

Chapter One

“Gabbi!”

Gabriella Hansley looked up from the text messages on her phone and glanced back down the corridor.

At 6:30 PM on a Friday, the halls of CIA Headquarters were fairly empty. She was hoping to make it home for a bath, a glass of wine, and some Netflix.

Oh wow, Gab, what a wild life you lead.

She ignored her inner voice. She was fine with her life. It was exactly how she liked it.

Her phone chirped again. Another nasty message from her brother. *Ugh.*

“Gabbi?”

Now she spied Doug Bernard, a fellow CIA business analytics officer, poking his head out of his office.

“Hey, Doug, I’m on my way out,” she said.

Her colleague hurried over. He looked his usual ruffled self, including remnants of some spilled lunch on his shirt.

He held up his hands. “I have a *huge* favor to ask.”

Gabbi suppressed a groan. Doug always needed a favor. It often involved less work for Doug and more work for whomever he cornered.

“I really need to—”

“Look, I have an encrypted external drive and some paperwork that needs to get delivered

to a security contractor. He works for Sentinel Security out of New York. They're doing some work for us, and this data can't be shared online."

Gabbi had been with the CIA since she'd graduated from Georgetown University. She enjoyed her analyst role, evaluating and analyzing digital business data from around the world to help meet mission requirements. She knew she'd suck as a field agent, but she rocked her desk.

She'd heard of Sentinel Security. The private security firm in New York was run by a former CIA agent. One who people still talked about with hushed awe, tinged with fear.

"Look, Doug—"

He barreled over her. "So, the Sentinel contact's having dinner at the Lafayette Restaurant. I'm supposed to deliver this intel by hand today. He leaves D.C. tomorrow."

Gabbi's phone vibrated again. Probably her brother or her mother. Her stomach clenched painfully. They both gave her heartburn. She really needed an antacid.

She focused back on what Doug had said. The Lafayette was one of the top restaurants in D.C. She'd always wanted to go there. She'd heard it was elegant, with great food, and had amazing views over Lafayette Square to the White House and the Washington Monument.

She sighed. It was expensive and romantic. There was no way she'd ever eat there alone, and her dating game was very weak.

"Get to the point, Doug." She pictured her clawfoot tub filled with bubbles.

"So, I have a date." Doug's tone turned wheedling. "A second date. I *really* like this guy, Gabbi, and I don't want to cancel." He held up the tiny, matte-silver hard drive and slim file, his eyes pleading. "Please, please, can you take these to the contact?"

Gabbi's stomach dropped. One, from the fact that Doug seemed to have a better dating life than her. And two, the Lafayette was right in the center of the city, so she'd have to fight traffic, tourist, and people. She saw her fantasy of a bubble bath fading, all the bubbles

popping into nothingness in her head.

“I don’t think—”

“*Please.*” Doug clasped his hands together like he was praying. “You live in Georgetown. It’s practically on your way.”

She snorted. Hardly.

“Please, Gabbi. I really like this guy. I’ll owe you.”

“You’ll owe me big time.” She snatched the drive and file out of his hand.

“Totally.” He squeezed her arm. “Thank you. Thank you. The contact’s name is Matteo Mancini.”

As Doug turned, she shook her head. “Doug, you might want to change your shirt before your date.”

He looked down. “Right.” He waved at her. “Thanks again, Gabbi.”

Doug hurried down the hall, and Gabbi mentally called herself some choice names. It was like she had a gene for allowing people to walk all over her.

Usually, it was her family.

She’d fought hard to escape her family’s dysfunction. She’d moved across the city from her gambler father, alcoholic mother, and drug dealer brother.

Her sister had escaped, too. Jasmine was off traveling the world and rarely checked in. A slight, stinging sensation pricked at her heart, but Gabbi couldn’t really blame her sister.

Right. Time to brave the Friday evening traffic full of all the other people, tired from the week and desperate to get home.

“Or getting out and having a life, Gab,” she muttered. “You should try it sometime.”

No. She had a plan. One she’d hatched as a teenager desperate to escape the trailer she’d lived in. Get educated, get a good job, get a good house, and make a stable, secure life for herself.

She'd made that happen, and she wasn't letting anything ruin it.

Grumbling, she clutched the hard drive and file and headed for her car.

