nervous twenty-year-old with couple of petty theft priors, played a jangling rendition of

“Jailhouse Rock” on his handcuffs.

Now that his tardy nemesis had finally deigned to enter her appearance, he swiveled in his chair to shoot her an it’s-about-damn-time look.

And felt a bolt of desire tighten his thorax.

Shortly after first-degree murder charges were filed against his client for the fatal shooting of a ten-year-old girl, there’d been a shake-up in the prosecutor’s office. In a move that had caught everyone involved by surprise, the lead attorney on the team that handled drug-related crimes had been pulled off the case. Even more astonishing, an assistant by the name of Maggie Kelly had been promoted to first chair.

Wanting to get the scoop on her, Gian had called a couple of other defense lawyers. Nothing they’d said had boded well for his client. Some of his colleagues had called her “Go For the Jugular” Kelly because when she thought a crime had been committed she went for the throat. Worse, all of them had complained that she was loath to make a deal.

What no one had bothered to add was that she had the kind cool beauty that could bring a hot-blooded man to his knees.

Tall and willowy and dressed to chill, she didn’t spare him so much as a glance as she pushed open the picket-fenced bar enclosure and carried her briefcase toward the prosecution table. Her hair was neither blond nor brown but more the color of wild honey in the courtroom’s artificial lighting. When she swept past him, Gian breathed in the subtle scent of gardenias.

Judge Thomas Murphy looked up from the stack of status reports he’d been reviewing. Over six feet tall and thickly built, his black robe gave him an aura of dominance. He was impatient with the unprepared, notoriously unsympathetic to the guilty and a stickler for promptness.

But now his eyes twinkled mischievously behind his tortoise shell-framed glasses. And his voice was as mild as Gian had ever heard it when he said, “I’m pleased you were able to join us today, Ms. Kelly.”

“I was waiting for the police photographs of the crime scene to be developed, Your Honor,” she explained as she opened her briefcase and removed a manila envelope. “May I approach the bench?”

“Certainly,” he said.

From his place in the well, Gian watched her cut around the prosecution table, taking in those stiletto heels—a power play on a woman of her height—and a pair of silk-encased legs that probably took her an eternity to cross.

When she stood on tiptoe to hand the envelope across the bench, he caught a glimpse of the weblike black lace that bordered the hem of her slip. Immediately aroused by the sheer femininity of it, he forced his unwilling gaze upward. And wondered what other frilly little garments she might be wearing under that mannish looking suit.

As if sensing that he was mentally undressing her, she turned and met his speculative gaze with a challenging tilt of her chin.

He stood and threw down a gantlet of his own. “I object to the admission of the photographs, Your Honor.”

“On what grounds, Mr. Romeo?” the judge asked him.

“On the grounds that their prejudicial impact outweighs their probative value,” he answered.

“You haven’t even seen them yet,” Maggie rebutted.

“Which means the People have failed to follow the rules of discovery,” Gian pointed out.

“I have copies for defense counsel.” She returned to the prosecution table and produced a second envelope, which she handed to him. “And I would remind Your Honor that the introduction of photographs as evidence that a felony has been committed is standard practice in a preliminary hearing.”

They argued about the admission of the photographs until Judge Murphy, correctly guessing that tempers were about to flare, ordered a ten-minute recess.

“Ms. Kelly.” In the crowded hallway outside the courtroom, Gian caught up with her and introduced himself.

“I know who you are, Mr. Romeo.” She ignored his extended hand and just stood there, all buttoned up and brimming with impatience. “I’m also well-acquainted with the kind of skanks you represent. Dopers, robbers, murder —”

“All of whom are entitled to the same presumption of innocence as you or I.” Dropping his hand, he delivered his civics lesson with a smile.

She nodded, but the fire in her eyes gave the lie to her cool concession. “What do you want?”

With time at a premium he cut to the chase. “Look, my client didn’t kill that little girl, but he knows who—”

“Spare me the SODDI defense,” she snapped.

“This isn’t your typical ‘some other dude did it,’” he argued. “My client is the fall guy here. But he knows who pulled the trigger and he’s ready to deal.”

She didn’t so much as bat an eye at the offer he was making her. “I’ve got a witness who can put him in the car, and—”

“He’s already admitted as much,” Gian acknowledged. “He needed a ride home from the party.”

“I’ve also got his fingerprints on the gun,” she added.

He refused to be baited. “So he held the gun while the driver got in the car. Big deal. That might make him stupid but it doesn’t mean he’s a murderer.”

“A little girl is dead,” she reminded him, stone-faced.

