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Patience Griffin

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Patience Griffin : The Accidental Scot (Kilts and Quilts) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Accidental Scot (Kilts and Quilts):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Overall Excellent ReadBy CustomerI always enjoy reading this series. The stories are fun reads and the characters are easy to care about. This time, there were some minor problems. The towns folks meddling was less endearing. I had hard time with the lengths with which was of the returning characters ...well.... butted into very personal dealing of Pippa and McKinley. I had an equally hard time with the idea Ross and Pippa couldn't just be honest about their lack of feelings. Maybe if the characters had been younger (18-23 maybe). But two successful working people, one of whom had left the village and had an independent life of her own, tolerating pressure even when Pippa admits she and the her betrothed never loved each other? Not likely. That being said, everything else made for smooth sailing. Engaging story, well developed characters, great humor, and side stories that made for some unexpected drama, as well. I finished the book in two nights and can't wait to see what comes next!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. WonderfulBy Linda AmirkhiziIt's always such a treat reading one of Patience Griffin's books about the beautiful town of Gandiegow. I loved Max and Pippa. Max comes to town to make a deal for NVS new sea valve design. Pippa is the chief engineer and a whole lot more than Max bargains for. I just love the kilts and Quilts ladies and all the mischief they get into!!!2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Pippa and MaxBy Kindle CustomerI love this series ! Three interconnecting stories is a marvelous form of writing with the right author. I loved the narration but most of all love the quilting ladies. I lent this series to a dear friend whose first reaction as a quilter was "i want to go" but then she paused and said. " I want to live there and find a Ramsey".

When her father is injured in an accident, Edinburgh engineer Pippa McDonnell comes home to Gandiegow to take over the family business, the North Sea Valve Company. Now she's working overtime trying to fix NSV's finances and find the cash to get her father proper medical care. One possibility is to accept a partnership with MTech, an American firm desperate to get their hands on her da's innovative valve design. He was against bringing in outsiders, but Pippa is desperate enough to at least listen to MTech's charming representative Max McKinley. As Christmas approaches and with the help of Gandiegow's meddling quilters, Pippa and Max slowly find themselves attracted to each other. Max seems honorable, but is he there to steal the valve design . . . or Pippa's heart?

"Kirsten Potter does an amazing job with this series. She does a great Scottish accent . . . She makes it all worth listening too!" ---Books, Movies, s! Oh My! About the Author Award-winning author Patience Griffin grew up in a

small town along the Mississippi River, living life in a close-knit community. She loves to quilt and has gained some recognition with her September 11 story quilt, which has toured the country as the property of the Pentagon. Visit her at patiencegriffin.com. Actress Kirsten Potter has performed on stage, film, and television, including roles on *Medium*, *Bones*, and *Judging Amy*. Her narrations have won AudioFile Earphones Awards, and she earned an Audie nomination for her reading of *Rise Again* by Ben Tripp. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Praise Also by Patience Griffin Title Page Copyright Acknowledgments Pronunciation Guide Epigraph Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen Chapter Sixteen Chapter Seventeen Chapter Eighteen Chapter Nineteen Chapter Twenty Chapter Twenty-one Epilogue Excerpt from *The Trouble with Scotland* Aileen (AY-leen) Ailsa (AIL-sa) Bethia (BEE-thee-a) Cait (kate) Deydie (DI-dee) Fairge (fah-[d]RAYK-yuh)mdash;sea, ocean Lios (lis)mdash;garden Lochie (LAW-kee) Macleod (muh-KLOUD) Moira (MOY-ra) Taog (took) bampotmdash;a crazy person eacute;ilidh (KAY-lee)mdash;a party/dance CNC machinemdash;a machine used in manufacturing to increase the accuracy and efficiency of metal parts by utilizing a computer to control machining tools English paper piecingmdash;A quilting technique used to piece small shapes with precision, in which fabric is basted over paper templates, then whip-stitched together kirkmdash;church mo chroiacute; (muh khree)mdash;my heart postiemdash;postman reivemdash;to robskivermdash;a person who avoids work or duty Tha gaol agam ortmdash;I love you Chapter One Pippa McDonnell adjusted her winter coat, tightening the belt around her waist. She did her best to shut out Father Andrews's words during the graveside service. She tried to distract herself by thinking of different ways to solve the high-pressure test problem at the North Sea Valve Companymdash;her darsquo;s company. Her tactic didnrsquo;t work. Her emotions threatened to overtake her as the service concluded and the villagers processed down the narrow path from the cemetery. Pippa followed them, focusing on the scenerymdash;the familiar rooftops of Gandiegow below, the choppy sea on the horizon, and the crunch of the snow beneath her boots. But all pretense of not feeling fell away once the women made their way into Deydiersquo;s cottage. Deydie was the head quilter, the town matriarch, the bossiest woman Pippa had ever known. Thatrsquo;s when and where reality sank in. Pipparsquo;s father, the McDonnell, could end up like Kenneth Campbellnbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;. dead. She had come home the second week in July, when her father had his accident, and taken his place running the North Sea Valve Company. It was now almost December, and NSV still wasnrsquo;t standing on its own legs. Neither was her da. Each woman pulled out a chair and sat around Deydiersquo;s worn dining table, devoid of the sewing machines that had always been there when Pippa was a girl. Now all the machines resided at Quilting Central, where the women gathered regularly. The usual crew was here, the quilters. Pippa wasnrsquo;t one of them, though the older women had tried their damndest to mold her into a quilter when she was knee-high to a midge. But she was a part of them, shared a commonality with the village women, closer than a lot of blood relations. She just couldnrsquo;t remember it ever being this quiet in Deydiersquo;s cottage. Pippa glanced over at Moira, the reason they were all here. Moira was painfully shy, but the pain on her face today had nothing to do with being bashful. Kenneth Campbell, her father, had been laid to rest only an hour ago. Normally, the town wouldrsquo;ve gathered to support her at the kirk or at Quilting Central or at her house, but Moira needed only the quilting ladiesnbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;. and of course, Pippa. Laid to rest seemed fitting. Pippa sure hoped God would let Kenneth Campbell rest after all this time. The big Scot had spent many years trying to recover from a fishing accident. In pain, miserable, and lingering, but hersquo;d never complained. Moira had taken diligent care of him for years, but Kenneth never got better, never overcame. The words that Darsquo;s doctor had spoken to Pippa only yesterdaymdash;in hushed tonesmdash;fell over her again like the quiet enormity that rested around the table now. Your fatherrrsquo;s not healing as expected. Hersquo;s not recovering like wersquo;d hoped. Pipparsquo;s da was everything to her. He had been her whole life. What if his fate was Kennethrsquo;s fate? What if his broken bones never mended? What if he was laid to rest in the cemetery as well? But Pippa wouldnrsquo;t sit by and wait to see what would happen next. She stood and paced the floor. Deydie was the only one who seemed to notice her movement. Pippa had always been a woman of action. She would find a way to pay for the private care the doctor suggested. She couldnrsquo;t stand by and wait until a slot came open for a specialist. Her father needed help now. Deydie pushed the teapot closer. Idquo;Pippa, pour Moira a cup of tea.rdqquo; Freda jumped to her feet, too, pulling down mugs from the cabinet. Pippa filled while Freda placed. When tea was pouredmdash;and ignoredmdash;Pippa resumed her pacing. Bethia, Deydiersquo;s oldest friend, grabbed Pipparsquo;s hand. Idquo;Sit, dear. Please.rdqquo; Begrudgingly, Pippa took her chair. Her heart went out to Moira, whorsquo;d been through the wringer this past month. Her fatherrrsquo;s decline, her young cousin Glenna coming to live with her as her own parents had perished, and then three days ago, the inevitablenbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;. Moirarsquo;s da died. Pippa shouldnrsquo;t draw parallels, but was Moirarsquo;s future to be her future, too? Moira had completely withdrawn, shutting out a good number of them, but none so much as Andrew, her beau and Gandiegowrsquo;s Episcopal priest. Cait, Deydiersquo;s granddaughter, touched Moirarsquo;s arm. Idquo;Come stay with us tonight at the big house. Mattie can keep Glenna company.rdqquo; Moira shook her head no without looking up. Cait was dealing with her own loss, two miscarriages. And leaving soon. With a book about her famous husband Graham coming out shortly, theirsquo;d decided to escape Scotland to avoid the media frenzy.