Battling the traffic did nothing to improve her mood. When Gabbi finally pulled her Tesla Model 3 up in front of the historic, grand entrance of the Hay-Adams Hotel that housed the Lafayette restaurant, her belly was rumbling with hunger, and her feet were aching.

She handed her keycard to the valet with a smile.

Oh, the hotel was gorgeous. Class and history oozed from its Italian Renaissance exterior. It was the kind of place she'd dreamed about visiting when she was a kid.

She ran her hands down her gray pencil skirt and white shirt. Her shirt was a little wilted, but she looked respectable. She headed inside.

More class greeted her. Wood paneling, arches, and old-world chandeliers hanging from the fancy, decorated ceiling.

Gabbi spotted the elevators and changed course. She spied several senators striding through the lobby. The British ambassador was standing nearby, the woman wearing a bright suit and scarf, chatting with a small group of people.

The elevators opened, and a tall, glamorous woman came into view.

She had to be almost six feet tall in her high heels. Her tiny, silver dress clung to her willowy, supermodel figure, and she had a fur stole—God, Gabbi hoped it wasn't the real thing—draped around her.

The woman tossed her mane of black hair over her slim shoulders and strode out. She'd no doubt have a fantastic name like Esmeralda or Ambrosia.

The woman flicked a glance at Gabbi for about half a second, her nose wrinkling. Clearly, Gabbi's skirt, plain shirt, and sensible pumps didn't pass muster.

Yes, yes, you think I'm dowdy and plain; I think you're superficial and shallow. Esmeralda stalked off like the Hay-Adams lobby was a Milan runway, and Gabbi stepped forward to

stop the elevator doors from closing.

She slipped inside and hit the button for the restaurant.

Okay, so she wasn't a glamazon. She didn't care. She didn't want to be. Growing up, she was lucky if her parents remembered to feed her, let alone clothe her in something fashionable.

She knew she wasn't unattractive. She was just...ordinary. Her hair wasn't blonde or brown, just somewhere in the middle. Light brown was the best description. Her eyes were blue. Okay, sort of blue-gray.

Some of the field agents she worked with were striking. Beautiful, confident, and quick on their feet, like her friend Devyn. The redhead was well on her way to making herself a legend at the CIA.

Gabbi shook her head. She was a CIA analyst, for God's sake. What mattered was making a good, secure life for herself, far away from her problem-riddled family.

The elevator stopped. Two men in dark suits, about her age, got on. They didn't even look her way.

Gabbi sighed and clutched the encrypted drive and file to her chest. She may as well be invisible. She eyed the men in front of her. One had a strong jaw and clean-cut, even features. She'd dated a few clean-cut men like that. D.C. was full of them. But she'd never clicked with any of them. She found most of them self-absorbed, too dedicated to their careers, or looking for a gorgeous creature like the one who'd exited the elevator earlier.

For a while, Gabbi had wanted a man in her life. A loving man who'd be her partner. Someone to travel and go out with, but mainly she wanted someone to come home to. To commiserate with on a bad day. To rub her feet when they were aching. To have regular sex with.

But after some bad dates and a lot of boring ones, she'd come to the conclusion that love

was a fairytale that the wedding industry made up to sell expensive dresses, cakes, and flowers. She'd seen her parents' explosive, abusive relationship and was certain that wasn't love. Her brother was usually dating several women at once, without any of them knowing.

No, she'd scratched *Man* off her plan.

Right now, she was focused on work, saving to renovate her downstairs bathroom, and maybe planning a holiday somewhere fun. France, Italy, or Greece would be nice. She'd always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower, the Coliseum, or Santorini.

The elevator slowed, and she shook her head. She was going to deliver this damn drive, get home, and have her wine in the bath.

The men in suits walked out ahead of her. She waited patiently for the elegant restaurant hostess to deal with them before she turned to Gabbi.

"Yes?" the woman said.

"I just have something to deliver to Mr. Mancini."

A look crossed the woman's beautiful face, followed by a dreamy smile. "Of course. He's at that table by the window." The woman pointed.

"Thank you." Gabbi took in the lovely décor of the restaurant, her gaze drawn to the spectacular view of the White House and the Washington Monument all lit up.

Now, if a guy took her here on a date, she'd be impressed.

Then her gaze moved to the man sitting alone at the table in front of the window.

