
This Time Around
TRACEY MAGRUDER

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Great Missenden Ever After Book 2

TRACEY MAGRUDER

OceanofPDF.com

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For everyone who fell in love with
the characters in *Between the Lines.*
This book would not exist without you.

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August 20, 2001



-Maggie-

The late summer humidity hung heavily in the air, and Maggie was already sweating by the time she slammed the garden gate. She cut across the overgrown field behind their house, cheeks flushed from the heat. As she ran, her mother's words echoed through her head.

Don't confuse talent with destiny, Margaret.

Margaret. Her mother only called her that when she was trying to be cruel. Brambles caught her bare ankles, but she didn't bother shaking them off. She'd gone without shoes—another small act of defiance her mother likely noticed.

You have to be practical! Have a real career with something you can actually succeed at.

She skirted the cricket pitch and cut up the public footpath toward the ridge, ignoring the worn sign asking people to keep to the marked trail. At

the stile, she hesitated, half-hoping the wood might splinter under her weight, but it only creaked as she stepped over and sat.

Performing in London isn't a plan. It's a dream!

Maggie didn't remember making the decision to leave, only the sudden rush of open air, and the quiet relief of being somewhere no one was watching.

From here, she could see the whole valley. The village's lights flickered, mirroring the stars above. It should have felt comforting, but it was just a reminder of everything she was trying to escape.

Maggie pulled her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. Taking a slow breath, she tried to picture herself years from now, living out the dreams her mother claimed would never be reality.

If she stayed, she knew exactly what would happen. She'd end up like the women she worked with every night at her godfather's pub. They were all settled and tied to the village, and to her, that felt like surrender.

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes, willing herself not to cry. Crying felt like admitting defeat, and she wasn't willing to do that. Not when she'd always been so sure that she was meant for something more.

When she lowered her hands, she spotted the names and dates carved into the wood by people who'd once sat exactly where she was now. Her fingers traced the grooves.

AMY LOVES RICK
LOU 1987
KATHY IS A SLAG

Maggie shook her head and let out a small chuckle. Did any of them imagine they'd stay? Or had they all believed, the way she did now, that they were only passing through? That they were meant for something bigger.

She wriggled her toes deeper into a patch of soft dirt where the grass hadn't found purchase, grounding herself in the sensation. She knew she'd have to go back soon, before her mother came looking. For now, she stayed motionless, and the quiet stretched around her.

She heard him before she saw him, the solid footsteps through the grass. Maggie stilled, shoulders tightening instinctively, then forced herself to

relax. If he were here, it meant her mother had enlisted him and her brother, Elliot, to find her.

“You planning to stay out here all night, or just making a point of it?” a deep voice asked.

“Maybe I just like the view, Fergus.”

It sounded less convincing out loud than it had in her head.

He climbed the stile in one easy movement, balancing for a second before dropping down beside her, a cloud of dust kicking up where he’d landed. Not too close, but not distant either. Just… there. Close enough that she was suddenly aware of the heat of him. He didn’t look at her straight away, which she appreciated more than she wanted to admit.

“You’ve got dirt all over your feet,” he said after a moment.

“Well spotted,” she replied, and waved a rising dust cloud away before it could get in her eyes.

“Might regret that when you step on something that bites.”

She huffed, but it felt easier now, the edge of her anger dulled just enough by his presence. Fergus leaned back on his hands, stretching his legs out in front of him like he had nowhere else to be, and, for a while, neither of them spoke.

Then, he asked softly, “Alright, then?”

Maggie picked at the wood again, splintering off a thin strip. “Yeah… you?”

He nodded, and then, much to her surprise, made no move to rush her into heading home. A wave of exhaustion washed over her as the adrenaline from the argument eased. Looking over at his profile, she started to say something but stopped. She did that two more times before she cracked.

“Mum thinks I’m going to ruin my life,” she blurted out, shoulders collapsing under the weight of the confession.

“That so?”

“She thinks London’s a bad idea. That I’ll end up back here anyway, only worse off.”

“And…”

Maggie let out a short laugh. “...and I’d rather try and fail than never leave at all. At least if I fail, I won’t look back and wonder what if.”

She glanced at him, half-expecting a lecture, or worse—agreement with her mother. Instead, he just nodded once.

“Fair.”

That was it. No argument or dismissal, just understanding. That was something even Elliot hadn't been able to give her, and there was a warm and unfamiliar feeling that settled behind her ribs. It was the sort of thing that had been happening more and more the last few months, and she didn't quite know what to do with it.

Instead of acknowledging it, she stared out over the valley again. His presence was soothing, and her next words slipped out before she could stop them.

"Everyone already has my life all planned out if I stay here," she told him, and Fergus turned his head slightly at that.

He was quiet for a beat, then said, "So don't stay."

Maggie let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh. "Right. Because it's just that simple."

"Isn't it?"

"Maybe for you it is. Not for most people."

"Maybe, but it's still your choice, not theirs."

After a moment, she said softly, "Like your choice to leave?"

It wasn't really a question, and Fergus shifted, gaze dropping to the ground as he muttered, "Yeah."

"How soon?"

"Next week."

She felt a pit forming in her stomach. She had known it was soon, but she hadn't realized he would likely be gone by this time next week. Over the years, Fergus had probably spent as much time at the Hartwell residence as he had at home. For a long time he was just Elliot's annoying mate. Now, though… he was one of the few people she trusted.

"Oh."

He rubbed the back of his neck nervously and added, "Got a spot lined up. It's… good. Proper chance."

"You're not excited?"

"I am. I just…" He trailed off with a shrug, then released his breath slowly. "It's a lot."

Maggie studied him for a second, surprised. Fergus had always been one of those constants. He was solid and unshakeable, the kind of person who never seemed to doubt where he was headed. It had never crossed her mind that he might feel uncertain too.

"You're scared," she said.

He glanced at her, one corner of his mouth lifting. “Not exactly.”

She gave his shoulder a playful bump with her own, not that it moved him even a centimeter. “You just always seem so… sure.”

“About leaving?” He looked back out toward the valley. “Yeah, I’m sure… Doesn’t mean I don’t wonder if I’m not as good as everyone thinks.”

Maggie blinked at him, trying to reconcile what he had just admitted with what she already knew to be true. On the rugby pitch he’d always been brilliant. It was more than that, though—he was the kind of person people just assumed would make something of himself.

“You are better than you give yourself credit for,” she told him, leaning her shoulder against his and staying there this time.

He glanced back at her, then down to her shoulder resting against his arm. One of those rare genuine smiles formed on his lips.

“So are you.”

Her face warmed, and she looked away before he could notice. The quiet stretched again, but it felt different now, easier somehow, like something had settled into place. He didn’t move away either, and the feel of his shoulder against hers was anchoring.

After a moment, he said, “You’ll get out. You’re meant for more than this place.”

The words landed somewhere deep, deeper than they should have. She felt her eyes sting, and she swallowed, blinking it away.

“What if it doesn’t work?” she asked, hating how uncertain she sounded, but still confident in the knowledge he wouldn’t judge her for being afraid.

Fergus shrugged. “Then it doesn’t. You’ll figure something else out.”

No grand speech. No false promise. Just certainty.

“Come on,” he said, pushing to his feet. “You should head back before your mum sends a search party.”

Maggie made a face but didn’t argue. Swinging her legs back over the stile, she winced as her feet hit the ground, something sticking into her heel.

“Told you,” he said.

“Shut up.”

He grinned, falling into step beside her as they made their way back down the path. They didn’t talk much on the walk back, and at the edge of her road, Fergus slowed, stopping just short of the turn. She faced him, all too aware of how close they were standing.

“You’ll get there, Mags.”

He said it as if it were already decided, and when she met his gaze, something steadied in her chest.

“Yeah,” she said, quietly. “So will you.”

He nodded once, but he didn’t turn away immediately, and neither did she.

For one foolish second, Maggie thought he might say something else, or do something else. His gaze dropped briefly to her mouth, and he shifted closer. A dog barked down the street, causing them both to jump, and Fergus looked away, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Best get inside,” he said quietly. “I’ll stop by before I go next week.”

Maggie stood there a moment longer, watching him walk away, and the night settled around her. The echo of his words lingered, and for the first time since the argument, the future didn’t feel like something closing in on her. It felt like something that was waiting.

She turned back toward the house, shoulders a little straighter than before, and let herself believe—just a little—that she might get everything she dreamed of.

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September 27, 2025



-Maggie-

The Roaring Stag was packed. Football matches meant enough body heat to drive away the fall chill. Locals crowded around the screens and shouted at referees who couldn't hear them, while tourists clutched their pints, trying to work out if it was safe to cheer for the opposing team.

Maggie moved through it all, a grin on her face despite the chaos.

Then, predictably, a tourist by the dartboard lost his grip on his pint. The glass hit the floor with a sound like a miniature car crash, splashing the legs of nearby patrons, causing the room to go silent for a breath. What was left of the lager began spreading across the floor, and the rest of the group danced away from the mess, wiping at their legs.

Maggie caught Jenny's eye, giving her a tilt of her chin that said *you-know-what-to-do.* The younger woman sprang into action, bobbing and weaving through the exuberant crowd, tea towel already in hand. Maggie didn't miss the shadows under Jenny's eyes, though, or the worry pinching

her face. It had been there ever since the young woman's mother had passed six months ago. She made a mental note to check in with her at close and grabbed another mug.

On days like today, the Stag basically ran on adrenaline and brisk nods. Which meant, naturally, that Gareth Davies was already elbowing his way up to the bar for round three, boots trailing generous amounts of countryside across the hardwood. He tapped his glass against the bar, voice like gravel.

"Word of advice, lass," he grunted, weathered eyes narrowing like he was about to impart something of great historical significance. "On a day like this, it's not about pacing yourself. It's about staying ahead of the rush. Hydration strategy, you see."

Maggie didn't even blink as she refilled his pint. Mr. Davies was at the Stag most nights, and it hadn't taken her long to figure out that he had a very loose grasp on the facts in most cases.

"'Course," he went on, entirely unprompted, "that's why the Romans drank diluted wine. Keeps the head clear." He tapped his temple smartly. "Same principle."

"Is it?" Maggie asked, humoring him.

"Absolutely," he replied, the unwavering confidence almost comical, since he'd never been right about anything in his life.

"Fascinating," she said, sliding the pint toward him.

Mr. Davies gave a satisfied nod, as if he'd personally improved her chances of survival, and disappeared back into the crowd.

Maggie watched him go, lips twitching.

"How many is Old Man Davies up to?" a deep voice asked to her right.

"Three," she replied, turning to face Fergus, who was holding a phone to his ear.

"Slow day then."

She snorted, grabbing a rag to wipe down the bar.

In the chaos, Fergus practically radiated calm. Or what passed for calm, if you ignored the way his jaw ticked every time someone banged a chair against a table.

"Still on hold with that tosser?" she asked, grimacing at the thought of the outrageous repair bill she had opened that morning. Fergus had taken one look at it and told her he'd handle it. She reflexively opened her mouth to object but then stopped and forced herself to nod. She didn't like anyone

“handling” things that had her name on them. Still—her temper had been primed to scorch the earth, and Fergus’s brother was able to find out the actual cost of the parts the man had used—so she let him.

Over the years, he had gone from occasional muscle to an integral part of her staff. If someone needed a shift covered, Fergus was usually the first to volunteer. On delivery days, he showed up early, having once caught her trying to move a heavy keg by herself and nearly going ass-over-teakettle in the process. She didn’t have to ask; he was just there. Most of the time she didn’t dare allow herself to think too deeply about why.

“Well aware it’s Saturday, mate,” he said into the phone, then stopped to listen to whatever was being grumbled through the speaker. Instead of answering, he held the phone away from his ear as a cheer echoed through the pub. When it quieted once more, he pulled it back. “Does that answer your question?”

Men and football, she thought, fighting back a snicker.

“We both know you’re overcharging for those parts,” she heard Fergus say as she poured another pint for the man staying in room three. “If you don’t want to be bothered on a Saturday, don’t take advantage of Maggie.”

Maggie didn’t try to pretend she wasn’t listening. Fergus was a menace with words when he wanted to be, all gruff vowels and blunt force logic. Must’ve been hell to be the unfortunate bloke on the other end of the line, getting talked down to by six feet four inches of ex-rugby scrum.

The repairman caved in record time. Fergus’s expression didn’t change, but Maggie could tell.

He grunted a quick, “Cheers, then,” and thumbed the call dead. Then, he slid the phone into his back pocket like he hadn’t just bullied a man into a discount using only sarcasm.

Maggie cocked an eyebrow at him. “Sorted?”

Fergus shrugged, flexing his fingers along the wood of the bar. “New bill’s coming Monday morning.”

Maggie laughed. “I knew he’d fold. He didn’t count on someone around here actually knowing what those fancy industrial parts cost.”

Fergus shrugged like it was nothing, but the corner of his mouth twitched. “Wasn’t hard. He’s got a reputation for fleecing ‘country folk.’ Doesn’t know who he’s messing with.”

“Next time he tries it, I’m sending you over in person,” Maggie shot back, but she was grinning. “Just stand in his lobby and stare at him. Bet

he’d cut the bill in half.”

Fergus made a deep, low hum—a sound that might’ve been agreement or just his version of a laugh. With him, it was always a toss-up.

Of course, what Fergus didn’t know was that even after discounts and smooth-talking, each bill caused a mild panic. Maggie could feel the winter coming on, same as she felt the ache in her left knee every time she climbed the inn’s stairs. The slow months always gnawed at her. Fewer pints, fewer tourists, and the regulars were more reluctant to part with their money when the weather soured. Sometimes she wondered how much longer she could keep the Stag running before something gave, but she’d be damned if she let anyone see it.

She shook it off quickly. The Roaring Stag had survived the last thirteen winters on her watch; this one would be no different. But if she’d been hoping for a moment’s peace, Maggie was out of luck. The front door swung open, letting in a rush of cold air and two figures bundled in scarves and wool coats. Maggie looked up automatically—and stopped short.

Hannah.

Her niece stood just inside the threshold, cheeks pink from the cold, strawberry blonde hair pulled back in a braid. She’d grown into a beautiful young woman, but the smile she wore was the same one Maggie remembered from school plays and sleepovers.

Beside her was her boyfriend, Ben—solid through the shoulders, the kind of young man who stood a little too straight when he was nervous. He was always polite, offering to carry bags and always holding the door for her niece. She had already given her stamp of approval on the relationship, which, to her shock, seemed to mean more to Hannah than her father’s did.

Hannah spotted her and broke into a grin, weaving through the crowd and into Maggie’s waiting embrace. Ben followed close behind, his hand dropping from the small of Hannah’s back when they got close.

“Well, this is a pleasant surprise,” Maggie said, already smiling as she moved from behind the bar. “What brings you two in?”

“We were in the area,” Hannah said, pulling back and shrugging out of her olive-green coat. “And you’re always here on Saturdays, so I thought—why not?”

“Given this crowd, I can think of a few reasons why not!” Maggie ignored the few rowdy regulars who responded with a ‘*Hey!’*

“I thought corralling them was Fergus’s job,” Hannah laughed, giving Fergus a warm smile as he set the pair’s usual on the bar.

“Good to see you, lass,” he said before giving a little nod to Ben and returning to his post.

“What happened to the platinum blonde?” Hannah asked, motioning toward Maggie’s hair.

She had decided to go back to something that resembled her natural strawberry blonde a few weeks prior after years of bleaching it. Jenny had made quite the fuss, but Fergus had frozen in place. The way he had looked at her, like he was seeing her for the first time, had caused her mouth to go dry. She had spent the next two days avoiding him as much as one could in a busy pub.

“I thought it was time to match the rest of the Hartwells.”

They chatted easily for a few minutes after that—mostly about work and how Hannah was settling into her post-uni life. Maggie listened with half an ear, content just to have her here. She had been like Hannah once—sharp, determined, full of plans and not yet understanding how the world could bruise a person.

Then Hannah set her glass down.