Everyone in the world would learn that this was Graham's hometown. Pippa was the opposite of Graham. She'd never wanted to leave Gandiegow, while she hadn't been done with school two minutes before taking off and planting herself in Edinburgh. Her plans and dreams had been too big for this village to hold. They still were. But nothing could change how she felt about Gandiegow's people. They were pure gold. Cait gazed up at her kindly. "Why don't you go on home and check on yer da." She'd misread Pippa's restlessness. Pippa didn't correct her, but took the out. "Aye. Da should be ready for his pills." Freda jumped up, too, always willing to help. Something Pippa both resented and appreciated. She held up her hand to stop the woman who had been a fixture in Pippa's life forever. "No. I've got it." Pippa laid a hand on Moira's shoulder as she passed by. Too much more and Moira would've been escaping for home. But no one would be there. Pippa grabbed her coat off Deydie's quilt-laden bed. As she slipped it on, she glanced at the wall, seeing something new. "What's this?" Pippa stepped closer, pulling it from a nail. "What do ye mean?" Deydie acted as if she wanted to call her a ninny but seemed to hold her tongue out of respect for Moira and Kenneth. "Haven't you ever seen a calendar before?" Pippa flipped the top page over. It was indeed a calendar, but it featured handsome men dressed in kilts: Men of the Clan. When she realized all the quilters were staring at her, she hung it back in its place. "I better get home to take care of my da." But then she wanted to kick herself. Hadn't she heard Moira say that same phrase a hundred times? Pippa quickly slipped out the door. The temperature had dropped as the days grew shorter. Her brain, though, barely registered the cold weather. A pang of guilt hit her. She had left Gandiegow to escape everyone trying to marry her off. Sure, she'd been back to visit, but stayed only as long as the weekend or a bank holiday. But she hadn't been here when the McDonnell had needed her most, when he'd almost killed himself doing something incredibly stupid and dangerous. Who in his right mind puts a pallet on a forklift, then a ladder on the pallet, then climbs to the top of the ladder to change a lightbulb? A pigheaded old Scot, who wouldn't dream of asking for help, that's who. But guilt and lecturing the McDonnell wasn't going to fix the problem at hand. She needed to find a way to afford private health care. Possibly get Da to the U.S. to see a specialist there. But NSV wasn't making it either. Everything was falling apart. She'd have to work on all three problems at once. Repair NSV's finances, find cash for Da's medical care, and keep everyone from pressuring her into marrying Ross now that she was home. Only last year MTEch had made an offer for NSV when they'd gotten wind of Da's new subsea shutoff valve design. Da told them flat-out no, North Sea Valve is not for sale. But whether her da liked it or not, she'd let MTEch or any other outside investor come in and she'd listen to what they had to say. Scots weren't known for taking charity, but she'd entertain the foreigners as long as they brought an infusion of cash to the table—and scads of it. Her other problem would take some thought. She hoofed it toward home to get Da his painkillers. Later, she'd head back to the factory to do paperwork. Deydie's calendar flitted through her mind. Maybe she could do something similar. Not a calendar with half-naked men but something to raise money. Women were suckers when it came to a few muscles and a bit of swagger. Pippa arrived home to find her father asleep in his wheelchair. She didn't have the heart to wake him, so she laid two painkillers beside his glass of water for when he woke up. As she walked out of the cottage, her eye caught the photo of her mother and father on their first date. Da had bid on her mother at a charity auction at university. Their beaming faces belied the fact that her mother would be gone four years later when Pippa was only a week old. She glanced once more down the hallway. "I'll be back in one hour." There was no one awake to hear her words, but she said it anyway—their old habit. Just to reassure herself. She walked to the parking lot, thinking of her parents' picture and how the auction had brought them together. She drove up and over the bluff to the factory a mile away. Once in her office, she pulled out a pad of engineering paper and began jotting down ideas, as if she were designing a piece of equipment. As she wrote, a grand idea started to take shape. Outside her door, the factory floor came alive. She'd given everyone the day off for the funeral, but apparently they were as restless as she was—needing something to take their minds off losing one of the long-standing members of the community and the nicest man they'd ever known. Ross and his brother Ramsay stood outside her door. Ross leaned into her office. "Can we talk to you a minute?" She'd grown up with these two hulking Scots and considered them like family. Ramsay, the youngest of the Armstrong brothers, wore the same easy smile she'd had on his face since marrying the matchmaker Kit Woodhouse, now Armstrong. Ross, on the other hand, didn't look so happy to see Pippa. He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking uncomfortable, things weird between them. She had long been expected to marry Ross, and now that she was home, the pressure was on. He must be feeling it, too. But she refused to think about all that now. She joined them outside her office. "Can ye both take a look at conveyor three? There's something hanging it up." They gazed down at her, expectantly, but it was Ross who spoke up first. "We want to know what the doctor had to say yesterday when ye were in Aberdeen. We're worried about the McDonnell." "Hell. Couldn't she have a little more time to process the news herself?" "I really don't want to talk about it." More of the workers made their way over and gathered around. Ross motioned to the group. "We have a right to know." Many of the men had invested not only their time into her father's vision, but what little money that they had. Ross included. "She's not healing." Taog, the