Gabbi's steps faltered, and her mind went blank. She stared. Any thoughts of the suits in the elevator being attractive went up in smoke.

The man was looking at the glass of wine in his hand but still managed to seem like he was all coiled energy, ready to erupt.

He wasn't wearing his jacket and had rolled up his shirt sleeves to show off bronze skin and the corded muscles in his arms. Her gaze drifted upward.

He had a strong jaw covered in stubble, a straight nose, and the sexiest, most perfectly formed lips.

Her heart skipped a beat. Or maybe ten.

His hair was thick, nearly black, with a hint of a curl. He looked like a dark angel, a dangerous bad boy.

Then his gaze flicked up and met hers.

Her lower belly clenched. Something sexual oozed off him. Some sort of built-in instinct told her he'd be an extraordinary lover.

She wouldn't say no to a man like this—a magnificent man who'd make her fantasies come true.

Gabbi saw the Italian god's sexy lips quirk. He knew how he affected women. Hell, he probably dealt with rendering women speechless all day long.

Mancini. An Italian name.

Her brain clicked back into gear. He was her Sentinel Security contact, and crap, now she'd have to talk to him.

Preoccupied with his latest case, Matteo “Hades” Mancini didn't pay much attention to the woman staring at him.

He was used to getting second and third looks, come-hither smiles, and flirty glances.

He loved women in all their shapes, sizes, and varieties. This one didn't attract too much attention. She was medium height, not slim, but not overly curvy, and her light-brown hair was twisted up in a simple roll at the back of her head. Her clothes didn't draw any attention.

But as she straightened her shoulders and headed his way, his attention sharpened. She held a file and hard drive in her hand.

She didn't set off his radar. His years in the DIA—Direzioe Investigativa Antimafia—

hunting dangerous mafia syndicates in Italy, had made his radar finely tuned for danger.

He saw the woman open her mouth, fumble the file in her hand, then drop it. Papers flew everywhere, and the slim hard drive fell on the carpet with a thud.

The woman made an annoyed sound and crouched, grabbing at them.

Matteo rose, fighting amusement. There was nothing quite like affecting a woman. He squatted and reached for one of the papers.

She did the same thing at the same time, and their fingers brushed. She sucked in a breath and raised her head.

Their faces were only an inch apart. She froze, her lips parting.

Matteo froze as well, a strange sensation washing through him.

He clearly hadn't paid close enough attention to her before.

This close to her, he smelled her perfume. Feminine, but with a touch of heady musk. Her skin was a golden-honey color, and so fine and smooth he saw the blue tracery of veins beneath the surface. Her eyes were a unique, blue-gray color, clear and intriguing. A beautiful color he could look into all day.

And her lips. There was nothing ordinary about her plump, perfectly shaped, full lips.

Lips he suddenly wanted to taste. Corrupt.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was clear, with a husky undertone. She dragged her gaze off his face, grabbing at the rest of the papers and stuffing them into the folder.

Yes, this was a woman who you didn't notice until you looked a little harder.

"No need to be sorry, *bella*."

Those blue-gray eyes ticked back up to his. A faint pretty flush filled her cheeks.

"It is certainly no worry to fluster a pretty woman," he added.

Her brow creased. She grabbed the now-back-together file and stood.

Matteo rose, as well. The top of her head reached his chin, and now he could properly

appreciate the way her skirt hugged her gentle curves.

She cleared her throat and held out the file and hard drive.

“These are for you, Mr. Mancini.”

Now he frowned. “You’re the CIA analyst? I was expecting a man. Doug Bernard.”

“Yes, well, he had a previous commitment.”

She grumbled under her breath, and Matteo was pretty sure she’d said something about being a pushover.

He hid a smile. “He conned you into coming into the city to deliver this.”

She sniffed. “I do favors for my work colleagues when required.”

“Even when it ruins your Friday night plans?” Perhaps she’d had a date?

“Yes, but this was important.”

Matteo took the file and drive. He strangely didn’t like the idea of her having a date. At all. “*Grazie.*”

“*Prego,*” she responded.

He arched a brow. “You speak Italian?”

“A little.” She angled her chin. All Matteo could do was take in the creamy skin along her jaw line. He wanted to touch it, lick it.

He frowned. *Merda.* What was wrong with him? He’d spent many nights with more beautiful, experienced women than this one. He rarely had trouble controlling his desires or keeping things fun and temporary.