“There’s something we wanted to tell you,” she said, glancing at Ben.

Maggie felt it immediately—the subtle tightening in her chest, the instinctive brace for the emotional impact.

“Oh?” she said lightly.

Hannah lifted her left hand, fingers trembling just slightly. A simple diamond ring caught the pub’s warm light.

“We’re engaged,” Hannah said, her voice bright and breathless. “It just happened last week.”

For a moment, the noise of the pub faded into nothing.

Engaged.

Her niece. Her brother’s little girl. The one she still pictured with pigtails and a backpack too big for her shoulders.

“Oh,” Maggie breathed. Then, laughing, she ran around the bar to pull Hannah into her arms. “Oh my God.” She hugged them both fiercely, blinking back moisture from her eyes. “Congratulations,” she said, her voice thick. “I’m so happy for you, I don’t even know where to put it.”

Hannah laughed, and Ben looked relieved, and maybe a little stunned himself. Maggie retreated back behind the bar, still grinning as she picked

up an empty glass and credit card receipt.

Hannah glanced at Ben, then gave him a nudge with her elbow. He winced, then cleared his throat, eyes darting between Hannah and Maggie.

"So," he said, shifting his stance uneasily, "we were wondering…"

"If you'd think it was mad," Hannah added quickly.

"…or too much," Ben interjected.

"…or terrible timing," she finished.

Maggie frowned, looking from one to the other as she tried to piece together where they were going with this. "What?"

Hannah gestured around them, suddenly sheepish. "Could we maybe have the wedding here?"

It took her a second to register what Hannah had said. The Roaring Stag certainly had its charm, but it was far from a dream wedding venue. The less frequently used common areas had fallen too far behind on repairs for that.

"We were thinking we could rent the courtyard," Hannah continued. "Maybe in November? I know it's short notice, but with Ben starting his apprenticeship in London in January, we didn't want to wait."

Maggie smiled. But inside, the numbers started running through her head. Weddings were expensive, emotional, and full of things like contracts and promises. She had once believed promises were enough, but she knew better now.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Fergus watching the exchange and, as much as she hated to admit it, it steadied her.

She glanced over, and their eyes met. It was only for a second, maybe less, but in it, an entire unspoken conversation passed between them. He already knew she was going to say yes, that no matter how bad an idea it was, she would be incapable of disappointing Hannah.

She broke the look first, turning back to the couple, willing her smile to stay in place.

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September 27, 2025



-Maggie-

“We were thinking maybe the end of November,” Hannah said, her excitement drawing attention from other villagers who offered their congratulations. Maggie’s expression must have given something away, though, because Hannah hurriedly added, “It doesn’t have to be anything massive. Something small and cozy would be perfect!”

Under normal circumstances, that would have sounded lovely. The courtyard was meant to be a gathering space, with its fairy lights and the fireplace built into one wall. It had been due for renovation five years ago, before the pandemic brought the world to a standstill. With every penny of profit going to keep the Stag from going under, it had been last on her priority list.

“You do realize this is England?” she said lightly. “November means rain. Or sleet. Or that special sideways wind that will ruin your hair no matter how much hairspray you use.”

Ben smiled, clearly unfazed. “We figured. But the courtyard has a roof…”

“And then it would already be decorated for Christmas,” Hannah added quickly. “I was thinking garlands with holly berries wrapped around the pillars and the fireplace illuminating everything… It’ll be festive!”

Maggie pondered this as her eyes surveyed the bar. The courtyard did have a roof, if you could call something that leaked in a light drizzle a “roof.” Then there were the heaters that only worked when the mood struck them.

She could feel the throb starting behind her eyes.

“Oh, it’ll be festive,” she said. “Right up until everyone catches pneumonia.”

Hannah laughed. “You’ve always said discomfort builds resilience.”

“It’s not just the weather,” she continued carefully, desperate for a way to make Hannah’s day special without ignoring the reality of the request. “The courtyard hasn’t exactly been… tested for something like that.”

She could see it now… a horde of guests on the uneven cobblestones, shivering under the malfunctioning heaters. A dance floor and outdoor bar one stiff breeze from blowing away. Musicians huddled around what was left of the heat, trying to play their instruments with cold-numbed fingers. It was an unmitigated disaster in the making.

Hannah’s expression softened. It was a look Maggie knew all too well from Hannah’s childhood pouting.

“I know it’s not perfect,” Hannah said, reaching across the bar and covering Maggie’s hand, which was nervously wiping down the counter with a damp cloth. “But this place is special to me. I always knew that when things got tough at home, I could come here… that The Roaring Stag was my second home. Please, Aunt Maggie.”

Maggie’s grip tightened on the cloth. There had been so many sleepovers where they stayed up late so Hannah could pour her heart out. So many times Maggie had managed to get through to her where her parents could not. She hadn’t realized that it had meant as much to Hannah as it had to her.

Maggie closed her eyes and made herself take a slow, calming breath. She pushed the disaster out of her imagination and willed herself to focus on what Hannah saw: strings of twinkling lights, tables of family and friends smiling, her niece in white against the purples and pinks of early

twilight. It was beautiful… and tantalizingly, dangerously close to a fairy tale.

"Right." Maggie drew in a breath, her mind already making an unbelievably long list of things that had to be done. "Let's step outside, then. Before you decide, it's best you see what we're working with."

The air outside was cooler than in the pub, carrying the damp scent of fallen leaves. Hannah tugged the sleeves of her jumper down over her hands, and Ben took a slow look around.

"Okay," he said. "I see it."

"You see what? A bunch of frozen guests coming down with bronchitis? Oh, I see that, too." Maggie instantly regretted the comment when she saw the look on Hannah's face. "I know you're in love with the idea, sweetheart. I just want you two to go into this with your eyes open. I love you, and I want your wedding to be as special as you are."

"We are," Hannah said, linking her arm with Maggie's as she looked over the courtyard. "With the fireplace and heaters… if we have some extra blankets around, the guests will be fine. Besides, you know how our side is—once they hit the bar, the alcohol will keep them from freezing."

Maggie snorted despite her reservations. They started talking logistics, and through it all, Hannah's excitement never faded. It was the kind of enthusiasm Maggie wished she still possessed. Instead, all she could see was the work.

The roof.

The stones.

The drainage.

The budget.

"We have to do quite a bit to get this ready," Maggie said bluntly. Hannah's shoulders dipped, just slightly, and something in Maggie's chest tightened. "Not that it can't be done," she added quickly. "It's just… this is not a small project."

Ben didn't hesitate. "We expected that."

"And we can help," Hannah said. "However you need us to."

They went quiet, waiting for her answer.

Maggie looked around the courtyard one more time—the potential, the problems, the way the light already faded earlier than it had a month ago, meaning less daylight for work. Looking at the bigger picture, she knew it could lead to more income for the Stag. The charm of the village of Great

Missenden made for an idyllic wedding location, and it could well carry her through the quieter months if she did it right.

"Let me run some numbers," she said finally. "I'll send you a quote tomorrow."

Relief washed over Hannah's face, and she barely gave Maggie time to breathe before pulling her into another fierce embrace. For just a moment, Maggie let herself sink into the warmth and the memories of the little girl with crooked pigtails and big ideas. She had grown into a woman in the blink of an eye.

When Hannah pulled away, though, reality slowly crept back in. November wasn't that far away. Hannah looked at her searchingly, and Maggie put on her best smile before the worry could show. For Hannah, she could play the doting aunt. Dealing with the stress could wait until the young couple had left.

They headed back inside to the welcoming warmth of the pub, and Hannah and Ben drifted toward a quieter corner booth, heads together as they talked excitedly. Maggie watched them before turning back to the bar. She picked up a towel and began wiping down the counter, grounding herself in the familiar motion.

"You alright?" Fergus asked. "You've wiped that same spot about thirty times. The rest of the bar is feeling left out."

She met his eyes and nodded once. "I'm good."

He didn't look convinced. However, he didn't press, which she was grateful for, and instead gave a little nod before returning to pouring pints.

He was still watching, though, as she purposely moved on to wipe another part of the bar, ignoring the smirk tugging at his lips.

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September 29, 2025



-Fergus-

Fergus knew something was wrong the moment he saw the office light on.

It was five o'clock in the morning; he doubted Maggie's rooster had even stirred yet. Mondays were the one day she generally allowed herself a few moments of rest. He handled the deliveries, and the kitchen staff prepared a light breakfast for the inn guests; meanwhile, the pub portion of the Stag remained closed until lunch the following day.

Peering through the open office door, he found Maggie scribbling on a notepad, still in her clothes from last night. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her tousled hair was falling out of the hair clip. She looked like she had gotten into a fight with her pint-sized hens and lost.

Crossing his arms, he leaned casually against the doorframe and cleared his throat to get her attention. Her eyes shot up, first to him, and then to the clock on the wall.

"Bloody hell," she muttered, heaving a sigh.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

She shook her head, reaching for a cup of tea that had gone cold. “Couldn’t stop thinking,” she said, grimacing after taking a sip. “Figures and fixtures and all that.”

Fergus pushed off the doorframe and took the chair opposite. “You look knackered, Mags.”

“Charming,” she said dryly. “Exactly what every woman wants to hear before six a.m.” Leaning back in her seat, she tossed her pen on the desk. “I’ve got a quote to put together before my niece starts making more plans.”

“The courtyard tour?”

Maggie’s mouth twitched, and she snorted. “You make it sound far more organized than it was.”

“Figured it wasn’t just fresh air.”

She tapped the pen against her notebook. “Hannah sees the Stag as this magical place instead of a money pit.”

“It isn’t?” he asked, one eyebrow raised as a devilish smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

She shot him a look. He didn’t bother trying to look even remotely sorry. If anything, the smirk deepened into pure amusement at her mock outrage.

“Don’t you start, too,” she said. “It could be. It’ll take a bit of elbow grease to get the courtyard in shape… and the weather will need to cooperate.” She shook her head, shoulders rolling forward. “With my luck, we’ll get a blizzard just as they’re cutting the cake.”

Fergus nodded slowly. “Can’t speak to the weather, but the heaters we can manage. Want me to take a look at them after the delivery?”

Maggie sighed, and gave him a look that made him unsure whether she wanted to thank him or smack him with the notepad.

“Be my guest,” she said, voice scratchy. “If you can figure out why they’re so bloody temperamental, your next drink is on the house. Top shelf, not the watered-down swill.”

“Done. You’re even more tired than I thought.”

“Or maybe I just know you’ll be swearing at the thing after about thirty seconds.”

He almost smiled but caught himself. “You have no room to judge.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Maggie said, feigning innocence. The fierce edge had dulled, replaced by something closer to relief—the unguarded kind she almost never let anyone see—and he had to ignore the urge to offer to do

more. Maggie lifted her cup again but stopped short before taking a sip. “This needs a refresh. Can I get you anything?”

“As long as you’re making a fresh pot…” He gestured at her cup. She nodded and headed out into the kitchen.

Fergus waited until she’d disappeared through the door before looking at the notebook again. The numbers were half-scratched out and rewritten, and the way she had circled them suggested she still wasn’t sure she had them correct.

He frowned.

The heaters were there. The lighting. Even a rough estimate for glassware breakage. But the staffing line was too thin, and no overtime had been accounted for. There was also no buffer for weather delays or margin for the sort of small disasters that always cropped up when you put people and alcohol together in the cold.

And then there was the matter of the roof and the drainage. Maggie had been saving for years to renovate the courtyard, but there always seemed to be an obstacle. A clogged pipe, a specialty part for the stove in the kitchen… she had silently shouldered each setback.

He exhaled slowly and glanced over at her as she moved about the kitchen.

When he had first walked back through the doors of The Roaring Stag after nearly two decades, it had taken him a moment longer than it should have to place the girl he remembered as his best mate’s little sister. Not because he didn’t recognize her, but because the woman standing behind the bar no longer fit the carefully locked-away version of her he had carried all those years.

He had noticed her properly once before—years ago, on a night neither of them had ever spoken about—and he had tucked it away. She was Elliot’s sister, and at the time, he was leaving. That had been reason enough to put his own growing feelings for her aside.

This Maggie was different. More certain. More fully herself. The confidence and independence had always been there in pieces; now they were complete. And underneath the fierce exterior there was still that same rare softness she only let show when she felt safe.

Those were the moments of beauty and softness that made him want nothing more than to be near her and be the reason for that smile.

Closing the notebook, he reminded himself that she was only agreeing to let him help out of practicality, and nothing more. He'd learned the difference a long time ago between being useful and being wanted. Useful was safe. Wanted meant risk.

He set the notebook back in its place, careful not to let it fall open again.

"Everything alright?" Maggie asked, glancing back at him as the kettle clicked on.

"Your numbers… they're optimistic."

She made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "That's a polite way of putting it. I've never been very good at separating family from business."

He shrugged. "You don't have to. The kids will help."

She grabbed a second teacup from the shelf, set it on the counter next to the kettle, and he watched as she busied herself lining up mismatched mugs while she waited for it to come to a boil.

"I know they offered, but I don't want to bother them with this. Hannah's going to have her hands full with Elliot," she told him, and he couldn't deny that she had a point. Her brother did have a way of pushing Hannah's buttons.

He watched her silently. She had her back to him now, the kettle starting to steam, shoulders hiked up to her ears. When the kettle whistled, Maggie poured the tea and, returning to the office, handed him a cup. He leaned back in the seat, pressing his hands around the mug and enjoying the heat on his palms. Maggie looked again at the notebook while she stirred her tea but made no move to reopen it.

"Jenny's covering lunch tomorrow," she said after a moment, setting down her spoon. "I have a few errands to run. If she comes in looking half-dead again, send her home."

Fergus took a tentative sip. "She won't go."

"I know," Maggie said quietly. "But someone should at least try."

Jenny had her hands full lately, running herself thin between shifts and whatever trouble her brother had found at the pitch or school. Callum had always been a good lad, until recently. Now grief over their mother's death had turned to anger.

"I'll talk to her," he said.

Maggie's mouth softened, but only for a moment. "Careful. She bites."

"So do you," he said flatly.

“Exactly why I hired her.”

They sat for a few minutes, sipping their tea in the quiet of the early morning, the only noise the ticking of a small antique clock behind her desk.

Their peace was finally interrupted by a loud rooster crow, and Maggie jumped. Why she insisted on keeping those blasted birds was beyond him. The fact that Freddie weighed roughly as much as a rugby ball made the noise all the more surprising.

“Like a bloody alarm clock,” he muttered, rising and taking his teacup into the kitchen. “Butcher’s delivery should be here any minute.”

Maggie picked up the teaspoon and gave him a half-hearted salute. Before she finished, a yawn escaped her, and he swore he heard her jaw crack.

“If Alfie’s late again, just threaten him with the hens,” she called. “That usually puts the fear of God into him.”

“Right,” Fergus chuckled, finishing his tea before washing the cup and putting it in the drain rack. “Get some rest, Mags.”

He stepped out into the cool morning air, the sounds of the village just beginning to stir—the distant clatter of a delivery truck, another rooster crowing in the distance. Fergus pulled the door shut behind him, careful not to let it bang.

He could handle heaters, and deliveries, and heavy lifting.

For now, that would have to be enough.

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September 29, 2025



-Fergus-

By half past five on a damp Monday afternoon, the rugby pitch was more mud than grass. Fergus's boots had already sunk an inch into the touchline, and every step made a wet squishing sound. The skies above threatened more rain, and his breath came out in short pale clouds that vanished before they had time to mean anything.

"Wilkes," he called. "Watch it into your hands! Drop it again you're carrying it home, mud and all."

Andrew Wilkes, fifteen and gangly in a way that suggested his arms and legs hadn't been formally introduced to one another yet, glanced over and, as a result, dropped the ball for the third time. He looked up at Fergus with an accusing stare and wounded dignity.

"It's slippery, Coach."

Fergus shrugged. "Wet leather often is."