factory's ancient machinist, seemed to have read her mind. "What a rotten herring. 'Tis bad enough the McDonnell took a spill." "It was more than a spill," Murdoch interrupted, running his fingers through his beard. He was the other machinist. He and Taog were always together, and more times than not, were at each other's throat. "I saw the bone sticking out of his leg meself. Jagged, it was. Och, blood was everywhere." "Quiet," Ross commanded. "Don't worry, lass." Taog dug in his pocket and produced his wallet. "Somehow, I'll get him the medical treatment he needs. I'll pass around a bucket to collect for private care." "It won't be enough. We could ask Graham." Ramsay looked embarrassed to have said it. "Nay. The McDonnell wouldn't want it." Pippa had to do this on her own. "No one better bother Graham and Cait. They have enough worries." She pointed at Taog. "Grab the notepad off my desk." Taog lumbered past her to get it. "But we want to help." Murdoch nodded his head, his beard bouncing. "I know you do. And most of ye will." Pippa took the pad from Taog. "Here's how we're going to raise money." She thanked the Almighty for the clues and ideas that had dropped in her lap today—Deydier's calendar, her father buying her mother at auction, and her engineer's calculating brain. "There's no need to call anyone. We have all we need right here." She looked around at the ruggedly handsome men of the village, the single handsome men. She sent up another thank-you for that, too. "I'll have an auction. We're going to sell off our bachelors." Ramsay's face uncharacteristically clouded over, a storm coming. "And who's going to tell my wife that you're horning in on her business with this plan of yeres? It won't be me." Pippa laughed and it felt good after so much sadness. "No worries. It shouldn't interfere with Kit's serious matchmaking. It's just a bit of fun for one evening." Ramsay grinned. "Then I'm sure you can count on us to assist you with it." Pippa looked into the eyes of each single, bonny Scotsman standing there. "Ye'll all help with the auction?" "Aye, Pippa," they all agreed one by one. The whole lot of them were like brothers to her and she could get away with talking to them like a bossy sister. "Each of you will be shaved, showered, and kilted. And there better not be the stink of bluidy fish on any one of you. Do ye hear?" "What's your plan, ya have in mind?" Taog, being an old married man, had nothing to worry about. "Here's the plan," Pippa said. "I'll round up every rich lonely female in Scotland. I'll even reach out to London if we have to. I'll entice them to come to Gandiegow with their purses stuffed with money. And after we've filled them with our best single malt whisky, I'll sell off you lads for an evening of debauchery to the highest bidders." * * * * * Miranda Weymouth read the e-mail from Roger Gibbons, M Tech's president, concerning NSV's patents for the subsea shutoff valve. Send Max McKinley. Have him convince Lachlan McDonnell to sign. Tell McKinley to put his honest face to good use. Don't share the details with him. But NSV had been her deal. * * * * *. though one small miscalculation on her part had ended the negotiations early. Since then Roger's confidence in her had waned. Miranda typed back to Roger. North Sea Valve is my project. I'll go. I know Lachlan McDonnell. No sooner had she hit the SEND button than Roger had written back. No. McKinley will go. You'll be his backup, but only if he fails. She closed her laptop, knowing what rested on this deal. Max, the golden boy, better not screw this up. * * * * *. Max McKinley was jarred awake from his nightmare as the plane touched down in Scotland. The same damn dream every time. The real live nightmare he'd lived through at fifteen. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and tried to put the tragedy out of his mind. It always got worse this time of year. God, he hated Christmas. He grabbed his carry-on and rushed off the plane. The first order of business was to call Mom and let her know the news—he wouldn't be home for the holidays. She would have a cow. Maybe he should've called before he left. But hell, he'd barely had enough time to pack before M Tech pushed him out the door. It still puzzled him. Max was the new guy. The technical asset. Brand-new in the acquisitions department. Why send him? Before he went in search of his rental car, he pulled out his phone and delivered the bad news. "You're what?" His mom came close to blowing a gasket. "Not coming home for the holidays," Max repeated. "Or won't? How did you arrange it this time?" There was severity in her mom-knows-all Texas twang. He cringed for the truth in her words. But he was thirty-four, for chrissakes. He was entitled to do what he thought was best. He loved his mom and her heart was in the right place, but she was ruthless when it came to the holidays. "Come for at least the day," she said. Max was tired from traveling, and tired of the same old argument, so without cushioning the blow he released the second bombshell. "I can't. I'm in Scotland." "You're where?" "Scotland. For work. Please don't give me a guilt-trip over it." Max sighed heavily into his cell, making sure his mother heard him all the way back in Houston. She lit into him anyway. "You volunteered for it, didn't you? Found the perfect excuse to get out of Christmas this year." "Mom—," he tried. "You're not the only one who's suffered. Your father would've wanted you to move beyond this. And your brother—." Well, at least we bought him a wheelchair instead of a casket. "Max ran a hand through his hair. "I know." "You still blame yourself for Jaker's accident, but—," He cut her off. "Enough, okay? This trip has nothing to do with the past. It's work. But both nightmares still felt fresh. A fifteen-year-old boy should not be awakened