What was it about the slightly awkward woman that got to him?

“I speak Portuguese, some French, and Spanish and German as well,” she said.

“A woman with brains and beauty.”

Her flush deepened. “Are you making fun of me, Mr. Mancini?”

He shifted closer. “It’s Matteo, and of course not.”

“I’m not beautiful. I’m sure you have beautiful women throwing themselves at you all the time. You must know the difference.” She started to turn away.

He grabbed her arm. “*Bella*, beauty isn’t one thing. It isn’t what they show on the TV screen or on the pages of a magazine. It’s smooth golden skin, silky brown hair, a beauty spot on the side of a slim neck, begging for a man’s lips.”

Unconsciously, she lifted her hand to the small mark on her neck.

“It’s fathomless blue-gray eyes.” He leaned closer. “It’s sweet, subtle curves encased in a sexy skirt.”

He saw her eyes widen, and something flare in them. “Wow, you’re good.”

He scowled. “This isn’t a come-on.”

She pressed a hand to her hip. “No? No one has ever said any of that to me before.”

“Then the men of your acquaintance are fools.”

Her nose wrinkled, her gaze turning inward. “You’re probably right about that.”

Her honesty made him smile. He liked it. Most women he dealt with flirted and flitted, saying what they thought he wanted to hear, not the truth.

Except the ladies he worked with at Sentinel Security. They never held back. They’d like this quietly sexy CIA employee.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving now. Good night, Mr. Mancini.”

No. He had an instant gut reaction. Two things hammered at him. He couldn’t let her walk out and never see her again.

And he needed to know her name.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her closer. She managed to trip and collided against his chest. That tantalizing scent of hers filled his senses.

She stared at his chest and pressed a hand to his shirt. He saw the pulse flutter madly in

her throat.

She looked up, gaze locking with his.

Delicious heat curled in his gut.

She felt it, too. Whatever the strange magic was between them.

Then her cell phone rang.

She jolted, fumbling to reach for it. “Ah, I should—”

“Answer it, *bella*.” Matteo kept a hold on her arm.

She didn’t even look at the screen, just held it to her ear. “Hello?”

Then she winced.

Matteo frowned. A whiny female voice came through the line but he couldn’t make out the words.

“Hi, Mom.” His woman closed her eyes. “No. Look, I’m busy.” A pause. “Yes, because I work. No, I haven’t heard from Casey.” Her blue-gray eyes opened, filled with deep resignation.

Matteo hated seeing it. He didn’t think she realized he was still there.

“No, Mom, I can’t make his charges disappear. Casey made his choices, he deals drugs, and he has to face the consequences.” The voice on the phone rose.

Matteo’s hands flexed, and he fought the urge to snatch the phone away.

“No, I won’t send money for his bail. Not to bail him out, or for you to fritter away on shopping or wine. Or for dad to lose at the card tables.”

Matteo made a sound. Her gaze whipped up to his.

Her cheeks paled and he watched embarrassment suffuse her features. She hunched her shoulders.

Oh no, bella. You’re not going to run and hide.

He was just realizing he might have found a flower who’d bloomed in a patch of weeds.

She ended the call. “I need to go.”

“Stay. Have a glass of wine with me.”

Her gaze drifted over his face, and down to his throat. “I can’t.”

“You can.” He toyed with the silky strands of hair that had slipped loose from her roll.

One was a gold strand that shone in the light. “Tell me your name.”

She pulled in a deep breath. “Gabriella. Gabriella Hansley. But everyone calls me Gabbi.”

“Gabriella. A beautiful, Italian name.”

“My mother probably didn’t know that. She just picked something she thought sounded fancy.”

Suddenly, Matteo’s radar went off and he lifted his head, scanning the restaurant.

Three men in suits stepped off the elevator. There was nothing refined about them. They were stocky and muscular, with hard looks on their faces.

One of them had tattoos twining around his neck.

The men perused the restaurant, their gazes hitting Matteo and Gabbi.

Cazzo. Fuck.

His radar went crazy.

He yanked Gabbi to him and she let out a small cry.

The men reached under their jackets and yanked out guns.

Matteo snapped into hyper-focused mode.

“Everyone, get down!” he bellowed.

Then he dived, pulling Gabbi with him to the floor, just as gunfire tore through the restaurant.