

## Chapter One

Callum MacLeod watched the private jet roll to an easy stop on the tarmac, engines still humming and blasting out heat behind them. The air shimmered around him, the heat a palpable thing as it rose off the steaming asphalt. He squinted against the mid-day sun beating down on him, raising a hand to shield his eyes as he studied the sleek jet. A hot wind blew, sending dust and grit bouncing off of his skin. He fought back a grimace, schooling his face into a practiced, neutral expression. Nothing like a little sand in just about every orifice to remind him how much he hated tropical climates. Sweltering heat. Bugs the size of an elephant's arse. Diseases most had never heard of back in Scotland.

But inhospitable conditions were something he was used to. As a protection officer—a bodyguard—for Southgate Group, one of the world's most elite private military contractors, he spent his working hours guarding very important people in very dangerous places. High-ranking politicians, dignitaries and diplomats, and powerful business people. He was a professional. Battle-hardened and tested. Experienced. And yet the woman inside the private jet was a first for him, and that had him just a little on edge. He wasn't used to firsts. Not anymore.

He especially wasn't used to that first showing up in the form of a gorgeous princess. He'd never worked for royalty, and he knew there'd be hell to pay if this job didn't go smoothly. His boss, Darby Cross, was the head of Southgate Group, and wanted to expand their services to include providing security to royalty.

Callum adjusted his sunglasses, scanning the tarmac for anything suspicious. Although the civil unrest in Ndola, the small African country nestled on the coast of the Indian Ocean between Mozambique and South Africa, had been over for nearly a year now, there were still

pockets of rebels roaming the country. Most of them had retreated to more remote areas, staying away from Ndola's capital city, Makembi. The country was in the midst of a revitalization, which was why the United Nations had elected to hold their symposium on educating girls here, subcontracting all security to PMCs, including Southgate. Callum was one of several Southgate Group officers on the ground in Makembi.

The jet stopped completely, giving Callum a view of the elegant black-and-gold crest of the royal family of Clervaux adorning its side. Clervaux was a small European principality with one foot in Belgium, the other in France, poking its borders into each country. It was one of those countries you'd heard of before, but didn't really know what went on there. Like Luxembourg or Malta.

To prepare for the assignment, Callum had researched the princess and had been impressed with what he'd learned. Her Royal Highness, Princess Audrey of Clervaux, was a humanitarian and a philanthropist, using her position to help those in need. Her causes seemed to center on women and children in impoverished areas, which was why she'd been invited to speak at the Symposium for Female Education in Makembi. She'd attended Benenden and then Oxford for a degree in philosophy, politics and economics. Before she'd graduated, she'd founded Our Pantry, an organization responsible for collecting and distributing food and sanitary products to women's shelters across the UK. She was involved in poverty reduction, literacy, and female education initiatives across Europe. She'd spoken at the United Nations, Harvard University, on the BBC, and had delivered speeches with Desmond Tutu and Michelle Obama. She'd written essays for *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Time Magazine*. She'd won awards for her humanitarian efforts, and she'd done it all with grace, humility and humor.

Like he'd said: impressive.

She was a media darling and was often photographed wherever she went. Callum had found recent photographs of her doing such scandalous things as shopping, attending a yoga class, and eating at a restaurant with her mother, Queen Charlotte. But she attracted attention because of her looks—which were stunning—and her royal title.

The jet's engines stopped, leaving his ears tingling, and the door opened, a set of stairs unfurling down to the asphalt. A handful of royal attendants emerged first, lining the pathway and standing at attention in front of the stairs, somber expressions on their faces. Callum stood up straighter, squaring his shoulders and clasping his hands in front of him. A tiny shadow darkened the jet's door, and then Princess Audrey began making her way down the stairs. Her thick, dark brown hair was pulled back into a braid that hung over one shoulder, and she wore a plain white button-down shirt, open over a white tank top and a pair of green khaki shorts. Her slender legs were bare, with sturdy hiking-style boots on her feet. Her face appeared free of makeup. All in all, her look was a far cry from the glammed-up image she often presented when attending charity galas, but it raised his respect for her yet another notch.

She faltered slightly on the stairs as she caught sight of him, her hand grabbing the banister. She paused, staring at him, and it felt as though her eyes were pinning him in place. As though she weren't just looking at him, but truly seeing him.