A scatter of laughter went up from the squad. Wilkes ducked his head and grinned despite himself, retrieving the ball from the puddle it had landed in. Fergus folded his arms inside his coat and tried not to smile. He'd learned in the eighteen months since he'd taken on the under-sixteens that smiling at the wrong moment could ruin a perfectly good correction. The boys were sharp; they could smell amusement at fifty paces, and once they saw it, they used it shamelessly.

It still surprised him from time to time how he ended up in this position. He hadn't meant to become a coach. Like most things in Great Missenden, it had started with someone needing "just a bit of help" and ended with him standing ankle-deep in mud three times a week.

When the chairman of the village rugby league had first cornered him over a pint at the Stag, Fergus had been very clear. He was not the right man for it. Just because he had played didn't mean he had any experience herding adolescents. The chairman, a soft-spoken retired solicitor with the persistence of a horsefly, had nodded sympathetically through the entire speech and then said, "Wonderful, Ferg. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, under-sixteens. We've already told the parents."

Maggie had laughed at him for a full minute when he told her. Then she'd poured him a pint and said, "You'll be brilliant, you know."

He hadn't been brilliant at first, but the boys turned up, more or less, every practice. They ran when he asked them to run. They listened when he stopped them mid-drill and explained why they were tackling like a bunch of drunken pandas. And, miraculously, they had even managed to win a few matches last season.

That was something.

He hadn't expected it to be something, but it was.

"Right," Fergus said, raising his voice just enough to carry across the pitch. "Reset. Two lines. Ball moves down the chain. Call for it before it reaches you. Wilkes, you don't call, you're running the long way round the posts, and I'll be watching."

"Yes, Coach."

The boys jogged into position, breath steaming, clothes already streaked with the brown-orange mud that would never wash entirely out, no matter what their mothers did to it. The captain, a stocky, sensible lad with the kind of haircut his mother had clearly chosen for him, clapped his hands twice and started the drill. Fergus liked him. He'd been picked because he didn't

shout and didn’t sulk, two qualities Fergus considered more valuable in a fifteen-year-old than any amount of speed or strength.

The ball moved down the line. Fergus paced along the touchline with his hands shoved deep in his coat pockets and his shoulders hunched against the cold. His left knee was complaining, the way it always did in damp weather.

He ignored it.

Coaching was not playing. He had known that going in, but knowing wasn’t the same as experiencing it. His muscles never quite forgot, though. His body still leaned forward when the ball went up, expecting to be in its line, expecting to run.

He didn’t grieve in the way he used to, but it was still there at the back of his mind.

He’d allowed himself to grieve when he’d first returned home to Great Missenden, during those strange quiet months when the pandemic shut half the world indoors and left him with nothing but the ache in his knee, the walls of his small cottage, and the knowledge that rugby was done with him whether he was done with it or not. He had recovered here in the village because there had been nowhere else to go. No club to return to, no squad waiting, no path back if he only worked hard enough.

Just four walls and silence.

The village had carried on around him in odd, muted fragments. Empty streets. Closed doors. Maggie keeping the Stag alive by sheer force of will and takeaway containers. His younger brother leaving bags of groceries at his door without asking if he needed them. Fergus had hated needing anything then. Hated the stillness. Hated the body that had stopped doing what he told it to do.

But he’d worked through it and he had come out the other side in a better place, even if not whole.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Wilkes finally, on the fourth attempt, caught the ball cleanly and grinned like he’d scored at Twickenham. The captain calmly ordered the chain to reset without looking to Fergus for permission.

“Right,” he called when the chain had run its length twice without serious incident. “Water. Two minutes. Wilkes, almost a proper catch. Well done.”

“Cheers, Coach.”

“Don’t get cocky or the next one bounces off your head.”

The boys broke for the touchline, shedding mud and shouting over each other in the half-feral way of teenage boys who had been holding it in for too long. Fergus watched them go, counting heads automatically. Seventeen. That was one less than at the start of practice. He squinted across at the cluster of bottles by the kit bag, finding the eighteenth boy, and sighed.

Across the pitch, Callum Price stood apart from the others.

He had one hand jammed into the sleeve of his club jersey, which was now, two seasons in, beginning to fall apart. The cuffs were frayed, and the colors were fading fast. He was fifteen, slight for his age, but quick. Fergus had noticed that in the first week. There was precision in the way he moved that some of the bigger lads hadn't learned yet.

But there was anger, too.

When he looked at Callum, there was no doubt he was Jenny's brother. He had the same dark hair and pale, watchful face. The same tight expression in his jaw that suggested its owner had gotten tired of explaining things a long time ago..

Fergus knew bits and pieces of what had happened to their parents. Their dad had left several years ago, and their mother had passed after an accident on the A413 the previous spring. He hadn't been close to the family but had gotten to know Jenny a bit from shifts spent behind the bar at the Stag. He had heard fragments of what happened on slow evenings: the social worker who came and went, Jenny dropping her plans for university to stay home, the house on King's Lane that nobody had quite known what to do about.

Maggie had told him once, in the strained voice she used when she was angry about something she couldn't fix: "Twenty. She's twenty, Fergus. And she's trying to be both a parent and a sister."

Fergus had nodded and said nothing, because there was nothing to be said.

"That'll do," he called when the boys had stretched two minutes into four. "Tackle bags. Pair up. Pad and runner. Twenty seconds on the bag, then swap. Low and through. Anyone goes in high, you do it again until your shoulders give out."

The boys split into pairs reluctantly, knowing the next ten minutes were going to hurt like hell. Fergus moved toward the bags, his eye sweeping the squad without appearing to.

"Callum," he said. "With Marsden."

Callum’s head came up. His eyes met Fergus’s for a fraction of a second, and then he nodded once and moved into position.

The drill started, and it took Fergus less than thirty seconds to see the problem.

Callum hit the bag clean, which was good, and low, which was better. However, there was a second after contact when his shoulders kept driving, a small extra grunt of breath that wasn’t about technique at all. Marsden, broad-set and patient, staggered back a step and laughed.

“Bloody hell, Price. Save some for the match.”

Callum didn’t smile. In fact, he didn’t say anything. He just reset, jogged back, and went again.

Same hit. Same extra inch of shoulder.

Fergus watched with his hands in his pockets and his face arranged in the calm, mildly bored expression he kept on standby. That was not a boy having fun. That was a boy who had found somewhere legal to channel his anger.

He let three more go before he raised his hand.

“Callum, a word.”

Callum jogged over, breath misting, and his eyes flicked up and away again.

“Coach.”

“Your shoulder’s coming through clean,” Fergus said. “They’re good hits, but you’re carrying the drive on too long. The bag isn’t going to fall over. Make the hit, plant the feet, recycle. Yeah?”

Callum nodded. “Yeah.”

“Run it again. Dial it back a bit. You won’t lose anything.”

“Right.”

He didn’t meet Fergus’s eyes before he turned and jogged back. Fergus watched him go, slight hitch in his stride, his jaw already set.

The next hit was harder.

Fergus rolled his eyes, knowing there wasn’t much more he could do at the moment. Some things had to find their way out.

He moved on down the line, correcting Wilkes, who had twisted himself somehow and was in danger of tackling the bag with his ear, but he kept half an eye on Callum.

They’d moved on to live touch-tackle drills by the time it happened. Two-on-two, low contact, short whistle. Fergus had the whistle in his mouth and

was watching a clean break down the right when one of the older boys, Hewitt, went in on Callum and brought him down a little harder than the drill called for.

The whistle went, and the boys started to peel apart.

Then Hewitt, getting up, said something, clearly thinking Fergus wasn't paying attention, but Fergus saw Marsden's face change as he looked between Callum and Hewitt. Fergus moved closer, catching the end clearly enough.

"...your sister'll come kiss it better, won't she? Mummy Jenny to the rescue."

Callum was up off the ground before Hewitt finished the sentence.

It wasn't a tackle. It was a brutal shove. Two flat palms into the chest, hard enough to send Hewitt back a step and into an undignified half-sit on the wet grass. The whistle was already in Fergus's mouth as he quickened his pace, but Callum was faster. He was on Hewitt as the other lad scrambled up, fist drawn back, his whole compact frame gone tight and white-faced and somewhere else entirely.

"Callum!" he called.

He was between them by the time the second syllable was out. One hand landed against Callum's chest, the other braced behind Hewitt's shoulder. Separating them was easy enough. He had spent twenty years in rucks and knew the precise angle at which a body could be persuaded to go where he wanted it.

"That's enough."

Callum's fist was still up. He was breathing in short, hot bursts, and his eyes, when they found Fergus's, were very bright and not entirely focused.

"Stand down, Callum," Fergus said quietly. "Now."

For a long second, Callum didn't move.

Hewitt, behind Fergus, had the sense to keep his mouth shut. It was possibly the first sensible thing he'd done all afternoon. Around them, the rest of the squad had gone still.

Callum's hand came down slowly, but he didn't look away from Fergus or say a word.

"Hewitt," Fergus said without turning his head. "Long way round the posts. Twice. Now."

"Coach, he…"

"Twice. Move."

Hewitt opened his mouth, thought better of it, and moved.

“Callum. You stay back after we’re done and help me pack.” Callum’s jaw tightened, but he nodded once, sharply, and turned away. “And Callum.” The boy half-turned. “You had a go at someone in front of eighteen people. We’ll talk later. Not now.”

Another nod and Callum jogged back to his place. Fergus blew the whistle and the boys slowly reset.

The last twenty minutes of practice passed in something that resembled normality. Fergus ran a kicking drill, mostly to keep the bigger bodies separated, and gave Wilkes an entirely unnecessary lesson on conversion technique because Wilkes liked hearing them. Callum did everything he was asked without speaking.

At half past six, Fergus called them in and said the things he always said: well done, be on time on Wednesday, and eat something that wasn’t a sausage roll on the way home.

The squad dispersed toward the clubhouse and the waiting cars. Hewitt went past with his head down, enough sense left to lie low after his punishment laps. Marsden caught Fergus’s eye and gave him a small, somber nod.

Fergus returned it.

Marsden was a good lad. He’d be captain one day. Or possibly a vicar.

Callum stayed.

They worked in silence. The cones were first. Fergus took the far end of the pitch and let Callum take the near, giving the boy time to himself before they ended up in the same place. The drizzle had started properly now, a fine, slanting rain that put a sheen on everything and seeped into his collar depressingly quickly.

Fergus collected his cones and stacked them, then started in on the tackle bags. They were heavy and waterlogged and required a particular sort of grip he had gotten used to compensating for over the years.

Callum reached him as he was hauling the second bag toward the shed.

“Get the other end of that,” Fergus said.

Callum did so without comment, and they walked the bag to the shed and dropped it inside, repeating the process until all the equipment was stored.

Fergus shut the shed door, snapped the padlock, and turned around.

“Sit,” he said, nodding toward the wet bench by the shed wall.

“I’m all right standing.”

“So stand.”

Fergus sat. He let a few seconds pass, watching rain fleck the puddles in the center of the pitch. He had thought about this on and off through the kicking drill and had not arrived at any speech he was happy with.

So, in the end, he did without one.

“You crossed a line,” he said. “You know it.”

“Yeah.”

“If you’d landed that punch, you’d have done proper harm, lad, and you’d be off the squad for the rest of the season.” Fergus glanced over. “I know you’d feel worse about the first part.”

Callum’s hands were in his sleeves again, and he looked at the grass.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Hewitt was out of line. He’ll pay for what he said. Doesn’t make what you did right, but you should know.”

“Okay.”

Fergus looked at him for a long moment.

The boy was very still, and Fergus knew that stillness. He had, in his time, been remarkably stupid about other people, but he could read a stillness like that across a crowded pub.

“How are things at home, Callum?”

The boy’s head came up fast.

“Fine.”

Fergus said nothing. It was unnecessary. His silence said it all.

Callum couldn’t take it. “I said they’re fine! Jenny’s fine. I’m fine. We’re fine.” His voice rose defiantly.

“All right,” Fergus said calmly, which seemed to trigger Callum further.

“I don’t need…” Callum stopped. His mouth closed tight. The rain was running off the end of his nose, but he didn’t seem to feel it. “I don’t need counseling, Coach. I’m sorry I shoved him. There. I said it. Won’t happen again. Can I go now?”

Fergus held his gaze for a beat.

Then he nodded slowly.

“Go. I’m at the Stag most evenings. You need me, you know where to find me.”

Callum stared at him.

For half a second, maybe less, the guard slipped. Fergus saw the vulnerable kid trying desperately to pretend he wasn’t. A fifteen-year-old

boy who had no idea what to do with the exhaustion and anger bottled up inside of him.

Then the walls came back up.

Callum nodded once, turned, and walked away across the wet grass toward the gate.

Jenny was already there.

Fergus saw her before Callum did. She stood by the rail near the entrance, hands shoved deep in the pockets of a coat slightly too big for her, dark hair pulled back in the kind of ponytail that had been done in a hurry and not corrected. From a distance, he never would have guessed that she was only twenty. There was something in her posture that had aged faster than the rest of her. But as Fergus came up the touchline behind Callum, he could still see the youth in her face beneath the fatigue.

And the visible fatigue was considerable.

“Hiya, Cal,” she said as Callum reached her. Her smile came on like a light switch. Bright, immediate, a little too wide. “Good practice?”

“It was all right.”

“Good.” She glanced past him, caught Fergus’s eye, and the smile widened by another careful degree. “Evening, Fergus. Is he behaving himself?”

“He’s working hard,” Fergus said.

“That’s what we like to hear, isn’t it?”

She put a hand briefly on her brother’s shoulder. Callum shifted away from her touch, and Jenny’s hand dropped.

She recovered quickly. “Right. Come on then, you. Kettle’s on. Thanks, Fergus.”

“Jenny,” he said. “Anything you need…”

“Oh, we’re grand, honestly.” The smile didn’t move. “Cheers, though. See you tomorrow.”

Callum was already walking. Jenny turned to follow him, and Fergus stood at the gate and watched them go. Him with his hood up, looking down as he walked, and her walking half a step behind him. Both hunched against the rain, but keeping deliberate space between each other.

Fergus was good at fixing things, but this was different.

Shaking his head, he pulled his collar up against the rain and started back across the pitch.

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October 1, 2025



-Maggie-

Maggie stood in the middle of the courtyard, hands on her hips, taking stock. The morning air still had a bite to it, and pale sunlight caught the dried foliage in the corners.

She could understand why Hannah saw the charm here.

Unfortunately, that “charm” had seen better days. There were paving stones that had cracked or tilted so unevenly that they could trip the unwary. A cluster of weeds had claimed the far corner near the fence, pushing through gravel that hadn’t been refreshed in years. The drain gurgled like it had indigestion and a half-full bucket had been placed near one end to catch the leaks when it rained. Above all of it was the sagging timber beam which she had noticed Fergus eyeing apprehensively every time he looked out the window.

Individually, these weren’t massive issues, but together they would be a disaster for the wedding. She had spent the last few nights watching outdoor

home improvement videos online and checking the price of supplies at every shop within seventy-five kilometers. This was a showdown between her and her pub, and she intended to win it.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she muttered to herself.

The roof above her head creaked in response. It was going to be some work, but she had handled worse.

London had been worse.

That thought slipped in uninvited, and a knot formed in her stomach.

London had been expensive, loud, and unforgiving. She’d gone there with dreams and she’d left broken, but the Stag had changed everything. She absolutely refused to ever be broken again.

She dragged the ladder to the center of the courtyard, making sure it was locked in place before she began climbing. Each rung squeaked uneasily under her trainers.

Up close, the beam looked worse. It wasn’t catastrophic yet, but the dip in the middle was more pronounced than it had seemed, and there were unsettlingly large cracks near one of the bolts. She regarded it silently, weighing her options.

“You winning the staring contest with the beam, Mags?”

She didn’t look down, but she didn’t need to. She could picture Fergus perfectly—filling the doorway, arms crossed, that watchful, concerned expression. She had caved and let him help the other day, blaming it on lack of sleep, but it had to stop.

“It’s not bad,” she lied, shifting her weight to get a better look at the bolt. The ladder wobbled, supplying an unwelcome surge of adrenaline, and she froze. “It just needs tightening, that’s all.”