on Christmas morning and given the news that his dad was dead. For the whole day, the television had replayed the oil rig explosion over and over again. Max had made it through some rough Christmases since. Then Jakersquo;s accidentnbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;.Mom was the one who sighed heavily this time. Idquo;Why couldnrsquo;t they send someone else?rdquo; She could be such a pit bull when it came to family. And Christmas. Idquo;Why you?rdquo;Exactly the question hersquo;d asked himself. Idquo;I guess MTEch wants me to cut my teeth on this deal.rdqquo; Even though he had no experience, as yet, in the acquisitions department. It must be trial by fire. But maybe it was because he was such a damned good engineer. MTEch had made him the youngest lead engineer in the history of their company, and now theirsquo;d given him a new challenge.rdqquo;Well, I hope at least you packed some warm clothes.rdqquo; Mom said begrudgingly.rdqquo;Love you, Mom.rdqquo; He meant it. Idquo;Tell Bitsy and Jake Irsquo;ll call on Christmas Day.rdqquo; Therersquo;d be hell to pay if he didnrsquo;t talk to his siblings then.After a few more good-byes, he hung up. He got his rental car and started the trek to Gandiegow. It was only five orsqquo;clock in the afternoon, but the sky was dark, no moon in sight. The northeast coast of Scotland at the beginning of December would take some getting used to. With only the hum of the car to keep him company, the question niggled again. Why did MTEch send him?Max understood the importance of the new technology he was to evaluate. He was also here to close the deal. Miranda and the rest of the acquisitions department must have some pretty big Christmas plans to ship Max out alone. The whole thing was crazy, but he hadnrsquo;t questioned his superiors. Anything to get out of Christmas.Yes, this trip came at exactly the right time. A nice cold visit to Scotland by himself would be an excellent way to spend the holidays. It would be the best damn Christmas hersquo;d had in a long time.The drive took longer than expected, given the icy, curvy roads. Not to mention that his GPS had not calculated how a herd of languorous hairy cows, dawdling in the thoroughfare, would slow him down.When Max finally arrived in the village, he parked his rental car in the lot on the edge of town, knowing that no vehicles were allowed within the actual city limits. The walking paths were only wide enough for the small carts or wheelbarrows that rested here and there in front of the doorways. Hersquo;d read about this and many other quirks of the community in the MTEch file.He pulled out his American Tourister, locked his rental car, and rolled his bag toward the sparse civilization of stone cottages. He wasnrsquo;t in Texas anymore.The small village of Gandiegow hugged the coastline in an arc with a smattering of houses and buildings. The town looked as if an artist had painted it there to add visual interest to the snow-dusted bluffs rising out of the North Sea. Besides the valve factory, Gandiegow was known for two things: its commercial fishing and its international quilt retreatsmdash;Kilts and Quilts, they called it.Max wheeled his bag over the snow-covered cobblestones until he reached his destination, The Fisherman. After getting a look at the town, he understood better why there was no hotel. It was a small community and ancient. He should be happy there was at least a space for him to rentmdash;the room over the pub.For a moment, he stood peering down the narrow walkway that expanded to the other end of town. This strip of concrete was the only thing separating the ocean from the village. He really should go inside the pubmdash;he was freezing his ass offmdash;but he couldnrsquo;t get over it. One strong wave and the town could be washed away; the sixty-three houses and various establishments pulled out to sea. Who in their right mind would live near such danger looming outside their door?He stepped inside the mayhem of the crowded pub and made his way to the bar with his bag in tow. Hersquo;d considered staying in Lios or Fairge at one of their bed and breakfasts, but he needed to be close to the factory, and it wouldnrsquo;t hurt to embed himself in this community. He had only a month to win these people over and convince Lachlan McDonnell and his son to make the deal with MTEch.It would be a hell of a partnership. NSVrsquo;s new subsea shutoff valve had the capability of shutting down an oil rig leak in seconds and preventing a catastrophic event. Like the one that killed my father and many others over the years.If Max did his job right, the valve would be perfected in MTEchrsquo;s state-of-the-art research facility and in full production by the end of next quarter. He knew MTEch saw dollar signs when they drew up this deal, but Max saw only how the valve would save lives.As soon as he sat on the barstool, a strawberry blondemdash;tall, lean, and temptingmdash;materialized. She glanced at his luggage and then peered at him.rdqquo;What can I get for ye, Yank?rdquo; She had a thick Scottish burr and the most incredible sea-blue eyes.Before he could answer, an inebriated lug pushed Max aside and got in the bartenderrsquo;s face.rdqquo;Give us a kiss, Pippa.rdqquo; the man slurred. Idquo;Just one kiss before I have to go home to me wife.rdqquo;Idquo;Och, yersquo;re stinking drunk, Coby. Back off with ye. Canrsquo;t you see we have an important guest in our midst? An American.rdqquo;Idquo;American?rdquo; Coby telescoped his head back and forth, likely trying to get Max in focus.Max caught him as he fell forward.rdqquo;Donrsquo;t muss the pretty Yank.rdqquo; She motioned to the group at the end of the bar. Idquo;Taog, Murdoch, get Coby home, will ye?rdquo;Max transferred Coby to the others and waited until they were out of earshot. Idquo;So Irsquo;m pretty, huh?rdquo;Idquo;Aye and you damn well know it.rdqquo; She gave him a sardonic once-over as if real men were honed during barroom brawls and covered in scars from wrestling with sharks. She plunked a shot glass in front of him and filled it, though he hadnrsquo;t ordered. Idquo;Herersquo;s yere drink, sir.rdqquo; She cocked a mocking eyebrow at him.He didnrsquo;t let her less than warm welcome bother him. Hersquo;d expected some resistance, especially since MTEch had tried before to buy NSV outright. Instead, he smiled and thought about how her spirited name suited hernbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;. Pippa. Hersquo;d grown up around sassy womenmdash;his tough mother, grandmother, and firecracker of a little sister. He wasnrsquo;t