Which was daft. Shit, he was probably dehydrated. And in any case, he hoped what he'd felt wasn't real, because he was harboring a lot of shit he didn't want anyone to see.

She finished descending the stairs, and he approached. He'd been about to bow and introduce himself when her toe caught on a rock and she stumbled forward. Instinct took over and Callum's hands shot out, grabbing her hips to steady her. Her small, round breasts flattened

against his chest and everything inside him went very still. She looked up at him through her lashes, her full lips parted.

“I...thank you,” she said. Her voice was rich and feminine with a slight rasp to it, paired with an alluring accent that had a British base with hints of French and German. She was so tiny against him, all soft curves and warm skin, and for a second, all he could do was stare. As though he’d been struck by lightning and frozen in place. It was a completely unsettling feeling, especially given that she was both a client and royalty.

“You’re welcome,” he said, fighting the urge to flex his fingers into her hips. *A princess’s hips*, he reminded himself. *A client’s hips*. What the hell was wrong with him?

She swallowed, but didn’t move away. “You must be Mr. MacLeod.”

“Aye. And please, call me Callum, Your Highness. I dinnae like to stand on formality with clients.”

A warm smile curved her lips. “Then just call me Audrey, please. Since we *dinnae* want to stand on formality,” she said, gently imitating his accent. A flush rose up his neck and he nodded. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was flirting.

“As you wish. Audrey.” She watched his mouth as he spoke, making him hyperaware of his lips as they formed the syllables of her name.

One of the royal attendants cleared her throat, and Audrey glanced down to where Callum’s hands still rested on her hips. Her cheeks turned a very appealing shade of pink and she took a careful step back. He dropped his hands, taking in the disapproving glares of her attendants.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. They were cross because he’d violated royal protocol. No one was supposed to touch the princess without first asking her permission. But

what was he supposed to have done? Let her face plant on the tarmac? It was his job to protect her, whether it was from Ndolan rebels or an errant rock. A surge of protectiveness shot through him, heightened by his body's lingering awareness of her. He cleared his throat and returned the attendants' glare with a neutral expression.

“The mayor's Jeep is waiting for you at the end of the tarmac. A representative from the symposium is waiting inside along with the mayor of Makembi. They're here to greet you and accompany you to your hotel. As your personal security expert, I'll be with you at all times while you're in Ndola.” In an effort to maintain tight security for the symposium, the UN had taken charge of assigning all guests with personal security officers instead of having guests bring their own, the princess included.

She nodded, an elegant dip of her head, and then turned to her attendants. “I'll meet you at the hotel.” She gestured toward the Jeep. “Shall we?”

When they reached the Jeep, Callum pulled open the door to the boot, where he'd stashed important gear and equipment. Rifling through one of the heavy canvas duffel bags, he found what he was looking for and extended it toward the princess. “Please put this on, Your...Audrey.” He'd started to use the honorific, but caught himself just as her eyebrows knitted together.

“A bullet-proof vest?” She frowned, her eyes raking over his chest, which he liked way more than was appropriate. “You're not wearing one.”

He tipped his head in acknowledgment. “Aye, but I'm not a princess.” He flashed her a half-smile, hoping his gentle teasing would prod her into putting the vest on.

She opened and closed her mouth, as though undecided if she should argue or not. He kind of hoped she would. What would her voice, with that sexy accent and raspy tone, sound like if she got angry? Passionate?

The fact that he was even thinking that, wondering that about her, made him clamp down on those thoughts—hard—and toss them in the mental trash heap. Clearly, it had been too long since he'd had a woman. After this assignment, he'd put in for leave and spend a week or two drinking and fucking his way through a foreign city. In the past, that had always done the trick, and he'd be back on the job refreshed and sharper than ever.

With a sigh, she took the vest and then stared at it as if it would bite her. "Fine." She pulled the Velcro straps open, then slipped the vest over her head.

"Why would you be reluctant to wear a vest?" he asked, watching her fingers work to secure it.

"Because it can send a negative message, that I don't feel safe in Ndola. And if I don't feel safe, maybe others shouldn't, either."

"Do you feel safe?" Before he could stop himself, he reached out and adjusted the straps of her vest, pulling them tighter. He focused on the rasp of the material beneath his fingers, avoiding any thoughts about her creamy skin, the rounded tops of her breasts, the way she was looking up at him and biting her full bottom lip...

*Fuck.*

She smiled up at him, pink spots on the apples of her cheeks. "I do now."