There was a pause, then he asked, “Going to fix that by yourself, are you?”

She slowly and carefully twisted around to look his way. She kept one hand braced against the beam, not fully trusting the ladder.

“I’m… assessing,” she answered.

“With a spanner?”

“Being prepared is not a crime.”

His gaze moved from her to the ladder, then back to her.

“If you want a hand…”

“I don’t.”

She hadn’t intended it to be so harsh. She shifted her weight, and the ladder creaking again was the only sound breaking the silence that stretched between them. She saw the flash of concern and hurt in his eyes.

“I am perfectly capable of tightening a bolt without assistance, Fergus,” she assured him. “I promise I won’t bring the entire structure down… you don’t have to worry about it. Really.”

His eyes flicked to the beam, then back to her.

“It’s not the structure I’m worried about,” he said softly.

“Well, I...” she trailed off as what he said sank in. She felt her face flush, and she knew immediately that he’d noticed. She recovered quickly with a playful smile and, brandishing the spanner like a sword, said, “Well, you should be. I’m a menace with a power tool!”

Fergus laughed, as she’d intended, but then he quickly became serious again.

“Just...” he began, then stopped. “Call if you need me,” he finished carefully.

She watched him retreat, his words lingering, and then shook her head to clear it. What she needed were new screws, a level, twenty minutes of peace and quiet, and maybe, if the universe was kind, a ladder that wasn’t trying to kill her.

She climbed down carefully to look for supplies in the storage shed and tried very hard to convince herself that everything was under control.

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The door to the courtyard slammed hard enough to rattle the glassware.

Conversation at the bar sputtered, then resumed as the patrons pretended they hadn’t noticed anything at all. Maggie rolled her shoulders back, doing her best to look like nothing was wrong. She nearly succeeded, if one ignored the dust in her hair… and the streak of something pale across her cheek… and the fact that one of the fairy light strands dangled from her fist like a casualty of war.

She could feel Fergus’s eyes on her, and she walked by briskly without looking at him.

“It’s fine,” she said before he could ask. “The beam’s slightly more temperamental than anticipated, but it’s nothing catastrophic.”

She needed something to do with her hands and began wiping down the bar. Looking up, she stared at him, daring him to contradict her. The cloth dragged across the bar in tight, unnecessary circles, and there was a long pause. She watched him watching her, and the amusement in his eyes was infuriating.

“Did it fall?” he asked calmly.

“No.”

There was another pause and then, “Did you?”

Her jaw tightened, and she snapped, “I’m standing, aren’t I?”

A glass clinked somewhere down the bar, and Mr. Davies coughed, although she was sure he was trying to cover a chuckle.

Before Fergus could answer, the front door swung open, banging against the wall, and Owen Merrick sidled in, muddy boots first, cradling a large terracotta pot against his chest. The pot contained what appeared to be a fern in the final stages of a nervous breakdown.

“Alright, alright,” the younger Merrick brother huffed, kicking the door shut behind him with his heel. “Hold your applause. I heard my name from halfway down the street, which means someone was either speaking fondly of me or slandering my good reputation.”

Fergus closed his eyes and muttered something, and Maggie stared at the pot as Owen made a beeline for the bar.

“Unless that thing is buying a drink, it stays off my counter.”

Owen froze mid-lift, offended. “That ‘thing,’ as you call it so disrespectfully, has survived neglect, frost, and the emotional wasteland outside Baxter’s Garden Centre.”

“So have half the men in here. Still not letting it sit on the bar.”

Mr. Davies lifted his pint. “I resent that.”

“You resemble that,” Owen shot back, setting the pot carefully on the floor instead.

A small shower of dirt spilled onto the boards. Maggie looked down at it and then pointedly back up at Owen, raising her eyebrow. In return he gave her his most charming smile, the one that had probably gotten him forgiven for every disaster he had ever caused.

“Magpie.”

“Do not Magpie me. Why is there a dying fern in my pub?”

“It’s not dying. It’s emotionally complex.”

“It’s shedding on my floor.”

“It needs community.”

“It needs a blowtorch.”

Owen gasped and placed one hand over the fern as though shielding it from harm. “Violence toward foliage. Noted.”

Fergus quietly fetched the broom from behind the bar.

“And why,” Maggie continued, watching mud slowly drip from the heel of Owen’s boot, “are you covered in half the village?”

“Public service,” Owen said, leaning one dirt-crusted elbow on the bar, and Maggie’s hand whitened around the cleaning cloth. “Mrs. Palmer’s trellis collapsed again. I exposed several structural flaws.”

“You exposed that nothing survives contact with you,” Fergus corrected, and he gestured toward the fern with the broom, like he was trying to drive the point home.

“That is one interpretation.”

“It’s the only interpretation.”

Owen ignored him and turned his attention back to Maggie. She watched his gaze flicking over the dust in her hair, the string of lights on the bar, and the expression she was trying very hard to arrange into something dignified. When his grin widened, she felt her jaw tense in anticipation of the havoc that was about to ensue.

“Oh,” he said. “I’ve walked into something…”

“No,” Maggie said immediately.

Fergus’s voice came at the exact same time. “You haven’t.”

Owen looked delighted. “Sounds like you two rehearsed!”

Maggie pointed the cloth at him. “Not another word.”

“I wasn’t...”

“You were about to.”

“I was thinking loudly. There’s a difference.”

Fergus swept the last of the dirt into a dustpan and gave his brother a flat look. “Why do you have that fern?”

“I liberated her.”

“From Baxter’s?”

“From spiritual abandonment.”

“You stole it.”

“I bartered.” Owen straightened, offended again. “Baxter had a leak in the guttering. I gave him professional advice. He gave me Euphemia.”

Maggie blinked. “You named the fern.”

“She’s been through enough.”

Mr. Davies leaned sideways on his stool to inspect the fern. “Looks like it’s survived a nuclear winter.”

“Thank you, Gareth,” Maggie said. “Helpful as ever.”

“I’ve seen month-old lettuce in the back of my fridge look more alive,” he continued, undeterred.

“Stop it!” Owen exclaimed, pointing at him. “My Euphemia is sensitive.”

“Euphemia is one sneeze away from compost,” Maggie said.

“Honestly, Magpie, your hospitality is appalling.”

“My ‘hospitality’ will be a fond memory if you don’t move that thing before someone trips over it.”

Owen crouched and shifted the pot closer to the end of the bar, where it was somehow both less in the way and more impossible to ignore.

“There,” he said. “She adds character. The Stag could use a bit of greenery.”

“The Stag could use fewer Merricks dragging dying vegetation through its door.”

Owen placed a hand over his heart. “She admits we’re essential.”

“I said fewer. Not none.”

“Practically a love letter.”

Fergus, who had been standing quietly with the dustpan in his hand watching this tennis match, muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *God help us,* and set the broom back in its corner.

Maggie tried not to smile. She failed, but only slightly, and immediately regretted it when Owen’s eyes brightened.

“There it is,” he said. “Knew you loved me.”

“I tolerate you because of your brother.”

“That’s hurtful, but fair.”

She watched as Fergus turned and stopped short, and his attention zeroed in on her hand.

“You’re bleeding.”

A thin, wet, red line traced across her knuckle. It was bright against her skin, and there was no hiding it. It looked deep enough that it likely needed some pressure to stop it.

She looked down at it and waved it away. “It’s just a scratch.”

“Maggie.”

The way he said her name in that soft tone caught her off guard, and she looked up and met his gaze. Before she could form an answer, he reached over and grabbed a napkin with one hand and her injured hand with the other. Gently, he applied pressure to it, and she felt a warmth rising from deep inside her that she refused to acknowledge, lest it become real. He cocked his head at her and raised an eyebrow.

"It slipped," she told him before she could stop herself. "The ladder. Not me."

Owen's brows shot up. "You were on a ladder?"

"No," she lied, but when she saw the look on Fergus's face, she knew she would not be getting away with it. "Briefly."

Owen turned slowly toward his brother. "Fascinating."

"Owen," Fergus warned.

"What? I'm simply gathering facts before the inquest."

Mr. Davies made a choking noise into his pint, and Maggie ignored them both, her focus on Fergus.

"I told you it just needed tightening. The bolt was looser than it looked. That's hardly a structural crisis."

"You should have let me spot you," Fergus replied, looking up from where he was applying pressure to the wound on her hand.

On a rational level she understood what he meant, yet it felt like he believed she couldn't handle a few small repairs. Rolling her eyes at him, she pulled her hand away quickly, fetched a thick elastic band from a drawer, and wrapped it around the makeshift bandage to hold it in place. Picking up the cloth, she resumed wiping the counter down as if nothing had happened.

"I am quite capable of climbing a ladder without help."

"Didn't say you weren't," Fergus said, leaning his hip against the work counter as he was known to do when he was trying to appear unaffected by whatever chaos was happening around them.

"Then what the hell are you saying, Fergus?" she snapped as she threw the cloth down.

The question landed even sharper than she intended, and the pub went quiet for a beat. Despite the slight pink blooming at the tips of his ears, Fergus turned and glared at the regulars. Some pretended to go back to their conversations, but they were still listening.

Owen, however, had gone unnervingly still, which was never good, and the silence continued to press in between Maggie and Fergus.

“I’m saying,” Fergus said carefully, “some things are not meant to be done alone.”

The words hit a nerve she hadn’t known was so close to the surface. Alone was safe. Alone meant she couldn’t be let down.

“This wasn’t one of them,” she insisted. “It’s one beam.”

“It’s not just the beam, Maggie.”

Something in her chest flared. What little patience she had left snapped. She squared her shoulders, straightening to her full height even though it only brought her to his shoulder.

“I declined the help,” she said, sharper than she meant to. “You offered. I said no. That should have been the end of it.”

He inhaled slowly through his nose, that familiar restraint settling over him like armor. She had often wished, just once, that she could put a crack in it. Even now, with her provoking him, his voice stayed measured.

“It was.”

“Then why are we still talking about it?”

From the end of the bar, Mr. Davies cleared his throat loudly.

“If you two are done having your domestic, I’ll have another,” he said mildly, lifting his pint.

Every face in the bar turned and stared at Davies, whose only response was to raise his glass, oblivious, and waggle it back and forth.

Maggie’s mouth opened, then closed again. Her head snapped back to Fergus, who was looking back at her, his cheeks flushed. The words hung there, ridiculous, inappropriate, and entirely too accurate.

Beside them, Owen just stared. Maggie had never known Owen Merrick to go completely silent, and that somehow made it worse. His eyebrows climbed slowly, vanishing nearly into his hairline as he looked from Maggie to Fergus and back again.

When Fergus noticed and shot him a warning look, Owen lifted both hands, innocent as a choirboy, and said, “Didn’t say a word.”

“Just did,” Fergus said.

“Wasn’t going to.”

“Owen.”

“I’m simply sitting here, witnessing village history,” Owen replied, voice solemn.

Maggie let out a short, brittle laugh, desperate to break the tension before she combusted on the spot. “We’re not…”

“This is not…” Fergus said over the top of her.

They cut themselves off, and silence fell again as they both shifted uncomfortably. Davies looked unbothered and altogether too smug as he set down his pint glass and pushed it across the bar in Maggie’s direction. Owen, meanwhile, looked like Christmas had come early.

“I need to wash this,” Maggie muttered, holding up her hand. Then, giving Fergus one last withering look, she continued, “And then I have walls to prime.”

She retreated toward the back before anyone could answer, and she didn’t look back.

If she did, she might see Fergus still watching her, and she didn’t trust herself if he was.

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October 1, 2025



-Fergus-

The kitchen door swung shut behind Maggie. Fergus waited a moment, then returned to the bar and wordlessly served Davies the refill he'd been not-so-patiently waiting for.

Owen was still there, now cradling that ridiculous fern like a newborn, with a grin on his face that meant he was expecting to see someone suffer.

"So…" Owen began.

"Don't."

"I was only going to…"

"…poke your nose in? If you do, I'll throw you out myself," Fergus said.

Owen shifted the fern protectively to his other side, keeping himself between it and Fergus. A clump of soil dislodged and tumbled onto the bar top in a slow, insulting little cascade. Fergus and Owen both stared at it.

"Euphemia's shedding," Owen said, eyes following the path of the soil.

"A fern shedding… dirt?"

“She’s under stress.”

“She’s about to be in the wheelie bin.”

Owen gasped, one hand going protectively over the pot. “Davies was right, you know. You and Maggie. That was quite domestic.”

Fergus closed his eyes.

“The whole thing,” Owen pushed on, ignoring Fergus’s expression. “Your hovering. Her hand. The ladder argument.” He ticked off on his fingers. “Very married-on-a-Sunday energy, right, Davies?”

From three stools down, Gareth Davies cleared his throat.

The old farmer had been sitting there for the better part of an hour, nursing his pints like a man who understood that entertainment came in many forms, and some of the best ones were free. His weathered face attempted innocence and failed so thoroughly that it deserved applause.

“Leave me out of it. I’m not getting involved,” Davies announced.

“Better late than never,” Fergus muttered.

“Well, in that case, I will just say…”

“Gareth.”

“…I’ve been around for a long time, and I know what that look means.” Davies drained what was left of his beer. He tapped the rim of his glass with one calloused finger. “Also, I’m still parched.”

“I think you’ve had enough, Gareth.”

“Never!”

Owen snorted loudly, and the fern lost another tragic sprinkle of dirt.

Fergus gestured at the pot with the bar cloth. “What’s with the fern?”

“Well, it’s a gift.”

“For…?”

“For the pub. For Maggie. A housewarming gift of sorts, you see.”

“She’s lived here for years.” Fergus picked up a dry mug from the drain rack and began wiping it.

“Exactly. Housewarming.” Owen set the pot on the bar like a man planting a flag.

More bits of soil skittered across the counter. Fergus paused working on the glass long enough to fix Owen with a threatening stare. Owen only smiled more broadly.

“No,” Fergus said in a low voice.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You were going to say it brightens the place up.”

“It does.”

“It’s dying.”

“It’s adjusting.”

“To what? Being dead?”

“See?” Owen leaned both elbows on the bar and fixed him with the Merrick stubbornness they shared. “You’re deflecting. You’re insulting my fern. You won’t stop wiping a glass that doesn’t need it. Three minutes ago, it looked like you were about to chase her through that door and perform emergency first aid with your teeth.”

“Owen,” he warned.

“You were. Gareth saw it.” Owen looked over. “Gareth?”

Davies raised both hands, palms out. “I have no opinion on this fraternal nonsense,” he said. Then, after a beat, he added, “But yes. Yes, he was.”

Heat climbed past Fergus’s collar and settled around his ears. He could feel it. Worse, he knew they could see it. The great curse of the Merrick complexion. Fair enough to broadcast every inconvenient emotion in high definition.

He gave Owen the look he reserved for second-row forwards, drunk patrons, and one tourist who had tried to bring a live ferret into the Stag on a Tuesday. A look that said, *Stop talking, or I’ll make you.*

Owen perceived the look, processed it, and, obnoxious sibling that he was, dismissed it entirely.

“She called you Fergus,” Owen observed, tipping his head like he was examining a crack in a wall. “Not Merrick. Fergus. There was emphasis.”

“It’s my name. She always calls me that.”

“Not like that.”

Tired of having his refreshment needs ignored, Davies picked up a nearby spoon and tapped the rim of his empty glass several times with it, causing heads to turn, and Fergus relented. He retrieved the empty glass before the man could tap it again and pulled him another pint. When he stopped, the dark stout foam rose up even with the top of the glass. A perfect pull. He’d developed steady hands after years of pouring pints, stacking crates, gripping rugby balls in sleet and bracing himself against impact.

His mind was another matter. It had been racing ever since Davies said “domestic,” and it showed no sign of slowing down.

“Owen,” he said, “I’m not having this discussion.”

“Right.”

“With you especially.”

“That feels personal.”

“It is. You’d use anything I say against me at Christmas dinner.”

Owen considered that, then nodded. “That’s fair. I absolutely would.”