in the least put off by this Scottish lass and her sharp tongue. Actually it was quite the opposite. Her long curly hair and perfect curves made this Texas-born man want to know more about this intriguing woman. But he wasn't here to hook up with the local barmaid. He was here to make a deal, which would prove himself to the higher-ups at MTech. Max needed to earn the trust of the Gandiegowans or hersquod go home empty-handed. Thanks. He picked up the mystery drink and eyed the caramel-colored liquid before knocking it back. It didn't taste like the scotch back in the States. It was smoky and burned smooth. He pulled out money for another, enjoying the shocked expression on Pipparsquos face. She leaned on the bar and he couldn't help but notice the tease of her cleavage in her tight green sweater. So ye can handle your whisky? There was an air of respect in her tone and perhaps admiration shining in her sea-blue eyes. Aye, he said teasingly. But here in Scotland, we sip our drinks. A reprimand as she poured him another one. Before taking the dram, he stuck out his hand. Irsquom Max McKinley. She eyed his hand but didn't take it. We know who you are. She motioned to the room, but no one else paid attention. She leaned in again. You may have been invited here, but beware. We know yersquove come to rob us blindmdash;take our factory and its jobs away from our people. Her words doused him as if shersquod thrown ice water in his face. Whoa, there. He scooted back, putting his hands up. I haven't come to steal anything. Are you not with the big American company who was sniffing around before? She stood tall and straight. The mangy dogs. Yes, but that doesn't meanmdash; Just because our little factory needs a bit of help, you Yanks think itsquos a fine time to swoop in and swallow us whole, then spit out the leftover bits. He frowned. He didn't agree with all of MTechs business practices. Yes, many times they bought a company for one of their products, only to dismantle the rest, letting thousands of employees go in the process. He had to keep telling himself business was business, it wasn't personal. Besides, the deal he brought to the table was different this time. MTech wouldn't get run out of town with a buyout offer like before. MTech was willing to do a partnership. And I didn't come here to discuss it at the local pub over a shot of whisky. He was here to speak with Alistair McDonnell, the chief engineer, and his father, Lachlan McDonnell, the owner of the North Sea Valve Company. You needn't say a word. Itsquos plainly written on your face. She gave him a dismissive glower. Maybe it was the exhaustion, or jet lag, or the scotch. But hersquod had enough. For a bartender, he snapped, you certainly act like you have some say in the matter. She didn't flinch but surprisingly backed down. Aye, yoursquore right. Itsquos up to the McDonnell. She dropped her eyes with a submissive shake to her gorgeous head. Irsquove no say. I should remember my place. She wandered off and he downed his shot, regretting what hersquod done. He couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of even one villager. The stakes were too high. Miss? he called out to her, motioning for her to come back. When she sauntered toward him, he saw the disguised shrewdness playing in her eyes. She wasn't the demure pussycat whorsquod backed down a moment ago. She was a cunning panther, ready to pounce. She stopped in front of him and smiled sweetly. Yes? Sorry for being rude. Please forgive me. Can I buy you a drink to make it up to you? She tsked at him. Da says never to drink at the trough with the swine. He winced. Ouch. Besides, us working girls can't afford to imbibe on the job and get fired. How long are you planning on being here, Yank? As long as it takes. The New Year? Maybe longer. Max knew these deals took time. That long, huh? She looked at him as if taking his measurements, then sashayed away. She hadn't forgiven him, and he hated being in this positionmdash;the perceived bad guy. He squeezed his empty glass. But he was the one whorsquod put in for the promotion, trying to stretch his skill set. He wasn't just an engineer anymore. He was a closer. And by God, he would close this deal if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter Two

The next morning Max woke to a text message from Alistair McDonnell. Hersquod moved the appointment up, which was fine with Max. Over the last twenty-four hours, the two of them had exchanged many messages, and Alistair seemed like a decent, knowledgeable guy. Max knew Alistair was the one responsible for calling MTech back to the table. From the project file, the McDonnellmdash;as others referred to Lachlan McDonnellmdash;would never have opened the door to MTech and another meeting. Max stretched and gazed out the small window of his room. During the night, the snow had quietly tiptoed in. White covered everything, which was a real treat. Living in Houston, hersquod seen snow only when he went to Vail or Durango to ski. After a quick shower, Max trudged to the parking lot in a business suit, tie, and dress shoes. By the time he arrived at his car, his dress shoes were soaked and his feet had turned into ice blocks. Thankfully, the steep road that led in and out of town had been scraped, but he wasn't taking any chances with any slick spots beneath the wheels. Slowly and carefully, he drove back up and over the rounded bluff to where NSV sat about a mile away from Gandiegow. Just as the factory came into view, the sun peeked through the clouds, giving Max hope that all would go well here today with Alistair and the McDonnell. NSV, made of ancient stone, had none of the glitz or size of the mega-factories in the U.S. But it did have charactermdash;an old warrior, worn-out from many years of battling time and the elements. He knew the building had stood empty for many years until eighteen months ago, when the McDonnell had reopened the factory doors. His son, Alistair, had recently joined him, stepping in as chief engineer. Max pulled into the lot and turned off the car. No one was outside except one guy shoveling snow from the sidewalk leading to the front entrance. As he got

closer, two things struck him at once. It wasn't a man clearing the walk at all. It was a woman in men's coveralls. Secondly, this wasn't any woman. It was the tall barmaid from last night.

