



ANDREA LAURENCE

A VERY EXCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

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Chapter One

Figlio di un allevatore di maiali.

Liam Crowe didn't speak Italian. The new owner of the American News Service network could barely order Italian food, and he was pretty sure his Executive Vice President of Community Outreach knew it.

Francesca Orr had muttered the words under her breath during today's emergency board meeting. He'd written down what she'd said—or at least a close enough approximation—in his notebook so he could look it up later. The words had fallen from her dark red lips in such a seductive way. Italian was a powerful language. You could order cheese and it would sound like a sincere declaration of love. Especially when spoken by the dark, exotic beauty who'd sat across the table from him.

And yet, he had the distinct impression that he wasn't going to like what she'd said to him.

He hadn't expected taking over the company from Graham Boyle to be a cakewalk. The former owner and several employees were in jail following a phone-hacking scandal that had targeted the president of the United States. The first item on the agenda for the board meeting had been to suspend ANS reporter Angelica Pierce for suspicion of misconduct. Hayden Black was continuing his congressional investigation into the role Angelica may have played in the affair. Right now, they had enough cause for the suspension.

When Black completed his investigation—and hopefully uncovered some hard evidence—Liam and his Board of Directors would determine what additional action to take.

He was walking into a corporate and political maelstrom, but that was the only reason he had been able to afford to buy controlling stock in the company in the first place. ANS was the crown jewel of broadcast media. The prize he'd always had his eye on. The backlash of the hacking scandal had brought the network and its owner, Graham Boyle, to their knees. Even with Graham behind bars and the network coming in last in the ratings for most time slots, Liam knew he couldn't pass up the opportunity to buy ANS.

So, they had a major scandal to overcome. A reputation to rebuild. Nothing in life was easy, and Liam liked a challenge. But he'd certainly hoped that the employees of ANS, and especially his own Board of Directors, would be supportive. From the night janitor to the CFO, jobs were on the line. Most of the people he spoke to were excited about him coming aboard and hopeful they could put the hacking scandal behind them to rebuild the network.

But not Francesca. It didn't make any sense. Sure, she had a rich and famous movie producer father to support her if she lost her position with ANS, but charity was her *job*. Surely she cared about the employees of the company as much as she cared about starving orphans and cancer patients.

It didn't seem like it, though. Francesca had sat at the conference room table in her form-fitting flame-red suit and lit into

him like she was the devil incarnate. Liam had been warned that she was a passionate and stubborn woman—that it wouldn't be personal if they bumped heads—but he wasn't prepared for this. The mere mention of streamlining the corporate budget to help absorb the losses had sent her on a tirade. But they simply couldn't throw millions at charitable causes when they were in such a tight financial position.

Suffice it to say, she disagreed.

With a sigh, Liam closed the lid on his briefcase and headed out of the executive conference room to find some lunch on his own. He'd planned to take some of the board members out, but everyone had scattered after the awkward meeting came to an end. He didn't blame them. Liam had managed to keep control of it, making sure they covered everything on the agenda, but it was a painful process.

Oddly enough, the only thing that had made it remotely tolerable for him was watching Francesca herself. In a room filled with older businesswomen and men in gray, black and navy suits, Francesca was the pop of color and life. Even when she wasn't speaking, his gaze kept straying back to her.

Her hair was ebony, flowing over her shoulders and curling down her back. Her almond-shaped eyes were dark brown with thick, black lashes. They were intriguing, even when narrowed at him in irritation. When she argued with him, color rushed to her face, giving her flawless tan skin a rosy undertone that seemed all the brighter for her fire-engine red suit and lipstick.

Liam typically had a thing for fiery, exotic women. He'd had

his share of blond-haired, blue-eyed debutantes in private school but when he'd gone off to college, he found he had a taste for women a little bit spicier. Francesca, if she hadn't been trying to ruin his day and potentially his year, would've been just the kind of woman he'd ask out. But complicating this scenario with a fling gone wrong was something he didn't need.

Right now, what he *did* need was a stiff drink and some red meat from his favorite restaurant. He was glad ANS's corporate headquarters were in New York. While he loved his place in D.C., he liked coming back to his hometown. The best restaurants in the world, luxury box seats for his favorite baseball team...the vibe of Manhattan was just so different.

He'd be up here from time to time on business. Really, he wished it was all the time, but if he wanted to be in the thick of politics, which was ANS's focus, Washington was where he had to be. So he'd set up his main office in the D.C. newsroom, as Boyle had, keeping both his apartment in New York and the townhouse in Georgetown that he'd bought while he went to college there. It was the best of both worlds as far as he was concerned.

Liam went to his office before he left for lunch. He put his suitcase on the table and copied Francesca's words from his notebook onto a sticky note. He carried it with him, stopping at his assistant's desk on his way out.

"Jessica, it's finally over. Mrs. Banks will be bringing you the paperwork to process Ms. Pierce's suspension. Human Resources needs to get that handled right way. Now that that mess is behind

me, I think I'm going to find some lunch." He handed her the note with the Italian phrase written on it. "Could you get this translated for me while I'm gone? It's Italian."

Jessica smiled and nodded as though it wasn't an unusual request. She'd apparently done this in the past as Graham Boyle's assistant. "I'll take care of it, sir. I have the website bookmarked." Glancing down at the yellow paper she shook her head. "I see Ms. Orr has given you a special welcome to the company. This is one I haven't seen before."

"Should I feel honored?"

"I don't know yet, sir. I'll tell you once I look it up."

Liam chuckled, turning to leave, then stopping. "Out of curiosity," he asked, "what did she call Graham?"

"Her favorite was *stronzo*."

"What's that mean?"

"It has several translations, none of which I'm really comfortable saying out loud." Instead she wrote them on the back of the note he'd handed her.

"Wow," he said, reading as she wrote. "Certainly not a pet name, then. I'm going to have to deal with Ms. Orr before this gets out of control."

A blur of red blew past him and he looked up to see Francesca heading for the elevators in a rush. "Here's my chance."

"Good luck, sir," he heard Jessica call to him as he trotted to the bank of elevators.

One of the doors had just opened and he watched Francesca

step inside and turn to face him. She could see him coming. Their eyes met for a moment and then she reached to the panel to hit the button. To close the doors faster.

Nice.

He thrust his arm between the silver sliding panels and they reopened to allow him to join her. Francesca seemed less than pleased with the invasion. She eyeballed him for a moment under her dark lashes and then wrinkled her delicate nose as though he smelled of rotten fish. As the doors began to close again, she scooted into the far corner of the elevator even though they were alone in the car.

“We need to talk,” Liam said as the car started moving down.

Francesca’s eyes widened and her red lips tightened into a straight, hard line. “About what?” she asked innocently.

“About your attitude. I understand you’re passionate about your work. But whether you like it or not, I’m in control of this company and I’m going to do whatever I have to do to save it from the mess that’s been made of it. I’ll not have you making a fool out of me in front of——”

Liam’s words were cut off as the elevator lurched to a stop and the lights went out, blanketing them in total darkness.

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