“And the next three Christmases after that.”

“Depends how good the material is.” He plucked a dying frond from the fern and twirled it between his fingers. “But just to be clear, you know everyone can see it, yes? Not just me. Gareth can see it. The postman can probably see it. I’d wager Euphemia can see it, and she’s fighting for her life.”

Fergus delivered the settled pint to Davies, who accepted it with a nod of satisfaction and took a long sip.

“In my day,” he said, wiping foam from his upper lip, “a man told a woman how he felt and took whatever came of it.”

“And how did that work out?” Fergus asked.

Davies considered this. “Forty-three years married.” For once, the teasing slipped from his voice. Warmth settled there instead, quiet and worn smooth by time. “Happiest years of my life,” he added.

That shut Owen up for almost four seconds. It had to be a village record. But he was still leaning on the bar, wearing that maddening grin. His demeanor, however, had changed, and Fergus recognized it. He had seen it happen more often these past few years.

From nuisance to observant.

Owen’s gaze moved to the tap handles, to the shelf behind the bar where the bottles stood in their neat rows, and then his head tilted.

“You replace that bracket?”

Fergus followed his line of sight. The shelf bracket was decorative, old, and made of iron. The previous one had been rusting for months until the whole thing listed to one side like a drunk coming out of the pub at closing.

He had swapped it last Wednesday during a quiet afternoon while Maggie was running errands.

“It was loose.”

“Mm.”

Owen’s finger traced along the bar, stopping at the spot where a fresh section of varnish blended almost seamlessly with the old. It was unnoticeable unless you knew what you were looking for.

Davies chose that moment to contribute.

“He did the guttering last week too,” he said conversationally into his pint. “Whole section round the courtyard side. Didn’t say a word. Just showed up with a ladder and some brackets when he knew she’d be busy.”

Owen’s eyebrows rose. “Did he now?”

“I work here,” Fergus said, his voice coming out flatter than he intended. “Things need doing. I do them. That’s the arrangement.”

“The arrangement,” Owen repeated, savoring the words in a way Fergus already disliked.

“Aye.”

“And does the arrangement include fussing over her hand like she’s suffered a battlefield injury, or is that some other arrangement?”

“She scraped it on a nail. I tended to it like I would for anyone. That’s all.”

Owen made a sound that communicated that he believed none of that, and Fergus reached for another glass.

Picking up the fern, Owen examined one of its drooping fronds with sudden and obviously false interest. Then he said, far too casually, “How bad is the courtyard, actually?”

The question landed differently, and Fergus’s hand stopped halfway to the rack. A beat passed, and then another. The two biggest busybodies in the village were currently sitting at the bar; anything he said would most certainly get back to Hannah and the rest of the Hartwells, which was the last thing Maggie wanted.

He pulled the glass down and set it on the bar.

“It’s… not great,” he admitted. Owen waited, just watching him. He had always been good at that when it mattered. Even better than Fergus, if he was being honest. “There are tiles slipping on the east side,” Fergus continued. “Water’s getting through the seam where the roof meets the wall. Beam’s sagging more than I thought. I don’t know how deep it goes.”

Owen’s face turned dead serious. No grin. No theatrics. Just the focus of a man who had spent much of his adult life fixing whatever happened to be broken in the village.

“The timber underneath could be soft,” Owen said.

“Aye.”

“And Maggie knows?”

Fergus glanced toward the kitchen door before he could stop himself.

“She was up on the ladder. Alone,” he said. “I went out and found her staring at the beam.”

Davies went quiet. The old farmer hunched over his pint, staring into it intently, trying for once not to be noticed. His silence, however, was somehow louder than anything he’d said all afternoon.

Owen set the fern down carefully on the floor. Even he seemed to understand Euphemia had lost the room.

“I could come have a proper look,” he said. “I’ve got the extension ladder in the van. I could tell you quickly enough whether it’s cosmetic or structural.”

Fergus said nothing. His thumb pressed against the base of the glass, back and forth in a small, repetitive motion.

“Ferg.”

“She doesn’t want help,” he said quietly, suddenly feeling tired. It was exhausting going right up to the line with her and having to back away every single time. “Made it very clear.”

“Made it clear how?”

“Told me straight up.”

Owen gave him a look. “Ah, well. Never argue with a woman holding a spanner and a grudge.”

Fergus almost smiled, but then the weight settled back in, and he pressed both palms flat against the bar.

“If we show up with a ladder and start making our own assessments, it won’t go well. She’ll think we’re second-guessing her. That she’s failing at this.”

Owen’s face softened. “Is she?”

“No,” he replied, the answer coming out decisively. “She’s not failing. But she’s managing more than any one person should. She’s doing it better than most, but the roof doesn’t care how stubborn she is. It’ll do what it wants.”

Owen studied him for a long moment. “You could ask her if we could look at it,” he suggested gently. When Fergus’s expression soured, he hurriedly added, “Tell her it was my idea, if it helps.”

It sounded so simple, but it was anything but. Asking meant admitting how closely he had been paying attention, how much he had noticed. It meant admitting to her what she likely already suspected, and confirming it might just be the final straw. She would do what she always did when

someone got too close. She would step back—politely and with a smile that said thank you and meant please don't.

"It's not that easy," Fergus said.

Owen opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Something passed between them. Not agreement exactly, but resignation. The acknowledgment was that there existed problems that couldn't be solved with a ladder and twenty minutes, no matter how badly both Merrick brothers preferred it that way.

Then came a sound from the kitchen. He heard the creak of the old floorboards and the familiar rhythm of shoes on wood.

All three men straightened like they'd been caught stealing, and Fergus grabbed the cloth and swept the remaining fern soil off the bar before moving on and beginning to wipe down a surface that was already clean. Owen picked up the fern and held it slightly higher, as though it had been the subject of conversation all along, and Davies continued to hide behind his pint.

"Anyway," Owen said loudly, "I think she just needs more light. South-facing window, maybe."

"Or outdoors entirely," Fergus replied.

The kitchen door opened, and Maggie stepped through. One hand was freshly bandaged, the other pushing loose hair behind her ear. There was still dust in her hair and grime on her face where she hadn't wiped it, though Fergus valued his life enough not to say anything.

Her gaze moved from Owen to the fern, and she asked, "Why is that still here?"

Owen looked wounded. "Euphemia is recovering from a difficult transition."

"Half of her is on my floor."

"All part of the emotional processing."

"She's compost with delusions."

Davies gave a low chuckle into his pint, but Maggie ignored him and pointed toward the corner near the courtyard door. "Put it there until you leave. If it drops one more leaf, I'm charging you rent."

Owen looked down at the fern. "You hear that? First step toward belonging."

"Now, Owen!"

Owen bristled but carried the pot toward the corner with exaggerated care, like he was transporting royalty instead of a dying fern. Maggie watched him go, then shook her head before turning her attention back to the bar. For a moment, she was close enough that Fergus noticed the clean white plaster wrapped around her knuckle.

“You alright?” he asked before he could make himself keep quiet.

Her eyes lifted to his, and something flickered there. Annoyance, maybe… or embarrassment… or perhaps the exhaustion of being seen too clearly.

“It’s fine,” she said, holding up her hand.

He hadn’t been asking about her hand, and he knew she knew that.

Her gaze dropped briefly to the bar cloth he was still holding, then to the spotless patch of bar he had been wiping. One corner of her mouth moved, but whatever she might have said stayed locked behind her teeth. Instead, she reached for the abandoned fairy lights as if they had challenged her to a duel.

“I’ve got walls to prime,” she said.

“Your hand…”

“Is still attached.”

Owen made a strangled sound from the corner.

Maggie turned her head slightly to look at him. “Careful.”

“I said nothing,” Owen exclaimed.

“You breathed smugly.”

“That’s just how I breathe.”

Davies lifted his pint. “It is.”

For half a second, Maggie’s mouth twitched. Then she gathered the fairy lights, and likely what remained of her dignity, and headed toward the back again. This time, though, she paused at the courtyard door.

She didn’t stay there long, barely a heartbeat, but it was long enough for her eyes to find Fergus’s and for that funny feeling in his chest to flare up again.

“Don’t let him leave that thing here,” she said, before pushing through the door. For half a second the walls dropped, and she looked at him like he was more than just the useful bloke who hauled kegs. Then, it was gone, and so was she.

Owen waited until the door swung shut before he leaned one shoulder against the wall, fern tucked beside him, grin sliding back into place.

“Domestic and botanical,” he said. “Busy afternoon.”

Fergus threw the cloth at him, and Owen caught it against his chest, laughing.

Grabbing a fresh cloth and a glass, he kept his hands moving. His expression remained neutral, breathing steady, but the word was still there.

Domestic.

It was warm and unwelcome in his chest, sounding far too much like something he wanted and far too little like something he had any right to claim.

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October 15, 2025



-Maggie-

The bar was empty after the lunch rush, the locals returning to their daily business and guests out for the day exploring the area. Usually, this was Maggie’s time to breathe and prepare herself for the dinner crowd. Most of the staff were on break, and there was no one looking for advice or entertainment.

Standing behind the bar, staring down at the screen of her tablet, she knew there would be no peace today. Not with the astronomical cost of the average roof repair staring back at her.

Stacks of index cards were spread out around the tablet, scrawled with parts lists, labor estimates, wedding invoices, food and floral items, and so on. Each had a cost penciled on it, sometimes erased and rewritten several times. She had been moving cards between stacks as she adjusted each total, trying to find the magic combination that made the numbers work.

It wasn’t a catastrophic amount, but it was close.

She couldn’t help but let out a wry chuckle. That was the phrase she kept using—not catastrophic. The drain in the courtyard flooding? Inconvenient but not catastrophic. The crack running up the side of one wall that needed patching? An eyesore but not catastrophic. If she took a shot every time she used that word, she’d be well and truly drunk before the dinner crowd arrived.

The problem was, even if everything wasn’t catastrophic, it wouldn’t take very much for the situation to become dire.

She tapped her pencil against the margin and did the math again, hoping against hope that it might change the result. Sadly, it did not.

Maggie sighed as she put the pencil in her mouth and gnawed on it as she tried a few more calculations on the tablet. If she took on more of the labor, patched the wall, and made the floral arrangements herself, it could save nearly enough to balance out.

Behind her, glasses clinked softly as someone stacked the dishwasher, and crates were being moved from storage. She didn’t look toward the window into the kitchen, though.

It had been two weeks since Gareth Davies had fired the shot heard round the village. The man was a notorious gossip with the subtlety of an elephant, and his “domestic” comment had hit close enough to home to do real damage.

Both she and Fergus were now extremely self-conscious about how everything looked, and they’d been carefully keeping one another at arm’s length. They spoke only when necessary and handed each other bottles behind the bar without lingering. She had also mastered the art of avoiding eye contact without appearing to.

It was easier this way. They had spent years building a solid working relationship, and although she caught herself noticing him in ways that were more personal than professional, she had always buried it and pretended she didn’t. However, there was always a small part of her that was still that teenage girl with a crush on her brother’s best mate, and the word *domestic* had lodged itself somewhere in her mind and refused to leave. She had replayed the whole incident several times. The way her heart had nearly pounded out of her chest, and Fergus’s eyes had widened as he stared at her. The way the whole bloody pub had gone silent.

Domestic.

It seemed the village had somehow decided on their behalf that they were, in fact, a couple, and they just needed to hear someone say it out loud.

“Bunch of nosy busybodies,” she mumbled, putting the half-chewed pencil on the bar and straightening the stack of cards.

This was absolutely the last thing she needed to deal with right now. What she needed was a roofer’s online forum where supposed professionals didn’t constantly contradict themselves.

Her phone lay open beside the invoices; its screen paused halfway through a video titled “Basics of Roof Repair.” She could do the beginner-level work. It was just one section, and plenty of people fixed their own roofs.

The door chimed, and Maggie glanced up automatically, smoothing her expression into something she hoped looked welcoming. Slipping into character was the one thing she did not need an instructional video for.

Recognizing her guest, a genuine smile spread across Maggie’s lips. For the first time since the whole wedding business started, she felt the tension fall from her shoulders. If there was one person in this village for whom she could just be herself, it was the one who appeared at her door.

“Grace,” she said with undisguised relief.

Her sister-in-law stepped inside, smiling. A scarf was looped loosely at her throat, and her bag tucked under one arm. As she entered, her eyes were already sweeping the bar to see who else might be present.

“Elliot’s gone to pick up something for the house,” Grace said, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Apparently, it is necessary for me to stay out of his way while he does it.”

Maggie chuckled despite herself. “That sounds about right. The usual?”

“As long as you’re not telling anyone,” Grace replied as Maggie moved toward where she kept the good Scotch.

When Maggie had first come back to Great Missenden, Grace had been one of the few people in the family who hadn’t treated her like a failure, or treated coming home as just another temporary stop. She had simply folded Maggie back into her life without question or comment. It had made things easier in ways Maggie had never quite found the words for.

Grace slid onto a stool and set her bag down on the bar, taking in the stacks of index cards, the pencil, the tablet, and the now-cold remnants of tea Maggie had forgotten to drink. “Please tell me that isn’t all wedding-related.”

“It’s just budgeting,” Maggie said as she poured a double into a tumbler and slid it across the bar.

“Ah.” Grace leaned forward slightly. “Run-of-the-mill budgeting, or the special kind that’s required when my daughter engages in emotional terrorism?”

Maggie quickly consolidated the stacks and set them a little further away, though she didn’t remove them entirely. “It’s all sorted. I just needed to shuffle a few things around.”

“Such as?”

She briefly considered brushing it off, but what was the point? Grace had known her far too long. Long before London and the inheritance of the Stag. In many ways, she had been the big sister Maggie had always wanted.

“The courtyard needs more work than I thought,” Maggie conceded. “And the roof can’t be trusted to do its job. It had to be dealt with at some point, but the timing isn’t great, to say the least.”

“Elliot and I could pay fully in advance instead of giving you the deposit if that would help,” Grace said before taking a sip.

“No, it’s fine, really. Besides, if you did, my mother would never let me hear the end of it.” A pit formed in her stomach. Her mother had never agreed with the fact that Maggie’s godfather had left her the Stag. If she discovered how tight things really were… Maggie shook the thought away quickly.

“How’s Hannah holding up? I haven’t seen her since all this started.”

“She’s excited,” Grace said, a soft smile touching her mouth. “Ben’s pretending he’s not overwhelmed, and I almost believe him.”

“He’s a good lad. They’ll be alright.”

“Weren’t they supposed to be helping with the repairs?”

“They’ve got enough to do, and the last thing I need is someone else underfoot,” Maggie told her, shutting down that line of thinking.

“You know,” Grace added after a moment, her tone shifting, “last year when Elliot needed help with the shed, Owen and Fergus were there before he could even ask.”

“I remember,” Maggie replied, wishing that Elliot would walk through the door and interrupt. “But Owen’s got more work than he can handle right now, and when he’s not here at the bar raising my blood pressure, he keeps Fergus busy.”

She wasn’t sure that the last bit was entirely true. But she did know where this was going, and she wasn’t above creative speculation to head it off. The only way she could afford anyone, Owen included, was to do favors in return or arrange to pay in installments. Both were equally distasteful prospects.

“You should at least talk to Fergus about it. Handiness seems to be a Merrick family trait…”

As if summoned by the sound of his name, Fergus pushed through the kitchen door, a fresh keg balanced easily over one shoulder. Maggie felt her pulse race, hoping he hadn’t heard what Grace had just said. When he crossed behind the bar without looking at her and set the keg down with a solid thud, she calmed a bit.

It took a moment for her to realize she was staring. When it hit her, she reached for an empty mug and started filling it with Elliot’s usual lager. From behind the taps, she hoped Grace wouldn’t notice the slight coloring of her cheeks.

“Afternoon, Grace,” Fergus said, pausing for a moment.

“Fergus,” she replied warmly. “Still lifting the village single-handedly, I see.”

“Just the barrels.”