Pippa said, as chipper as the sunlight above. "Good morning to you, too." He was glad she'd let bygones be bygones. He pointed to her shovel. "Your day job?" She smiled brightly. "Aye. Here in Gandiegow, a lass needs to hold several positions to make ends meet. I'll never know where I might turn up." "Where else do you work?" And because he was a guy, and hadn't had the bandwidth to date lately, the word positions got kind of caught in his mind, rolling around. And not in an innocent way either. "I'll see me here and there." She smiled evasively and scraped the last bit of snow from the walk. "Come. I'll point you in the right direction." She leaned her shovel against the building and took the lead. Inside, the lobby was the strangest he'd ever seen. No contemporary plush furniture or end tables with trendy magazines. This place was barebones. Three kitchen chairs, one folding, and one dilapidated Queen Anne rested against the wall. A crest and a sword hung above the seats. In the corner sat the grand prize, a damned Douglas fir, decorated with loads of Christmas cheer. The magnificent tree didn't fit with the rest of the substandard decor. A brunette came from behind a worn receptionist desk with a hungry-for-men smile and a mug in her hand. "I saw you pull up and poured you a cup of tea. In case you needed warming up." Bonnie, by the way. She seemed to stick out her chest, flaunting her very large breasts in his direction. But Max wasn't half as interested in her as he was in the strawberry blonde who'd put him in his place last night. He took his tea and thanked the receptionist just the same. Pippa unzipped her coveralls and slipped her arms out, letting the top dangle down. He was stunned to see that underneath, she sported an old, form-fitting Tau Beta Pi T-shirt. Tau Beta Pi? The Engineering Honor Society? If he couldn't put together words, he might've asked where she got it. But he couldn't stop staring at her nipples. God help him! He jerked his eyes away, and in the process, spilled tea all over his suit from his chest to his knees. "Damn." "Not to worry." Pippa leaned over and whispered to the brunette who had resumed her position behind the desk. The only word he made out from the exchange was auction. From a nearby closet, Bonnie retrieved two items—a kilt clipped to a hanger, and a brown shopping bag. She handed them to Pippa. Pippa presented the clothing to him. "Here, put this on. I'll take care of your suit." He frowned at the man skirt. "Thank you, no. I'll be fine." "It's company policy to be dressed in a kilt." Amusement danced in her eyes, in addition to a fair dose of determination. "Everyone has to wear one for their company badge. For plant security." That seemed highly unlikely. He glanced at her chest; she wore no badge. He tore his eyes away. "Don't you have a guest badge?" "Like a normal factory?" "A guest badge is only good for the day. You said you plan to be here the month." She planted her hands on her hips. "It's company policy," he finished for her. "You catch on quick, Mr. McKinley." "That's what they tell me." He grimaced at the kilt again. She spun him toward a small door. "I'll be the one taking your picture when you come out." "Another one of your jobs?" "Aye. Now change in there." He marched into the small restroom and closed the door behind him. The brown bag held a white flowing shirt, black hiking boots, and thick, cream-colored knee-high socks. "Don't be long, Yank," she hollered through the door. "I've work to do." He quickly dressed, surprised the clothes and boots fit pretty well, considering. He left his wet things over the towel rack and went back out. The brunette rose, giving him a low whistle. "Aye, Pippa, you were right about the Yank in a kilt." Pippa nodded appreciatively at his legs. She grabbed a tartan and threw it over his shoulder. When she bent to fasten it by his hip, he couldn't help but let his mind wander to places it shouldn't. She smelled like fresh snow and woman. He felt both turned on and a little like Rob Roy. She dragged him to the Christmas tree, positioning him in front of it. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Just smile for the birdie." He didn't. She snapped several photos anyway. "Bonnie, pull the Queen Anne chair over to the tree and I'll take a few more." He folded his arms across his chest. "What's really going on here?" Pippa gave him an innocent "ve-no-idea-what-yours-re-talking-about" smile. "Are you sure you're not Scottish, Mr. McKinley? You have the name for it. And the stubborn attitude. A veritable Scottish warrior through and through." "Stop buttering me up." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're up to something." "Don't be a prig, Mr. McKinley." Pippa readjusted the sash on his shoulder. "Americans love to claim to be Scottish." The receptionist slipped from behind the desk. He frowned at both of them and moved the Queen Anne chair himself. The way Bonnie sauntered up to him, there was no denying she was out to stake her claim. "So what are you doing later? How about we grab a few drinks and have some laughs at the pub?" Pippa put her hands on her hips. "Back off, Bonnie. I'm here on business. Not to be handled by the likes of you." He felt like a spectator at a tennis match, looking from one to the other. Bonnie smiled, no offense taken to Pippa's harsh words. "A lass can try, can't she?" She slunk off, leaving them alone. "Can I change back into my clothes yet?" "Nay. We have to make sure you look right. For the badge and all." Pippa snapped a few more shots. One with him standing by the Queen Anne chair. Another with him seated like the frigging king of Scotland or something. She even had the audacity to point the camera at his legs and take two more, mumbling, "Good, good," to his shins. "So do all the