“It’s a tragic case, no doubt about it. But do you honestly believe that a jury is going to give my client the death penalty on snitch evidence?” When she blinked, confirming his suspicion that she was aware that her star witness’s story had problems, he pressed home his point. “Especially when the snitch got such a sweet deal in exchange for testifying against my client?”

She let out an exasperated breath. “My predecessor turned him, not me.”

“Which is why your predecessor is off the case,” he said, sticking the needle in a little deeper. “He flipped the wrong guy.”

She glanced at her watch. “Our recess is over, Mr. Romeo.”

He reached to open the heavy door for her. “One more thing, Ms. Kelly.”

Pausing, she tipped her head back to keep her gaze level with his. “What?”

“I’ve heard that your witness says that my client got out of the car to fire the gun.” He’d heard no such thing, but that didn’t keep him from trying to ferret out any information that the prosecution might be withholding.

“So?” she inquired with a degree of caution he found heartening.

He let her stew in her own juices for a few seconds before he jumped in and splashed them all over her. "So, I'm just wondering why the police didn't find any spent shells on the ground."

Her face going blank as a new slate, she squared her shoulders and marched back into the courtroom.

She'd had reason to smile a few moments later, however. Judge Murphy had ruled in her favor and allowed her to enter the pictures of the crime scene into the record. Gian's request for bail was then denied and his client was bound over for trial.

Five minutes after the courthouse doors opened the next morning, Gian had filed a motion to remove Maggie as the prosecuting attorney, claiming that her refusal to deal was tantamount to an obstruction of justice.

Months later she had reluctantly admitted that she understood the underlying reasons for his first motion. It was, after all, the kind of nitty-gritty, in-the-trenches, retail lawyering he was paid to do. She'd yet to forgive him for that second motion, though . . .

Now, standing in the bathroom they shared with shaving soap drying on his face, he beamed at the realization that he finally had her on the defensive. A nice change, he mused. And one he decided to use to his own advantage.

When he knocked on the shower door, Maggie dropped her leg and glanced up guiltily at him through the glass. Droplets of water jeweled her eyelashes and glistened on her breasts. Steam flushed her skin and a tiny pulse beat in the shiny hollow of her throat. Just looking at her, Gian felt himself stir again.

"I'm almost done," she said, bending to rinse a lingering soap bubble off her leg.

His gaze skimmed over her with increasing interest. "Where's your razor?"

"The blade was dull."

"So you borrowed mine."

Maggie sat up straight and, wagging the razor, gave him a sly, come-and-get-it smile. "And possession is nine points of the law."

La dolce vita indeed, Gian rejoiced as he opened the door and joined her in the shower.

"Grapefruit or orange?" Maggie held up two cartons of juice, one in each hand, so Gian could choose which he wanted.

He didn't look all that interested in either. "Got any tomato juice?"

"I'll check." She put the cartons back, closed the refrigerator door and crossed to the pantry to look.

He opened the bread drawer. "English muffin or toast?"

She snagged a bottle of tomato juice off the shelf. "I'm lunching with the victims' rights group today, so I'll just have cereal."

"Which reminds me, I've got a game this evening." Gian played on his firm's team in the bar association's slow-pitch league. It wasn't exactly how he had pictured himself winding up. Or was that winding down? Whatever, it didn't hurt his arm and it helped to keep him in shape. Not to mention in the game he'd loved his entire life.

Since he'd made the coffee, Maggie poured. "I'll probably be too full for dinner,

anyway.”

“That’s what you said the last time you lunched with them.” He popped a slice of bread in the toaster for himself, then got a bowl out of the cupboard for her.

“Can I help it if I can’t resist your ratatouille?” she teased as she traded the juice bottle for the cereal bowl.

He shook up the tomato juice, then shot her a quick, arrogant grin. “Anything else of mine that you find irresistible?”

Flicking back the bangs of her blow-dried hair, she handed him a glass before he could drink from the bottle. “I’ll give you three guesses, and the first two don’t count.”

Breakfast was the exception to the rule of domestic democracy in the Romeo household. Ordinarily, Gian did the grocery shopping and the cooking while Maggie paid the cleaning lady and the man who mowed the lawn. But with both of them pressed for time every morning, it was imperative that each did their part to get the first meal of the day on the table. So they divided the labor as equitably as they divided the *Kansas City Star*.

“The Royals won.” Gian always started with the sports pages.

Maggie read the metropolitan section first. “The mayor is under fire again.”

“Pass the jam.”

“Oh, no!”

“What, we’re out of jam?” He looked up, perplexed as to why such a minor dilemma should produce such a major reaction on her part.

“Uncle Tommy is retiring.” She stared down in dismay at the above-the-fold article she had been reading.