He reached for the tap key beside Maggie, their shoulders brushing. Neither acknowledged it, and Maggie turned away to fetch a cocktail napkin before setting it beside Grace’s glass. When she met Grace’s gaze, she knew her sister-in-law had missed nothing. She mentally cursed Mr. Davies for the thousandth time that week.

“We were just discussing the courtyard,” Grace said lightly.

Maggie stiffened, risking a glance at Fergus. “I was telling her it’s under control.”

Fergus nodded once. “Right.”

“I’ve been watching repair videos online,” Maggie added quickly, filling the silence before Grace could interject. “It’s not that complicated, really.”

“Mmhmm,” he murmured, crossing his arms over his chest. His expression gave nothing away. “If you need…”

“It’s sorted.”

Fergus gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. She felt her temper flare slightly.

“Fair enough,” he said.

He went about replacing the keg under the bar. No one said a word, and she could feel Grace watching over the rim of her glass. With a nod to them both, he hoisted the empty keg and disappeared back through the kitchen door without another word.

The silence lingered for a moment after the door shut. Grace took a slow sip, and Maggie let out a breath, bracing herself for whatever was coming next.

"Just say it."

If anyone in Great Missenden had perfected the art of looking innocent while being anything but, it was Grace.

"Say what?" She set the glass down with a trace of a smile.

"Whatever it is you're thinking but not saying. Just say it."

Grace shook her head, exasperated. "You two are exhausting."

Maggie's jaw dropped. "We are not… We aren't… I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. I'm one of the few people you can't fool." Grace reached across the bar and put a hand gently on Maggie's arm. "Sometimes even the strongest of us need a bit of help, and we both know Fergus would do anything for you."

Maggie's throat tightened. She was right, and that was exactly the problem.

"Elliot would kill him if he didn't."

"You know very well this has nothing to do with Elliot."

Something in Grace's tone made Maggie swallow hard. Fergus wasn't just some bloke who worked at the Stag. Growing up, he had been a regular fixture at their house, always hanging out with Elliot. Their history had made it all too easy for him to slip past her defenses over the last few years, and now, he was someone who, deep down, she wanted to rely on. That was the dangerous part.

The door chimed again before Maggie could muster an answer to that, and her older brother came in, shaking the rain from his jacket.

"There you are," Elliot said, then paused when he took in the two of them. "That look never ends well. Are you two plotting something again? Or has something horrible happened?"

Maggie turned away from him, picked up his drink from the tap, and placed it on a coaster before him. "You're very dramatic for someone who's just walked in."

“Says the woman who once stood on this very bar belting out show tunes with her friends.”

“One time, Elliot!”

“Right.” He slid onto the stool next to Grace, reaching for his mug with a smile. “Sure felt like more.” He raised his glass to her. “Cheers!”

Grace decided to show a great interest in her drink, suddenly entirely unhelpful.

Elliot’s eyes shifted to her. “You, my love, are far too quiet. What’s she not telling me?”

“Nothing,” Maggie said quickly.

Grace’s brow lifted, just slightly, and Elliot huffed a quiet laugh. “Right. So definitely something.”

Maggie picked up the pencil and began fidgeting with it nervously. “It’s just the courtyard. It needs a little more work than I thought… and since Hannah’s already picked a date…”

“…you decided to fix it yourself,” Grace finished for her.

Maggie narrowed her eyes but continued, “It has to get done sooner rather than later.”

Elliot glanced between them again, piecing it together.

“Ah. Explains that,” he said, gesturing toward the index cards and tablet.

“I’ve got it sorted.”

“Course you have.” His tone was easy, but there was something knowing underneath it. “As always.”

She pointed at him with the pencil menacingly and said, “Careful.”

“Or what?” he asked, already grinning. “You’ll stab me with your chewed-up pencil?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

He laughed and reached for a menu, and Grace hid a smile behind her glass. Then he paused, his attention snagging briefly on the kitchen door.

“Fergus back there?”

Maggie tensed. “Yes.”

“Good,” he said. He skimmed the menu and, without looking up, added, “You might try asking him about the courtyard.”

She gave her brother a look meant to instill fear in his soul. He peeked at her over the menu and laughed again. While his heart was usually in the right place, Elliot was as subtle as a wrecking ball.

Maggie gritted her teeth. “I said I have it sorted.” She shook her head, and added, “And roof repair is not in his job description.”

“Neither was getting my baby sister out of trouble when we were kids, but he did it nonetheless,” he fired back, setting down the menu and putting his elbows on it, watching her with amusement.

Maggie frowned. “For the love of all things…”

“Careful, love,” Grace chimed in finally, “I’ve already suggested that very thing. You’re playing with fire.”

“What? I’m just saying some things don’t change. Maggie would get into something, and then Fergus and I would end up fixing it.”

“That’s not…” Maggie began, but Elliot cut her off, obviously entertained by his sister’s discomfort.

“Like the time you and your friends tried to sneak into the churchyard because you were convinced Roald Dahl’s grave granted wishes if you left sweets there after dark?”

“Grace’s idea!”

Grace blinked. “It most certainly was not. I was just the lookout.”

Elliot looked far too pleased with himself, and pressed on, “You brought a torch, a packet of gobstoppers, and a notebook titled Wish Evidence.”

“I was thorough.”

“You got stuck climbing back over the wall.”

“My jumper caught.”

“You screamed because you thought the BFG had grabbed you.”

Grace pressed her lips together, fighting a smile.

Maggie lifted her chin, saying, “It was dark.”

“It was half past seven.”

Grace laughed, and Maggie gave her a look of mock betrayal as heat crept up her neck. “That’s it. No more free food from the bar!”

“You would never! Anyway, I’m just saying,” Elliot persisted, though his voice softened, “there is a longstanding history of Fergus stepping up for you.”

“I don’t need him to. I am perfectly capable of fixing a bloody beam without some man swooping in, deciding what I can or can’t handle,” she snapped more harshly than she intended.

Elliot and Grace stared at her in surprise, and Maggie felt her cheeks flush the moment the words had left her mouth. She started to apologize, but before she could, someone behind her cleared their throat.

Maggie felt suddenly sick to her stomach. She froze, and for a second, no one moved.

Then Elliot shifted slightly on his stool. “Fergus.”

“Elliot,” Fergus answered evenly.

“We were just reminiscing about old times,” Elliot said. “Like how you once had to pluck Mags off the churchyard wall.”

He looked far too smug as he took a sip of his lager, and Maggie closed her eyes briefly, trying to maintain her composure. She forced them open and reached for the stack of cards as if it required immediate, urgent attention.

“I…” she stammered, “I just remembered I need to… um… check something in the office.”

She picked up the cards and tablet a little too quickly, nearly knocking over Elliot’s drink in the process, and headed through the kitchen door, carefully avoiding looking at anyone. Especially Fergus.

She closed the office door behind her more loudly than she intended, the silence pressing in around her. She would need to apologize or at least explain. Right now, though, she was too busy wishing the floor would open and swallow her whole.

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October 15, 2025



-Fergus-

Fergus hadn’t intended to start on the heaters that night. After finishing his closing responsibilities, he went out to the courtyard to look at the beam again. It wasn’t sagging any further, but it had shifted a bit during the most recent storm, and that worried him. Maggie had dismissed it as cosmetic, and he hadn’t argued. He had just waited for a good opportunity to go out and look for himself.

As he’d turned to head indoors, he had noticed that one of the heaters was flickering again, and that was all it took to reach a decision. He fetched the toolbox from the kitchen without comment and returned to the courtyard. No announcement or requesting permission. He was just doing what had to be done, outburst or not. Although, if he was being honest, he’d been hoping she’d catch him.

He had the casing off, exposing the wiring, and was peering into it when the door creaked. He pretended he didn’t hear it, figuring it would force an

end to her silent treatment, even if only to tell him off for helping when she hadn't asked.

"You're aware we close the courtyard after dark for a reason," Maggie said, though there was amusement in her voice.

"Mm."

"Health and safety, you know? Generally speaking, it's a solid policy for not electrocuting our staff."

He tested a connection, a slight chuckle escaping him. It was a relief to hear her direct her trademark levity at him again. Hell, it was a relief to hear her say anything other than *I've got it sorted*.

"Good thing I'm off the clock, then."

There was silence, and he turned and glanced at her. She stood just inside the door, arms folded, hair pinned up in a way that was slowly surrendering to gravity.

"About earlier," she said, the words sounding a little stiff. "What I said to Grace and Elliot. I didn't mean… I mean, I did, but I didn't want you to think…"

"You don't have to explain."

She rocked back on her heels for a second and settled again. "I just wanted to say I was sorry."

The quiet that followed was thick and slightly awkward. Neither of them quite knew where to look. Then she sighed, the fight going out of her shoulders.

"Need a torch?"

"If you're offering."

She hesitated for half a second, then turned and grabbed one from inside. The torch clicked on, and a narrow beam cut through the gloom, illuminating the heater in front of him.

She kept a respectful distance, just as she had been ever since the incident with Mr. Davies. Each time one of them reached for something behind the bar, she had made sure not to brush against him. He had never given much thought to it before, but once she began deliberately avoiding contact, he became aware of it. What was worse, he missed it.

She angled the torch toward him, the light catching his hands, and the silence stretched between them. At last, he heard her slowly exhale.

"You don't have to do this, you know that, right?"

"Maybe I just felt like it."

“Feels suspiciously like you’re swooping in again, sir,” she teased.

He stopped and turned to look at her. She was watching him, one eyebrow arched as she looked down.

Sometime in the months before he left to pursue rugby, he had become aware of her in a way he had never been when they were kids. It wasn’t gradual. It seemed to happen all at once, and he had done everything in his power to hide it. He had known he was going. There had been no version of that summer in which he could have stayed, and Elliot would have murdered him if he had hurt Maggie.

Now she was a grown woman, and he was more aware of that than he cared to admit. If she had ever wanted more from him than a reliable pair of hands, he had assumed she would have made it clear by now. Her reaction to Gareth Davies’s comments a few weeks ago had suggested the assumption might not be entirely safe.

“Does it?”

“Yes,” she said, her tone neither angry nor defensive. It sounded more like bemusement. “If you keep doing things like this, the village will start sending anniversary cards.”

“If I spent my time caring what the village thought, I’d never get anything done.”

“Maybe, but you sure didn’t appreciate it when Davies shot off his mouth the other day.” His hands froze on the wires.

“He talks to hear himself.” He shrugged, untangling the heater’s wires. What bothered him wasn’t what Davies had said. It was the fact that the old curmudgeon had done so in front of half the village.

“Yes, he does… and we all know facts are not that man’s strong suit. But this… he implied we were acting like a couple.”

“He didn’t imply it, Mags. He said it straight up. But it doesn’t matter. No one is allowed close enough to you for it to be true.” An edge had crept into his voice. The words sat between them, and the courtyard felt smaller suddenly. She shifted her weight, boot scraping softly against stone, top teeth worrying her lower lip. He knew he was pushing it, and that if he went too far, she would shut down again. That would surely make the rift become a chasm. When she remained unexpectedly silent, he took that as a cue to continue. “I’d wager you don’t really trust anyone.”

Much to his amazement, she didn’t deflect… not immediately. Instead, she kept the torch steady while she stared at the heater panel, and he saw

her throat work as she swallowed hard.

“That’s not true…” she started, but her voice quivered. “I mean, it wasn’t always true. Look, the last time I let someone get close, it cost me. Dearly.”

He knew what she was talking about. Elliot had filled him in over the years.

“I’m not him, Maggie.”

She went very still, and he gave up pretending to fix the heater and stood up, taking a small step closer. She looked straight at him, and he saw a flicker of fear in her eyes, but underneath it, there was something else. Something softer. Something that made his chest tighten.

“You never planned on staying,” she said quietly.

The words caught him off guard. It had been a long time since he truly considered leaving. Initially, Great Missenden had been a place to land and recover. To find some way to feel useful until he figured out what came next. But somewhere between her offering him a job and now, staying had stopped feeling temporary.

“I didn’t really plan anything.”

She paused for a moment, then lowered the torch to her side, plunging their faces momentarily into darkness as their eyes adjusted. In the dim light, he saw her open her mouth to say something, then stop. Then the moment was gone as the defiant tilt of her jaw returned, and his heart sank.

“If something bigger came along, you would leave,” she said, almost accusingly. “And you’d be right to do so,” she hurriedly added. “This wasn’t your plan. You’re not obligated to stay.”

“That so?” he asked simply, taking another step closer, encouraged by the fact that she didn’t immediately retreat. Instead, her gaze lifted to stay locked with his. He could feel the heat of her even with the cool evening air.

“I didn’t mean to say… I meant…” she stammered. “I don’t want to be the reason you don’t have something better,” she blurted out.

“You’re not an obligation,” he said quietly.

She let out a small, brittle laugh, looking away. “That’s something, I guess.”

His hand came up, though he wasn’t entirely sure what he meant to do with it. Tilt her chin? Touch her cheek? Ask her to look at him and believe him for once? He made himself lower it.

“You’re not what’s keeping me here, Mags. You’re the reason being here stopped feeling like giving up.”

Her eyes widened as she took that in, but then, just as suddenly, the walls came up again. She looked away awkwardly.

“This is getting a bit dramatic for a Wednesday, don’t you think?” she said lightly, forcing a smile. “Head home,” she added. “It’s late.”

There was nothing more he could say, and he gave her a single, sharp nod. He turned and re-affixed the still-dysfunctional heater’s panel, gathered the tools, and walked slowly toward the door, a pit in his stomach.

When he reached the door, he paused, and, without turning, said, “You think you know what this place means to me. Maybe someday you’ll just ask.”

Then, he continued through the door, leaving her alone with her courtyard and torch.

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October 21, 2025



-Maggie-

By Tuesday, The Roaring Stag had settled into the in-between season, when tourists thinned, and locals reclaimed their corners close to the fire, where they could escape the chill.

Inside the Stag, everything looked the same, but nothing felt that way.

Maggie was a blur of motion. She had reasoned that if she kept moving, she wouldn't have time to think. When she wasn't working in the courtyard, she polished the bar, stacked piles of menus, and rechecked the booking diary several times throughout the dinner rush. It was a small loop of tasks designed to keep her hands busy and her mind quiet.

It wasn't working.

The courtyard conversation from last Wednesday was still replaying endlessly in her head, and the feeling lodged in her ribs had gotten worse. She could still hear Fergus's low, steady voice. *I'm not him, Maggie.*

How long had he been carrying that, waiting for the right opportunity to put it out there? When he finally mustered the courage to say it, Maggie had found it difficult to breathe, her mind swimming with years of thoughts and feelings she had done her best to bury.

So, she'd done what she always did when someone got too close. She'd thrown up her walls and backed away. Not in any obvious way—she was no teenager sulking around a boy at the village festival. She was a grown woman with a pub to run, a wedding to finance, and a roof to repair.

But she'd become… careful. Even more so than she had been since this whole repair nonsense started.

She didn't linger at his side when he poured pints. She didn't let her elbow brush his forearm when she reached for the tap key. She didn't trade the quiet looks they'd always shared across a crowded room—the ones that conveyed, *I've got your back*. She could have, but she didn't.

By late afternoon, there were just a handful of regulars spread out like they'd grown roots. Mr. Davies held court at his usual table with two men who had the same weathered faces and opinions on everything. Jenny was clearing a table near the dartboard, and even she had been avoiding their usual friendly banter. Which, under other circumstances, Maggie might have considered odd.

She stood behind the bar filing invoices when Fergus came through from the kitchen carrying a crate of glasses. He didn't look at her. He just set the crate down, rolled his sleeves once, and started quietly and methodically sorting glassware.

Maggie told herself that it was fine. Good, even. Space was professional and sensible… her chest still tightened anyway.

"Stock's low on tonic," she said, mostly to herself to put an end to her current line of thinking.

Fergus nodded, eyes still on the glasses. "I'll add it to the order."

"No need," she replied too quickly. "I'll do it."

He paused for a split second, and she could see the hurt in his eyes. He schooled his expression quickly, and then, in an even tone, replied, "Right."