He ducked his head and turned, pulling open the rear driver's side door of the Jeep and gesturing her inside. She slipped in, immediately striking up a conversation with the mayor. Callum secured the boot and then circled around the Jeep, eyes scanning for anything suspicious.

Satisfied all was well, he slipped into the front passenger's side seat, and the mayor's Jeep took off, joining the surging afternoon traffic.

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For what seemed like the hundredth time, Audrey had to wrench her mind away from the man sitting in the Jeep's front seat and force herself to pay attention to what Mr. Mondobo, Makembi's mayor, and Judith Chen, one of the symposium's organizers, were saying. They were thanking her for coming, looking forward to her talk, and pointing out landmarks as they passed them. City Hall, the Makembi Cathedral, the National Museum—those were the ones she'd been paying attention for, at least. She was positive there were others she'd missed. As the mayor talked about the early 20th century architecture in the city's central square, she nodded politely as her eyes returned to Callum and the part of him she could see from where she sat in the backseat. The reddish blond hair curling around his ears, slightly damp with sweat. Impressively broad shoulders barely contained in his simple blue cotton T-shirt. The corded muscle of his forearm, which pulled her eyes down to the large, powerful hand resting on his thigh.

As though he could sense his gaze on her, he turned in his seat and pulled down his sunglasses, revealing startlingly blue eyes. Despite the heat, their arctic intensity made her shiver. "We'll be at the hotel in five minutes," he said, his accent pulling and twisting his words into a melodic cadence. She nodded, trying not to stare at his face. In a different time, he could've been a sculptor's muse, with his high cheekbones, square jaw, and straight, masculine nose. When she'd first seen him standing on the tarmac, her heart had nearly stopped. She'd known she'd been assigned a personal security guard, but she hadn't been expecting over six feet of chiseled Scottish muscle with a smile that probably sent women tumbling to the ground at his feet.

Simply put, Callum MacLeod was mouthwateringly gorgeous. Her body had reacted to him almost instantly, and given the way her nipples were rubbing against the inside of her bra, it hadn't stopped. She could honestly say that she'd never responded to a man like that in all of her twenty-four years. Granted, it was entirely possible she'd never *met* a man like him. Not in the circles in which she traveled, anyway. The men she met were either interested in the prestige and fame that came from dating a princess (gross), or were overly paternalistic, treating her as some naïve, innocent little girl (also gross). It was kid gloves or social climbers, nothing else. Nothing real, with any kind of meaningful connection. Was it too much to want a man who treated her as a woman? As simply another person?

Given that she was still a virgin at twenty-four, apparently it was.

The Jeep turned a corner, and she was jolted forward as the driver slammed on the brakes. The street was flooded with protesters all wearing white T-shirts and carrying purple placards. They marched and chanted, waving their signs. Audrey noticed that most of the protesters were women, and she leaned forward in her seat.

“What do the signs say?” she asked the mayor. “What are they protesting?” Everything was in Bemba, a language she didn't understand.

“They're marching for abortion rights,” he answered.

Audrey simply nodded and sat back in her seat. Currently, abortion was illegal in Ndola, punishable by up to ten years in prison for both the doctor and the patient, which drove many women to seek illegal abortions, or to take matters into their own hands, doing things as drastic as drinking bleach or homemade poisons. It was a contentious issue in the country, which had Catholic roots, and Audrey wasn't sure which side of the issue the mayor sat on. She was a humanitarian, not a politician or a diplomat, and she wasn't here to debate him.

“Good for them,” said Callum. Audrey smiled and touched her fingers to her lips.

“I agree,” said the mayor, nodding gravely.

“Perhaps the focus should be on lowering the rate of unwanted pregnancy,” she said.

“Better access to birth control and sexual education for both boys and girls has been proven to lower the rate of abortion.”

The mayor nodded again. “It is difficult to change. We are a country steeped in tradition, both Catholic and African.”

Several white police trucks arrived on the scene, grey uniformed officers hopping out and shouting orders at the crowd. Stuck in traffic as they were, they could only sit back and watch as the police confronted the protesters, who pushed back, continuing to march and chant. She saw Callum slip a phone out of his pocket and fire off a couple of quick text messages, the muscles in his neck visibly tight.

After several minutes of shouted orders, the police fired tear gas into the crowd in an effort to get them to disperse. The organized chant dissolved into chaotic shouts.