Gian shrugged and helped himself to the small glass compote. “It’s about time ol’ Judge Roy Bean hung ’em up.”

Maggie slapped his hand, only half in jest. “He’s been a good judge.”

“For the prosecution.”

“Defense attorneys,” she muttered.

He gave her his rogue’s gallery grin. “We’re just doing our part to keep you jack-booted thugs from trampling the Constitution.”

“I wonder if Dad knew beforehand.” Her recently retired father and Judge Murphy had been friends since their law school days.

“I’m sure he did.”

“Why do you say that?”

Gian swallowed a bite of toast and smiled. “*Alimentary*, my dear. They still have lunch together at least once a week.”

Maggie groaned at the bad pun, then poured skim milk on her cereal. “I’m going to call my parents before they leave for the lake today, so I’ll ask him then.”

They finished both their breakfast and the newspaper in companionable silence.

Morning sunlight poured in generously through the windows that made up three walls of the breakfast area, eliminating any need to use the imposing iron chandelier that hung over the table.

Gian and Maggie had rented a maintenance-provided villa in suburban Kansas City after they were married. It wasn’t because they couldn’t afford to buy a house. Rather, they were both so wrapped up in their careers they had neither the time nor the inclination to take care of one.

That changed three years ago when they bought a red brick Georgian that had fallen into serious disrepair because the elderly owner could no longer maintain it. The asking price had seemed more than fair considering its run-down condition. Plus, it was in a prime location, just a few blocks south of the Country Club Plaza and only twenty minutes in heavy traffic from their respective downtown offices.

Rather than disrupt their busy schedules waiting around for plumbers and carpenters and painters, they hired Gian's father to act as the general contractor and left those headaches to him. The work took most of a year and cost about twice as much as they had anticipated. But in the end, they agreed, it was worth it.

"I wonder who the governor will appoint to replace Uncle Tommy." Maggie began loading the dishwasher, being careful not to splash water on her khaki linen jacket dress, as she spoke.

Gian mulled that over while he cleared the table, returning the milk carton to the refrigerator and setting the juice bottle beside it. "Someone a little more defense-oriented, I hope."

She ducked into the half-bath across from the laundry room to slip the posts of scrolled gold earrings into her lobes and to apply lipstick. He squeezed in behind her to button his heavily-starched shirt collar and to knot the silk jacquard tie that he'd left dangling around his neck during breakfast. The small bathroom should have felt crowded with both of them putting on the finishing touches. But they had long since learned to avoid each other's elbows.

"You're still holding a grudge because Uncle Tommy threatened to sanction you if you didn't stop filing those ridiculous motions to remove me from that murder case," she accused.

"I'd have kept filing them, sanctions be damned, if I hadn't seen some cracks in your armor after the second one," he agreed.

Maggie frowned at his smug reflection in the mirror above the pedestal sink. He might think it was funny but the memory of his legal shenanigans still annoyed her. "I was so angry and embarrass—"

"And horny." Gian smiled, remembering the way she had come storming into his office after the trial like a force of nature unleashed. Because he enjoyed getting a rise out of her, he bumped her gently from behind. "You were really horny."

"What did you spread on your toast?" she demanded tartly, and bumped him back. "Jam or ginseng?"

He just laughed and finished knotting his tie.

"Uh-oh." A glance at her watch had her spinning away from the mirror. "I'm running late."

"Far be it from me to delay justice," he drawled as he trailed her out of the half-bath.

"Says the 'King of Continuances'?"

"Smart-ass."

"You love it," she tossed over her shoulder.

He reached out and patted her bottom appreciatively. "Damn right I do."

Gian's leather briefcase sat next to Maggie's new messenger bag on the bottom step of the back staircase. He grabbed his and then opened the door. She snagged hers and preceded him out to the detached garage, where her new Ford Escape lorded it over

his 1970 DeVille convertible.

He punched the remote button to raise the double doors, then gave her a hand as she climbed into her car. She lowered the driver's-side window and leaned out. Their mouths met in a good-bye kiss.

"Your lipstick is smeared," he said huskily when they broke apart.

She couldn't help but smile at the smoky rose imprint she'd left on his mouth.

"So's yours."

His eyes were dark and smoldering in the dimly lit garage. "Wanna play baseball groupie when I get home tonight?"

"Depends on how sweaty you are."

"How sweaty is too sweaty?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," she returned dryly.

Laughing, they exchanged another kiss before he cut around her SUV and slid into his vintage black Cadillac. But even as they went their separate ways, with Maggie easing into the flow of traffic heading downtown and Gian turning into their neighborhood service station to fill his gas tank, their minds were going in the same direction. Life just didn't get any better than this.