There was something about the way he said it that had her wishing she had just said yes. She didn't want to lean on him, though, especially not after he'd basically promised she could. She reached for a clean cloth and started wiping the bar… again… and ignored everything else around her.

Fergus acknowledged Mr. Davies, pulling and sliding a pint across to him without being asked. The older man grunted approval and raised it in a brief salute.

“Lovely bit of service,” Davies called. “Almost like you live here.”

Jenny snorted into her wash rag and turned away quickly when Maggie shot her a warning glare. Fergus gave no indication he’d even heard it. He just reached for another glass and filled it for the man beside Davies.

“Gareth,” Maggie warned, her jaw tightening.

Most people knew better than to push. Gareth Davies was not one of those people.

“Tell you what,” he said, lifting his glass, “a man who keeps the pints coming without being asked? That’s how it starts. First it’s me, then it’s her, then suddenly you’re arguing over whose turn it is to lock up.”

Jenny laughed and dissolved into a fit of coughing when she tried to stop it. That had her disappearing quickly into the back.

Maggie steeled herself and took a breath. It was just Mr. Davies doing what Mr. Davies enjoyed doing more than anything else. Stirring the pot. Her pulse quickened anyway, because it was no laughing matter when she’d spent the last several weeks feeling like his last shot had opened a divide that grew bigger by the day.

Fergus’s jaw ticked, and he set the glass he had been drying down unnaturally slowly, fixing Mr. Davies with a stare. His expression didn’t change. Rowdy out-of-towners facing that stare had questioned their life choices and thought through their next move very carefully. Clearly, a line was being drawn in sand, and Gareth Davies was in grave danger of crossing it.

“Drink your pint,” he said.

Mr. Davies blinked, delighted.

“Ooh,” he murmured, leaning back like a man watching the telly. “He’s got teeth.”

Fergus’s cheek twitched, and Maggie’s throat went dry. Fergus did have teeth; he just rarely showed them. Right now, though, he looked ready to throw Gareth through a window.

She cleared her throat and forced her voice back into its usual brisk register. “If you’re going to make him grumpy, Gareth, at least tip well.”

Davies laughed, appearing entirely unbothered. “I tip in wisdom, love. You’re welcome.”

If the joke was designed to defuse the tension, it failed miserably. Nonetheless, Fergus shook his head and returned to his glassware while the pub settled back into its usual rhythm.

When Jenny reappeared, she gave Maggie a sympathetic wince before going to get drink orders from one of the tables.

Maggie returned to busy work, but the rhythm was broken when Fergus's phone buzzed in his pocket. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him retrieve it. He glanced at the caller ID, and then he turned and walked toward the back door without comment. Maggie froze, gripping the cloth tightly as she realized he hadn't once looked in her direction.

The back door opened briefly, the cold air lashing at her, and Maggie's eyes flicked to the window before she could stop herself. She could just make out Fergus's silhouette outside—broad shoulders hunched, head bowed, phone held up as he listened. The light from the window caught his profile in flashes. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, a gesture she'd come to recognize as his version of tension.

Then, the light caught his face as his mouth curved into a smile. Not a pub-smirk, or the smile of someone holding back laughter, but a surprised, pleased grin like he'd just opened a Christmas present he never dreamed could be his. Maggie's heart dropped. She'd never seen him look like that inside the Stag, or, more disappointingly, when he looked at her. Her eyes dropped to the cloth, hoping to hide her expression.

Jenny drifted closer, pretending to tidy a stack of coasters. "You want me to…"

"No." Maggie's head jerked up. Jenny blinked, and Maggie felt her cheeks warm at cutting the young woman off. "Sorry, love… just… thinking."

Jenny nodded and backed away, though Maggie caught the brief pinch around her mouth before the girl ducked her head and returned to the tables.

When the door opened again, Fergus stepped inside, bringing cold air with him. He shut the door firmly and slid his phone back into his pocket. When he turned, his face was back to his usual placid expression.

Maggie set the cloth down and opened a crate of glasses to busy herself, not remembering they'd been emptied earlier. Embarrassed, she closed it and turned back to Fergus, eyes darting around for something, anything to keep her hands busy.

“You alright?” she asked as casually as she could muster. She spotted a stray napkin on the bar and quickly picked it up and threw it away, while wondering idly how stupid she’d look if she opened the cash register and counted the cash on hand.

When she glanced up at him, his eyes met hers, and the look was completely unreadable.

“Yeah,” he said, giving a little shrug before pointlessly starting to reposition the bar stools, which were fine the way they were.

Maggie lifted one eyebrow. “Looked like a riveting conversation.”

A ghost of a smile touched his face, and then just as suddenly, it was gone. “Just… an old mate.”

The words hit home. She didn’t ask who, or whether it was rugby, or something else from the past calling like it always did. Asking would be admitting she cared, and caring was a doorway she’d cracked open enough lately.

“Right,” she said dismissively. “Well, if you need to nip out later, tell me. I can manage.”

Fergus’s eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t…”

“I’m just saying,” she cut him off quickly. “It’s quiet here. You’ve done enough.”

That sounded much better in her head than it did when she said it. She meant it to be casual, yet it came out sounding like she was dismissing him. Fergus’s face fell, and she knew she’d cut him in a way that only she could. Right now, though, she had no clue how to fix it.

“Right,” he said.

There it was again, that same bruising little word. That word had her gut in knots and her neck tightening. That word that signaled resignation, especially after she’d shut down so spectacularly a few days ago.

Fergus finally moved, this time toward the kitchen. As he passed, his arm brushed hers—barely an accidental touch. It still sent a jolt straight down her spine. He paused, just for a second, and she thought he might say something.

Maggie couldn’t look at him. If she looked, she’d see whatever was waiting behind his silence—and she wasn’t sure she could keep pretending if she did. So she stared at the bar top and kept breathing like she hadn’t just felt something electric from the smallest contact. Fergus continued into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind him, and the pub hummed on.

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October 22, 2025



-Fergus-

Mrs. Palmer’s fence post had been leaning like it had gone out for a pint and was still regretting that decision when they arrived. Fergus braced his shoulder against it while Owen crouched in the mud below, scraping wet earth away from the base with a trowel.

“She’s waterlogged down here,” Owen said from somewhere around his knees. “Ground’s gone to porridge. No wonder half the garden’s leaning.”

Fergus grunted and set his outside foot back, gaining more leverage against the post to keep it from sliding. His boots kept sinking into the flower bed, and the soil made a wet sucking sound every time he adjusted his stance. The garden looked gutted. Five fence panels were down, including the ones on either side of the badly listing post.

Owen had knocked on his door at half past seven, wearing his work boots and carrying two takeaway coffees from the café on the High Street.

Got a job needs doing. That was all he’d said.

Fergus had pulled on his jacket without asking questions, because that was the deal. You showed up. You lifted what needed lifting. You didn’t need an explanation. Or breakfast.

Owen stood, wiped his hands on his jeans, and surveyed the post, brow furrowed like a surgeon deciding where to make the first incision.

“Right,” he said. “I’m going to dig out the base and reset it with postcrete. You hold her steady while I work.”

“I gathered.”

He knelt and started digging with his trowel. The post, losing even more support at the base, tipped a fraction. Owen pointed up at him with the trowel. “Don’t let her drop.”

“Owen…”

“Just saying. You’ve got that faraway look on you.”

“I’m holding the bloody post, Owen.”

“Good man.”

Owen dug for several minutes, then got up and disappeared around the side of the shed to retrieve the postcrete, leaving Fergus alone with the weight of the thing digging into his shoulder. He could feel the grain of the wood through his jacket, the dampness already bleeding through the fabric. His left knee shot a thread of complaint up through his thigh when he locked it to brace himself.

Owen returned with a bag on one shoulder and a bucket of gravel hanging from the opposite hand, dropping both at the base of the post with a grunt. Thankfully, he worked quickly.

That was the thing about Owen: he ran his mouth like a man paid by the word, but his hands had a mind of their own, and they knew exactly what they were doing. Everyone in Great Missenden called him when something broke, and most of the time, he had it sorted before anyone could panic.

“Pass me the level.”

Fergus reached with one hand, keeping the other planted firmly against the post, and managed to hook the level from Owen’s toolbox with his fingertips. He handed it down.

“Cheers.” Owen went through the gap in the fence where the panel had fallen out and held it up against the other side of the post, squinting.

“A bit more toward the left,” he said, and Fergus adjusted the post. “No, your other left.”

“I don’t have another left.”

“Sure you do, use your imagination.”

Fergus frowned at him, and Owen grinned back. It was the same cheeky expression he used to wear when he was trying to convince their mum that Fergus had been the cause of whatever trouble had just happened.

“Right there! Hold it.”

They worked through the fence panels in a rhythm that didn’t require much discussion. Owen handled the fixing, drilling, and shimming where the rails had warped. Fergus lifted each panel into position and held it flush against the posts. The panels were heavier than they looked, waterlogged from the recent rain, and by the third one, his arms burned with the effort of holding dead weight at shoulder height while Owen took his sweet time getting each screw perfectly placed.

“You’re wobbling,” Owen said, lining up the next screw.

“I’m not.”

“Your arms are shaking.”

“I’m doing the hard part.”

Owen snorted, looking over in a smug way that had Fergus’s blood boiling. “The hard part is precision, mate. Anyone can just stand there holding something up.”

Fergus said nothing. Arguing would only take away the energy and focus he needed to keep the panel still. Plus, if it moved at all, Owen would use it to tease him for failing to do a ‘simple’ job for the rest of the day.

Once the last panel was secured, they stood back and assessed the line, Fergus a bit winded and breathing heavily. It was straight enough, and Mrs. Palmer would be happy, or at the very least she’d stop ringing Owen twice a day about how she had hired some fancy company to install the fence only for it to fall apart after the first storm.

“Right,” Owen said, tilting his head toward the lean-to. “Now for the fun bit.”

Fergus looked at the sagging roof and let out a slow breath. “That your professional opinion?”

“My professional opinion is that Mrs. Palmer’s shed is being held together by damp, prayer, and whatever rage keeps that woman alive.”

The lean-to was worse up close. Corrugated sheets over a timber frame, one support post rotted at the base. The whole structure seemed to be stubbornly refusing to collapse out of sheer spite.

“Under there,” Owen pointed. “Brace the beam while I jack and reset the post. If she starts to fall…”

“She won’t.”

“...if she starts to fall, you’ll want to get out of there quick.”

Fergus ducked under the lean-to roof and positioned himself beneath the main beam, pressing both palms flat against the timber overhead. The weight settled onto him immediately. Not crushing, but persistent. A steady downward pressure that required constant resistance.

His legs locked, and his core tightened as he pushed up against the wood. It was rough and cold against his palms, and damp enough to leave dark streaks on his skin.

Owen worked below, sawing through the rotten post and fitting a new section of timber into the bracket. The sound of the saw was rhythmic, punctuated by Owen’s muttered commentary about dry rot and cheap materials.

“Almost there,” Owen called. “Two minutes.”

Fergus adjusted his stance but kept up the pressure.

By the time Owen had finished, the lean-to sat straight enough to survive winter, which was more than could be said for half the village. Fergus ducked out from beneath the beam and stretched to release tension.

“That’ll hold. That’s solid craftsmanship,” Owen said, admiring his work.

“If you do say so yourself.”

“What? It’s true!”

Owen produced a thermos and cups from his bag, pouring tea into them. Fergus took one gratefully, wrapping both of his hands around the warmth.

“Saw the Price lad the other night,” Owen said after a moment, the steam curling around them from their cups.

Fergus looked over, and Owen was staring at the repaired fence line, casual as anything, which meant he had chosen his moment.

“Callum?”

“Mm.” Owen took a sip of tea. “Down by the pitch, hanging about near the lane with those Carter lads.”

Fergus’s fingers tightened. Everyone knew the Carter lads, at the very least by reputation. They were the sort of older boys who drifted around causing small bits of trouble. Nicked bikes. Broken windows. The kind of stupidity that had a way of becoming serious before anyone realized the line had been crossed.

“What time?” Fergus asked.

“Half ten, maybe later.”

Fergus stared at the fence without seeing it. He remembered Callum at practice and the way he threw himself into drills as if the physical pain could

erase the anger brewing inside him. Then there was Jenny, who always showed up for a shift with dark circles around her eyes and a smile that seemed too bright.

“Did he seem alright?” Fergus asked.

Owen made a noncommittal sound and replied, “He was trying to act like he belonged there. Which makes it worse, really.”

Fergus took a drink of tea and barely tasted it.

“You’ve got that look about you,” Owen said.

“What look?”

“The one where you’re already working out how to fix it.”

“I’m his coach,” Fergus told him with a shrug.

“‘Course you are,” Owen replied, leaning back against the garden wall. “But that doesn’t fully explain it. Coach or not, you notice everyone struggling within a fifty-mile radius, and then you try to fix things for them. It’s your gift. Fergus Merrick, collector of strays.”

“Piss off.”

“I’m serious.” Owen’s voice was light, but his expression somehow wasn’t. “Someone’s kid acts up; you’re there with a tackle bag and a speech. Someone’s fence falls; you’re here to put your body on the line to fix it. Someone’s pub needs saving…”

“That’s different.”

Owen’s eyebrows rose. “Is it?”

Fergus drained his tea and set the cup down on the garden wall harder than necessary. “It is.”

“And there’s the confession,” Owen said with a smirk. When Fergus just stared at him, he held up both hands and added, “I’m not having a go.”

“You are.”

“Well, if I am, then it’s because I’m your brother and I’m contractually obligated to be irritating.”

“You’re jolly good at it.”

“Thank you.” Owen’s smile faded slightly as he said, “I’m just saying, you’ve got a pattern. Someone struggles; you’re right there making yourself indispensable.”

Fergus turned away and reached for the pile of broken fence slats that needed to be stacked for disposal, buying himself a moment.

“Callum’s just a kid,” he said, “and Jenny’s barely hanging on. He falls in with that lot; she could lose him for good.”

“I know.”

Owen moved to help with the slats, stacking them alongside Fergus in silence for a minute.

“I’m not saying don’t help,” Owen added, quieter now. “I’m just saying you can’t be the answer to everyone’s problems, Ferg.”

Fergus knew that. He knew it in the same way he knew clouds meant rain and damp meant his knee would punish him by dinner. But knowing didn’t stop the instinct to step in and hold the line. It was old and deep, wired into him by a sport that had eventually broken his body. Showing up hadn’t been enough to save his career when the injuries piled up.

He stacked the last slat and straightened, his knee clicking in protest. “I’ll talk to him.”

Owen looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s all,” Fergus insisted. “Just talk.”

“Right.” Owen picked up his toolbox and started packing away the drill and screws. “Jenny’s taken a second job working mornings at the Co-op, by the way. Mondays and Thursdays, I think.”

Fergus froze.

Owen shrugged. “What? I notice things, too.”

Before Fergus could respond, his phone buzzed against his thigh. He didn’t reach for it immediately. Instead, he hefted another armful of broken slats into the back of Owen’s van and wiped his hands on his jeans.

The phone buzzed again.

Owen glanced down at Fergus’s pocket. “Popular today.”

Fergus ignored him and pulled the phone out. The name Rowan Hayes flashed on the screen, and his stomach tightened before he opened the message.

> Good talking last night. Spoke to the board this morning. They’re keen to meet. Nothing formal yet, just a conversation.
>
> Leicester next week? Let me know.

Owen watched him read the text from the other side of the van, leaning on the tailgate with his arms crossed. “Who’s that then?”

“Nobody,” he answered, sliding the phone back into his pocket.

“That’s the face you make when ‘nobody’ sends you a message?”

Fergus reached for another broken slat. “Didn’t make a face.”

“You did, though. All grim and haunted. It was very theatrical.”

“It’s nothing. Drop it.”

Fergus’s look meant Owen should absolutely drop it, thereby ensuring Owen would most definitely not drop it. His brother had never dropped anything in his life, especially when ordered. He would take the smallest thread and pull at it like he was dismantling a jumper.