employees have their legs on their badges?rdquo; he drawled.ldquo;Oh, aye, absolutely.rdqquo; Pippa looked as if she could barely hold back from laughing. ldquo;Leg shots are imperative for security. Especially if someone is running from the building with our top-secret designs.rdqquo; She gave him a pointed look, as if that was why he was here. Her own words had a sobering effect. ldquo;I think wersquo;re done here.rdqquo; She brushed her long curls out of the way as if being the photographer had worn her out. Or was that relief he saw on her face?ldquo;Go change now, Mr. McKinley,rdquo; Pippa ordered. Without a backward glance, she walked through the double doors leading into the plant with the camera swinging at her side.He stood all alone in the lobby; Bonnie was gone, too.Max looked again at the double doors Pippa had gone through. He wondered if her other jobs included sweeping the factory floor or cleaning the toilets. She perplexed him and he didnrsquo;t know why. He forced her from his mind and went into the bathroom to put his clothes back on.ldquo;What the hell?rdquo;His tea-soaked pants werenrsquo;t where hersquo;d left them. Or his jacket. Or his dress shirt. He marched back out and found Bonnie had returned.ldquo;Where are my clothes?rdquo;Bonnie smiled helpfully. ldquo;Soaking in a bucket in the break room. Tea can be a bitch to get out.rdqquo;He stared at her slack-jawed. ldquo;What am I supposed to wear?rdquo;Bonnie eyed him like her favorite box of Christmas candy. ldquo;The kilt, of course.rdqquo;ldquo;I canrsquo;t go around like this.rdqquo;ldquo;Och. Itrsquo;s Scotland. Yersquo;ll be grand.rdqquo;He peered down at his outfit, wishing to be anywhere else, and then tried to look at the bright side. At least the boots were warm. He approached her desk. ldquo;I assume Alistair McDonnell knows that Irsquo;m here?rdquo;Bonnie stilled. For a moment, he wondered if maybe shersquo;d misunderstood. She seemed genuinely confused.He tried again. ldquo;Alistair McDonnell? We have an appointment.rdqquo; He lifted his mug and drained the remaining dribbles of his now-cold tea.She frowned at him, picked up the phone, and put it to her ear. ldquo;The American says to tell ye hersquo;s here.rdqquo; She glanced up at him as if hersquo;d been short-changed upstairs. ldquo;Go ahead and take a seat.rdqquo;He wandered over to the coat of arms and studied it. After a few minutes, he chose a chair as far away from the Christmas tree as he could and checked his messages.One from his mom. One from his sister. One from his brother.And crap, Miranda wanted him to check in. He texted back quickly that hersquo;d arrived, was staying in the room over the pub, and was about to meet with NSVrsquo;s chief engineer.As he hit SEND, the doors swung open and a professionally dressed woman came through. He stood. She had on a well-fitted navy suit with a tantalizing slit up the left side of her calf-length skirt. The way her heels clicked as she walked toward him sounded like a commanddash;the same heels that made her almost as tall as him. Her loose hair from earlier had been stretched into a knot at the back of her head. However, it was her sea-blue eyes that shocked him.Pippa was also secretary to the owner?She stuck out her hand. ldquo;Alistair Philippa McDonnell. Itrsquo;s nice to meet you.rdqquo; She gave him a firm handshake.He fumbled with the mug. If therersquo;d been any tea left in it, he wouldrsquo;ve doused his kilt and been forced to tour the factory buck-naked.She smiled, her professional aloofness daring him to acknowledge the switch-up. ldquo;Well, then,rdquo; she finally said. ldquo;Should we have a look around?rdquo;He seldom backed down from a challenge. ldquo;But last nightdash;rdquo; he started.ldquo;Letrsquo;s not ruin last night by talking about it,rdquo; she purred.Bonniersquo;s head shot up.Pippamdash;no, Alistairdash;gave a throaty laugh and sashayed away, not seeming to give a damn about her reputation.Max trailed behind her through the double doors like her lowly servant. They went down a long corridor as a million questions rolled through his baffled brain. Hersquo;d been given a data sheet on the McDonnell with as much personal information as could be attained. How had he not known that Alistair McDonnell was female? He certainly knew now by the shapely derriere in front of him. Maxrsquo;s only explanation for his file not being completemdash;privacy laws in Europe were much stricter than in the U.S.He didnrsquo;t let the subject drop. ldquo;Hold up. What should I call you?rdquo;She stopped and turned to him, the epitome of seriousness. ldquo;How about Yere Excellency?rdquo;ldquo;Alistair or Pippa?rdquo; he clarified.ldquo;Since wersquo;re in Gandiegow, you can call me Pippa.rdqquo;ldquo;Wherersquo;s the McDonnell? Is he waiting for me in his office?rdquo;Her eyebrows stitched together and she looked away, not meeting his eye. ldquo;Da took the day off.rdqquo;Max frowned at her. ldquo;He knew I was coming, didnrsquo;t he?rdquo;She didnrsquo;t answer but pushed open another set of double doors. They stepped into a room filled with industrial sewing machines and bolts of canvas. In the corner stoodnbsp;.nbsp;.nbsp;. another Christmas tree?ldquo;What the devil?rdquo; Max said. Nothing was typical in this factory.ldquo;We rent this space to Agnes Bowie. She makes custom sails to sell on the Internet. Agnes needed a spot for her shop and we made room for her.rdqquo;Apparently Pippa took umbrage to his shock. She scooped aside a sail as she walked bydash;much like a cat swishing her tail. And like a cat, her irritation was evident. He hadnrsquo;t been criticizing NSV or the sail shop, but it was too late to say so. She was already gone.Through the next set of doors was a machine shop, the place finally looking more like a manufacturing plant. However, the machines were ancient and antiquated, some held together with bits of wire and duct tape. Another Christmas tree, this one decorated with plaid bows, sat proudly in the middle of the room. Two old codgers, the same two from the pub last night, stood by a drill press, a flurry of heated words flying between them. They stopped at once.The bearded one bobbed. ldquo;Wersquo;ll be getting back to work now, Pippa.rdqquo; He eyed Maxrsquo;s kilt but didnrsquo;t act as if it was out of place.ldquo;Aye,rdquo; said the other one, nodding at the kilt as well.ldquo;You run a tight ship,rdquo; Max muttered, trying not to feel uncomfortable about his attire.She nodded. ldquo;I keep them on task. Taog, I told you to move the