“We canna stay here,” said Callum. “I need to get you to safety. The roads are completely blocked up ahead.” Before she could say anything, Callum had stepped out of the Jeep and flung her door open. He reached forward, unbuckled her seatbelt and grabbed her hand, pulling her against the shelter of his body. She was overwhelmed by him, but not in a negative way. His body was so much bigger than hers, but she trusted him not to swallow her up. It felt good to be in the shelter he provided. “Stay close and do as I say.” His voice had taken on a raw intensity that she didn’t know how to process. All she could do was nod, her blood buzzing at being so close to him.

With her hand enveloped in his, he led her away from the protest, in the opposite direction. “Dinnae look back or attract attention to yourself, Princess,” he said, weaving them through the traffic jam. She ducked her head, her eyes glued to the ground as her heart pounded hard and fast in her chest. Sweat slicked her palms, and not from the heat. Horns honked, blaring against the rising shouts of the crowd. Several people ran toward the growing clash. A man pushed past her, slamming into her shoulder and sending her crashing into Callum. He slipped his arm around her waist, tucking her against him, using his broad frame to shelter her. There was a muffled pop from behind them, and her shoulders hunched in surprise. She glanced up at him, but didn’t look back.

“More tear gas,” he answered, the muscles in his jaw popping.

“What about the mayor? Ms. Chen?” she asked, her chest constricting with worry. Callum paused, his features tense, and glanced back toward the Jeep. But then more police officers, rifles clutched in their hands, began making their way through the jagged lanes of stalled traffic, heading toward the protest—and toward them. Every muscle in Audrey’s body stiffened. She’d been to dangerous countries before, but she’d never found herself in a situation as potentially violent as this one. The sound of a gunshot cracked through the air.

Callum shook his head. “You’re my priority. The mayor’s driver will look after them. I have to get you out of here.” His grip tightened around her waist and he guided them swiftly into an alley. She trusted him, easily and completely, which was odd given that she’d only just met him. But she knew he’d keep her safe. She couldn’t explain how she knew it, but she did.

Without another word, he led her through a maze between apartment buildings, churches, stores, and restaurants. Smells and sounds assaulted her as the violent clash behind them became fainter and fainter. People crouched in doorways, women hawking their wares, men shouting words at

her she was glad she didn't understand. A man began to follow them, but with nothing more than a stern glare from Callum, he faded back into an alley. Callum's muscled body was hot against hers, and her heart throbbed in her chest from the exertion, from the adrenaline, from the weight of the vest pressing down on her shoulders. Sweat trickled over her temples and between her breasts.

After what seemed like miles, she heard it: the crashing of waves on the shore. Her chest heaved as she struggled to catch her breath. The heat was oppressive, and the vest was heavy.

"Take a rest, Your Highness," Callum said gently, easing her away from him and steadying her against a stuccoed wall. She felt the loss of him instantly. He pressed a hand against the wall near her head, still sheltering her with his body.

"Audrey," she panted out.

"Audrey," he murmured, his accent rolling over the syllables of her name. "I dinnae mean to push you so hard."

She expelled a long, slow breath and shook her head. "It's all right. I'm all right." She lifted her hand to brush away an errant lock of hair that had escaped from her braid and was surprised to see that her fingers were trembling. She stared at them for a second and then dropped her hand to her side. Callum shifted closer, then lifted his free hand and tucked the strand behind her ear. His eyes widened, as though he just realized what he'd done. But his hand lingered on her cheek just the same.

"Sorry. I'm sorry."

She laid her hand on top of his and shook her head. "Don't be."

For a moment, neither of them moved, cocooned away from the world in an ocean-side alley. His hand was warm on her face, making her skin tingle with awareness. Everything inside

her felt like liquid gold, all shiny and molten. He'd barely touched her, and she was melting for him. Maybe it was because she couldn't remember the last time a man had touched her like that, with a gentle protectiveness mixed with curiosity and desire. Or maybe it was because it was him. This man who was practically a stranger, yet who felt like anything but.

"I feel—" she started at the same time as he said,

"We should go."

With a reluctant nod, she dropped her hand, and he backed away from her.

"Sorry, what were you going to say?" he asked as he led them out of the shadowed alley and onto a small road. He slipped her hand into his, and the knot of tension in her chest loosened.

"I feel better," she said. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the truth either, because it wasn't what she'd been about to say.