CNC machine in here yesterday." She had the command of a drill sergeant. "Why haven't you turned it red?" The CNC was too pretty to use. The bearded one laughed. "And Taog's uglier than his own arse." Murdoch, Pippa said in warning. "We've discussed this before. No more insulting Taog or cursing on the job. I'll not be having it." "Aye, lass," Murdoch said, rubbing his beard. "About the damned CNC machine. Taog keeps it polished up just fine. Not a speck of dust on it." Max was impressed a small operation could afford such an expensive piece of equipment. "Can I take a look at it?" Pippa turned to him, seeming irritated. "It's at the back of the building. I'll show you." She handed him a hard hat and a pair of earplugs. "You'll need these." She donned her own hard hat, making it look at home on her head. A funny thought hit him. She is the sexiest chief engineer I've ever seen. She pushed through another set of doors. Max was glad for the ear protection. Conveyor belts clapped, horns blew, and pneumatic drills hissed. Most people would find it annoying, but a wave of nostalgia washed over him. He missed working for the factory and being close to the end product. Now that he'd been promoted, he was a long way from actually making anything, except maybe a deal. He scanned the room and once again encountered the bizarre. In one corner sat three pleasure boats on blocks. Pippa's eyes followed to where he looked. "Winter storage rentals," she hollered over the noise. That explains the boats but doesn't explain the farm's worth of Christmas trees scattered throughout the factory floor. Max focused his energy on the assembly line. He immediately saw ways to streamline their process and make the plant more efficient, just by rearranging things. While she explained the different valves and their applications, he flipped open his notebook and jotted down his recommendations. "You better not be stealing our designs," she warned. "Would you dream of it?" When they had a quiet moment, Max would share his ideas with her. "And the subsea shutoff valves? Where are they being made?" She frowned at him and he knew it was because she'd asked after their Golden Goose. Every oil and gas company in the free world wanted to get a good look at the McDonnell's design. Perhaps others were being invited here as well. The fact that Pippa had let Max in the front door must mean MTech was in the running. Her glare in his direction, though, said she wasn't pleased with him or MTech right now. She stood tall. "Mock-ups are in my office. Do you want to see the CNC machine or not?" Without giving him a chance to answer, she walked away at a clip. Sure enough, in the far corner of the factory sat a very large CNC machine. Max gave an appreciative whistle. "What a beauty." CNC machines were used to build parts with efficiency and accuracy in manufacturing. He did his best to ignore what they'd done to the poor thing. The CNC was decorated like a damn Christmas tree as well: Garland was swagged around the circumference and an angel was crowning the top. "If you don't mind me asking, how did NSV afford this machine?" She cocked an eyebrow as if she did mind, but then deflated as if to say, what the hell. "It's a gift from Corbie Engineering. Right before they went bankrupt." Her eyebrows furrowed as if she understood all too well what was at stake. North Sea Valve could very well be the next to go into bankruptcy court. "There's no need to worry," he assured her. "I can help." Her shoulders went back and she sucked in a breath before shouting over the racket of the machinery. "I'm concerned about MTech's definition of help. I know I called your company back to the table, Mr. McKinley, but the last time MTech was here, they tried to rob NSV blind." This is going to be an uphill battle. He patted his notebook. "I'm not talking about the MTech proposal. I'm talking about reconfiguring your operations, moving things around. Things you can do right away to save money, and it won't cost you a penny." She sized him up but looked too stubborn to acquiesce. "Can we talk about it in your office where it's quieter?" She glared at him for a moment before turning on her heel. "Follow me." She marched in the opposite direction. Damn she was prickly. Why did she think the worst of him? For his whole life she'd assumed, by the easy trust others placed in him, that his honesty shone through. But to come to Scotland and be treated like a common thief? . . . foreign. He wasn't a shyster. He was a stand-up guy. Was it too much to ask for them to put a little faith in him? Were all Scots this distrustful? All he wanted was to make sure their subsea shutoff valve came to fruition. Preferably with MTech, so he could keep his job. He opened his mouth to try to convince her that his motives were pure. But hell, pleading wouldn't do a damn bit of good. Everyone knew actions spoke louder than words. He focused his attention on her lovely backside as she paraded away from him, and unabashedly let the spectacle outshine his injured pride. The view also helped him to ignore how the workers were staring at his bare legs. She opened the office door and went in. He followed and his first thought was—Hoarders work here. She glanced around, too. "Organized chaos." Bookcases packed with technical tomes filled the small room. Piles of manila folders sat on the desk and floor. Stray valves here and there acted as paperweights. In the middle of the desk was that damn camera of hers from earlier. She flipped over what looked like a stack of photos before removing her hard hat. Her hair had come undone and a disarray of strawberry blond curls fell around her face. She shook them out as if she didn't know how distracting it was. From another kitchen chair, she moved a mountain of papers for him to sit. She waved to the accumulation in the room. "My system is organic. I'm still coming up to speed on the factory." He understood digesting a lot of information in a short period of time. Like this project, which she'd had only days to prepare for. "Don't apologize." "I wasn't." She settled herself behind

the desk. "Now what ideas do you have for me?" she asked skeptically. His gaze alighted on the one area of the room that seemed well put together—the wall behind her. Three diplomas hung in perfect order. It was an impressive display—bachelor's, master's, and doctorate in mechanical engineering. She followed to where his eye had landed. "Da insisted that Taog and Murdoch hang my diplomas." Interestingly, her cheeks tinged red. "Don't be embarrassed by your intelligence and accomplishments." "Are you always this cheeky with strangers?" She held his stare. "I'm impressed, is all." She shot him a stern frown that spoke volumes. "I'm not impressed with you." He ignored it. "What's that?" Beside the diplomas, a strange plaque hung, near enough for her to easily reach out and touch while seated at her desk. "A healthy dose of humility" was all she said. It was an honest-to-goodness cross-wise section of a valve with a hole blown through it. He leaned forward to read the inscription. PROOF THAT THEORY ≠ REALITY AND REALITY CAN BITE YOU IN THE ARSE CONFIRMED BY ALISTAIR MCDONNELL AND HER DESIGN TEAM. "Wrong size valve for that particular high-pressure line," she admitted candidly. "I keep it close to remind me that if I don't do my job correctly, I could cost someone their life." His mouth went dry and he couldn't speak. What could he say? That he understood her? His dad and a multitude of others had died in industrial accidents. Max was in the same business as Pippa was in—preserving lives. She cleared her throat. "I haven't received anything in writing from MTech yet. Did you bring the proposal with you?" "No. I understand they'll e-mail it soon. We have time," he reassured her. She shook her head as if they didn't. "He's been given only a few selling points. Straightforward, Miranda had said. Max's job was to check out their facility, review the specs on the valve—and make sure the valve was viable—and then get NSV to partner with MTech."

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