*I feel like I know you.* But the moment was gone, and in truth, she was grateful to have some space to examine her exciting yet puzzling emotions about him.

The Sunshine Bay hotel rose before them, its peach stucco walls glowing in the sunshine. The windows sparkled, reflecting the ocean's cresting waves. A fountain splashed happily in the courtyard, spurts of water arcing gracefully over the shimmering blue pool. Palm trees swayed gently in the breeze. It seemed a world away from the chaotic situation they'd just escaped from, and she was once again reminded of the enormous privilege she'd been born into. She'd done nothing to earn it, but strove to be somehow worthy of it.

"How on earth did you do that?" she asked as he led her toward the hotel's front doors. He'd let go of her hand, but had added his other hand to her lower back. Her hot skin tingled in response. He was breaking protocol by touching her without asking her permission first, and she

loved it. It felt so...so normal to be touched by him. To be touched as though she weren't a princess, but just a woman.

“Do what?”

“Find your way to the hotel through those back alleys?”

He shrugged. “I knew that alleys connect nearly everything in Makembi, and that the hotel was about a mile and a half southeast from where we were stopped.”

She glanced up at him. She wanted to ask him about his training, his experience, his background. She wanted to know so much more about him, but now wasn't the time. Not when others were still potentially in danger. “Well, I'm impressed. And thank you, for keeping me safe. But I have a favor to ask you.”

“Anything.”

He answered so quickly, so sincerely that it startled her. “Now that we're at the hotel, please make sure the mayor and Ms. Chen are safe.”

He slipped a hand into the back pocket of his jeans, pulling out a phone in a military-grade case. He tapped the screen a few times and then replaced it in his pocket. “Done. Someone else from the team will make sure they're able to get out safely.”

“You have a team?”

“I work for a PMC called Southgate Group. They have others here for the symposium, too.”

“I see.”

He held open the hotel's front door for her and she stepped inside. The cool air rushed over her skin, leaving it clammy. African-tinged jazz played in the elegant lobby, a few guests lounging in the plush seating area. Surrounded by marble and gold finishes, she felt grubby with

her frizzy hair, sweat stained clothes and dusty boots. Several of her attendants rushed forward, making an unnecessary fuss over her. They'd taken a more direct route to the hotel while the mayor had attempted to give her a small tour. She tried to wave them away, self-conscious of the attention. A suited man appeared and bowed.

“We're delighted to have you with us, Your Highness. Please, allow me the honor of showing you to your rooms.”

She smiled and nodded at him, brushing away the ministrations of her attendants. “I'm fine, I'm fine. Mr. MacLeod was with me the entire time. I wasn't in any danger.” It was truly how she'd felt. Not with Callum's arm around her, leading her through those alleys as though he'd grown up here.

He'd removed his sunglasses, once again unleashing his intense blue eyes. His gaze held hers for a second and he nodded, sending her a small smile.

They all entered an elevator which opened onto the top floor of the hotel. For both security and privacy, she'd reserved a suite for herself, and a series of rooms for her attendants—her stylist, her personal secretary, her hair and makeup artist, her communications strategist—one floor down. Before she could enter, Callum held up a hand and stepped out of the elevator and into her suite. With long strides, he swept through it, checking each room, opening each closet, peering into every corner.

Floor to ceiling windows stretched before them, presenting a breathtaking view of the Indian Ocean. To the right was a generously sized kitchenette, while a living area with a large sofa, overstuffed armchairs and heavy wood tables took up the center of the space. To the left were two bedrooms, each with their own bathrooms. Eventually, Callum nodded at her.

“Everything appears as it should, Your Highness. I can also check the rooms below.”

She shook her head. "I'm sure that's unnecessary." After a moment, she added, "And where will you be?" It was an innocent enough question, even if she didn't feel completely innocent asking it.

"Here, with you. If there's nothing else you need?" He arched an eyebrow, and she shook her head again.

"I'll be in my room, then, Your Highness," he said, bowing slightly before disappearing into the bedroom right beside hers.

She swallowed thickly, barely paying attention as her team ushered her into her own bedroom and began helping her to clean herself up while she rehearsed her speech. She heard the shower in the opposite bathroom turn on. Callum was in there. Naked. Soapy water running down his body in tantalizing rivulets. Her mouth watered and her stomach dipped and swirled at the thought.

He'd be sleeping in the bed mere feet from hers.