“The team?”

“No.”

“Maggie?”

Fergus crammed the slats into the van as quickly as possible, using a little more force than he intended.

Owen’s eyebrows shot up. “Interesting.”

“It’s not Maggie, you git.”

“I was just inquiring. Well then, if not Maggie…?”

Fergus exhaled through his nose and dragged a hand over the back of his neck. “It was Rowan Hayes.”

Owen’s eyes widened. “*The* Rowan Hayes?”

“There are probably several.”

“The one Mum wouldn’t stop talking about because he sent that Christmas card with the team photo?”

Fergus gave him a look. “Aye.”

“What does he want?”

“Nothing.”

“Ferg.”

He tossed the last of the slats into the van and the wood clattered sharply against the metal bed.

“He’s working with a youth development setup,” Fergus explained. “Leicester. Might be a coaching job.”

Owen blinked. “That’s not nothing.”

“It’s not something, either. Not yet.”

“Oh, it’s definitely something.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything. We’re just talking.”

“You took the call.”

“…because he’s an old friend…”

“…because you want the job.”

Fergus said nothing.

The October wind pushed through the garden, carrying the faint smell of distant woodsmoke. Somewhere beyond the rooftops, the Chilterns rolled

gray-green under the low sky, and beyond them, farther than he cared to picture, was Leicester.

Another pitch. Another version of the life he'd lost.

The thought gave him a strange feeling in his chest. It wasn't excitement or dread, but something like standing too close to an edge and not being able to tell whether the ground was pulling him forward or falling away.

On paper, the job was a perfect fit and probably the next logical step given his playing record and coaching experience.

There was another part, though, that remembered the surgeries and the rehab. That slow humiliation of knowing his body was no longer able to keep up with the demands of the sport.

Owen leaned beside him against the van, using a stick he'd picked up to scrape the caked mud off his boots.

"Big opportunity," he said carefully. "If it's real."

"It might not be."

"And if it is?"

Fergus shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's still in Leicester."

"Leicester has roads now. Trains, even. Very modern."

"I've got work here."

"At the Stag."

"Aye."

"With Maggie."

Fergus turned his head slowly and stared at him.

Owen looked up from his boot and met his gaze. "What? She's your employer, isn't she? Relevant logistical detail."

Fergus took a step away, found a chunk of thick grass, and began wiping the mud off his boots.

"She's got enough going on without me adding to it," he said, more to his boots than to Owen.

"Adding what?"

"Complications."

Owen gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "You're talking about yourself like you're a burst pipe."

Fergus glanced sharply at him, then looked away.

Maggie had been acting strange for weeks. Not exactly cold, but careful. She'd seen him take the call, yet she hadn't pushed. He'd wanted to explain, but he hadn't known how, and then she just dismissed him, like it didn't matter if he came or went.

“Have you told her?” Owen asked.

“Tell her what? There’s nothing to tell her.”

“Right.” Owen nodded gravely, and added, “Because when a former teammate rings about a coaching role in Leicester, and you look like someone’s shoved a lit match under your ribs, that’s obviously nothing.”

Fergus walked away and retrieved the level from the garden wall. Owen followed, not taking the hint.

“I’m just saying,” Owen continued, “your reason for dismissing it sounds personal.”

“It’s not.”

“The pub would survive without you, Ferg.” Fergus turned back to face him, level dangling uselessly by his side, looking as defeated as the man holding it. “It would. Maggie would swear and probably reorganize half the cellar out of spite, but she’d manage.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

Fergus turned the level over in his hand, rocking it left and right, and the bubble slid from one side to the other. Eventually, he forced it to settle in one spot; if only he could do the same.

“She shouldn’t have to,” he said.

Owen watched him for a long moment. “It’s not about the pub, is it, Ferg?” he asked softly.

Fergus walked back to the van and tossed in the level. “You’re getting sentimental in your old age.”

“I’m thirty-two.”

“See? Ancient.”

“Says the man whose knee makes weather predictions.”

Fergus huffed despite himself, but it faded quickly.

He didn’t know if Great Missenden was the life he’d chosen or the life that had caught him when he fell. He’d come back because there had been nowhere else to go, and he’d stayed because Owen was here… and because the village needed a coach… and because the Stag needed someone to move barrels and fix latches and open the cellar when Maggie was trying to do three jobs at once.

There was one reason that deep down he knew was more important than any of that. Maggie was there.

That was the thing he couldn’t afford to say.

“Let’s go,” he said finally. “My shift is at three.”

When they finally pulled away from Mrs. Palmer’s property, Fergus’s phone sat heavy and silent in his pocket. The road curved back toward the village, toward High Street, and the warm brick front of The Roaring Stag.

Rowan’s text had been short… nothing formal. But the question it left behind followed him all the way back into the Stag.

Was this where he belonged?

Or was this simply where he had gotten comfortable?

Staring out the window, he wasn’t sure he’d ever truly know.

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October 28, 2025



-Fergus-

Fergus heard the wind picking up outside, rattling the windows of his cottage as the expected late-night storm arrived. He'd taken note of the weather forecast that morning, and the red banners scrawling along the bottom of the television warning of incoming severe weather. The presenter had smiled like she was announcing a bake sale, and he'd muted it because there had been other things weighing on his mind.

The phone buzzed on the table, and his first reaction was to ignore it and just stare at the tumbler of scotch in his hand. He swirled it around in the bottom of the glass, still lost in thought about Maggie. When he'd first come home, convincing himself it was just physical attraction hadn't worked, he had found a way to be happy with being a supportive friend. Now, though, he couldn't seem to ignore the ache that had formed behind his ribs ever since this whole mess had started a few weeks ago.

Then there was the offer from Rowan. He'd told him he needed time, but for what he still didn't know.

It was a solid offer. No flashy headlines and stadium lights; just steady work and a clear career path. The sort of thing sensible men said yes to, without hesitation. He didn't need to imagine the mud under his boots; he remembered it well. The bite of cold air in his lungs, the clarity of knowing exactly where he was meant to stand. That was the bit he kept coming back to, because here, in the village, the pub, and the quiet spaces beside Maggie, his place was less defined. That feeling was unsettling.

A blast of wind slammed into his window, rattling it hard enough to startle him. A second later, the rain followed, lashing sideways against the glass in waves.

Glancing back at his phone, he checked the time. It was nearly eleven, and The Stag closed early on Tuesdays. However, he knew it wouldn't be empty. She would be out in the courtyard, torch in hand, trying to "handle it" alone.

Another gust hit the house, stronger this time, and the lights flickered. He tensed and thunder cracked, close enough to rattle the cutlery in the drawer behind him. He stood, his body making the decision before his mind caught up. Grabbing his coat from the back of the chair, he shoved his feet into boots still damp from earlier that afternoon.

It was just a precaution, or at least that's what he told himself.

The normal five-minute drive into the village felt like twice that as rain battered the windscreen hard enough that the wipers struggled to keep pace. The headlight beams illuminated more driving rain than the road ahead, and twice he had to quickly swerve around large fallen branches that had surrendered to the wind.

The Stag came into view around the bend, warm brick washed silver beneath the streetlamp. The pub was dark, but a few of the lights in the guest rooms above were still on. He pulled around the side rather than parking out front, tires crunching over gravel as he cut the engine outside the private residence in the back. He'd half-expected to see a tree had crashed through the roof, but the pub sat there stoically, enduring the punishment.

The sight gave him pause. He was being ridiculous. The Stag had stood for well over three centuries; it could survive a Tuesday night storm without him charging in like some sort of rescue party.

Another gust tore through the lane, hitting hard enough to shake his pickup, and he was instantly spurred back into motion. Throwing open the door, he jogged to the back gate near the chicken coop. It protested as he shoved it open, the wind nearly ripping it from his grip. The hens were already tucked away, mercifully sheltered from the chaos, but the tarp Maggie had stretched over the feed bins snapped and fluttered wildly in the gale.

Rounding the corner into the courtyard, he stopped, blinking in the downpour.

The fairy lights were dark, their wires whipping against the brick. One of the outdoor heaters had tipped sideways and was half-submerged in water that was beginning to pool near the far wall, and the bucket beneath the leak was already full, rainwater spilling over the rim and splashing back onto the stones.

There in the middle of it all was Maggie. Sleeves rolled to her elbows, hair dragged loose from its clip and plastered to her cheek, torch wedged beneath her chin as she crouched near the drain with both hands plunged into cold, leaf-clogged water. She was muttering something as she worked, but the wind and rain drowned out the words. Another gust hit, strong enough to shove her sideways. She caught herself on the wall, but her boots skidded on the slick stone.

He covered the courtyard in three fast strides, boots splashing through the puddles, and caught her elbow just as she shifted her weight again.

She startled, twisting toward him as she stood, torch beam jerking wildly before landing on his face.

“What the hell!” Her breath caught as she recognized him. “Fergus?”

“Aye,” he said, the rain running down the back of his collar, soaking through his coat in seconds.

“You don’t need to be here,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the storm. That familiar, stubborn, irritated face falling quickly into place as her shock faded. “I have it…”

“… sorted. I know. Figured you could use another set of hands.”

She stared at him, and he balled his fists to keep from shaking her. She had to know she needed the help, but it was obviously killing her to admit it. Whether it was pride, fear, or something else, he could only guess.

Another crack of lightning lit their faces, and a roll of thunder followed immediately. The courtyard gate behind them banged violently against its

frame, and that was enough to finally jolt her out of her indecision. She gave him a single curt nod, and that was all he needed to see.

“Right,” he said, already moving. “Get me some light. I’ll have a go at this drain.”

She hesitated half a second—then angled the torch beam so he could see what she’d already dug free. Leaves and debris clogged the narrow drain opening, water backing up around it in a shallow, fast-moving pool.

He quickly crouched down and plunged his hand into the freezing water. It was worse than he’d thought. The mud was thick as paste… twigs were jammed sideways… and the drain wasn’t letting anything through. He cursed himself silently for not having noticed the problem before.

“I should’ve seen to this earlier,” she said, echoing his thoughts. Her voice was barely loud enough to be heard over the wind.

For once he didn’t hold back his response.

“What you should have done was let one of us handle it.” He didn’t see the glare she gave him, but he felt it.

“You don’t have to make this a thing right now.”

Another violent gust tore through the courtyard before he could answer. Behind him, he heard a loud groan, and his head snapped in the direction of the sound. The sagging beam was cracking, the splintering sound loud enough to drown out the storm.

“Maggie!”

He lunged at her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her backward toward the wall. Spinning, he positioned himself between her and the courtyard, his old rugby instincts kicking in. Splinters of wood fell around them, and the part that gave way slammed into the ground. Tiles slid with it, clattering onto the stones as rain poured straight through the new gap, hammering at the stones.

She was pressed against the wall, and her hands clenched his coat in white-knuckled fists. The beam had hit exactly where she had been standing with the torch.

For the first time since he had known her, she looked completely shaken. Her eyes were wide in shock, rain running down her face in rivulets she didn’t seem to notice, and her fingers refused to release her death grip on his coat. They were both breathing hard, the reality of what almost happened settling like a lead weight.

“You alright?”

“I’m…” She swallowed, her eyes never leaving his. “I’m good. You?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he just lowered his forehead and rested it gently against hers. She didn’t pull away, and time stood still.

As the adrenaline eased, he knew they couldn’t linger with the storm still raging. He lifted his head and stepped back, forcing himself to turn and survey the damage. The fallen beam hadn’t brought the whole roof down with it, but the center now had a dark, jagged opening with rain pouring straight through.

So much for just tightening a bolt, he thought. This was now a major repair, and one she couldn’t do alone.

“Let’s just get inside,” he said, voice tight as his hand slid to her elbow.

Her spine stiffened instantly. “I need to get a tarp… some boards…”

“Maggie…”

“It just needs bracing. I’ve got spare boards…” she began, ignoring him as she stepped forward.

“Maggie,” he repeated, and something in the way he said it stopped her.

She froze, her look of grim determination softening just a bit. “Fergus, we can’t leave it like this; we have to…”

“Maggie, let it go. Get inside. Now,” he snapped, patience running out.

She went silent, and the thunder cracked again, closer still, and another shingle tore loose from the weakened section, skidding across the stones. The time for arguing was done. He took hold of her arm so he could steer her toward the path back to her cottage.

“Fergus…” She tried to plant her feet to resist, but the stones were slick, and he was too strong. He had half a mind to throw her over his shoulder and carry her inside like a sack of potatoes, but he knew that would cause a scene that would wake the inn guests.

They reached the front door, and he shoved it open. He guided her through it, then turned and slammed it shut against the storm. For a second, neither of them moved. The entryway was dim, lit only by the fire and soft lamplight from the living room, and water dripped from their coats and hair onto the floorboards.

Maggie recovered first and whirled on him, eyes flashing. “I had it under control!”

“What you had was a death wish!”

She opened her mouth to argue, then stopped. He felt a throbbing in his temple as he crossed his arms over his chest and regarded her silently while

he waited.

“Don’t be so bloody dramatic,” she snapped. “It needed to be handled, and I was handling it. I didn’t need you here trying to save the day!”

“It wasn’t worth dying for, Mags! My God, you’re stubborn!” She stared at him, and he knew he’d crossed some invisible line. His chest rose and fell sharply, adrenaline still ripping through him. He plunged on. “You think I don’t see? The roof, the courtyard, the bloody heaters? Trying to do it all alone. Thinking if you just prop things up fast enough, nothing will ever fall. The world doesn’t work that way, Maggie! Not for you, not for anyone!”

“What would you have me do?” she shouted, mimicking his posture. “Let it collapse? Ruin Hannah’s wedding? Let her down? I can’t do that, Fergus. I won’t!”

“Just take the help, you stubborn mule!” he shouted back, his exasperation finally getting the best of him as he took a step closer.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor, Fergus!” She threw up her hands in frustration, turning away and putting space between them. “Like I said before, I didn’t ask you to come!”

“You never do!”

The words hung there, and he saw her freeze as they hit home. She turned to look at him as she processed what he had said. Her defiance was gone, and all he could see was the tired, defeated look on that beautiful face. The ache of seeing her like that melted whatever anger was left, and he let it drain away as he took a slow breath.

“Look, we’ll board it up in the morning. I’ll get Owen to take a look.” Her shoulders stiffened at that. “Not saying you couldn’t fix it yourself if you had the time,” he added hurriedly to cut off any objection. “But you don’t. Not anymore. You fight me on this and there’s no courtyard wedding. Make your choice.”

He braced himself for her to have another go at him, but to his surprise, she simply sighed.

“I’ll put on some tea… we should warm up before we both catch our deaths.”

With that, she turned and headed toward the kitchen, and he stood there, watching her retreating form. He had won this small battle, but knowing her, the war was far from over.

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October 28, 2025



-Maggie-

The kitchen light felt too bright, and Maggie kept her back to him as she flicked the kettle on, the sharp click loud in the small space. Water still dripped from the ends of her hair, running cold down the back of her neck beneath her jumper.

She was shaking, and she told herself it was simply because she was currently soaked through. It had nothing to do with what happened in the courtyard… or the argument after. She couldn't remember the last time he had raised his voice at her. It was possible he never had, and that had made the moment all the more shocking.

Behind her, she heard the floorboards creak, and the all-too-familiar tread of his boots echoed through the cottage. He stopped just a few feet behind her, close enough that she could feel his presence. Neither spoke, and the silence stretched tight as a wire between them.

"You didn't have to shout," she said finally, reaching for two mugs.

There was a beat of silence, and she let out a sigh as she set the mugs on the counter. They were back to this. Back to him meeting her fire with that infuriating calm that signaled retreat. For a moment out there, when he lost his patience with her stubbornness, she had felt something stir. He had cared enough about something, about her, to fight back.

“Would you have listened if I didn’t?”

She was taken aback by his question. “You made it sound as if I was trying to get hurt.”

There was another pause as she fetched the tea. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, and when he spoke again, closer this time, she felt a shiver of surprise run down her spine.

“That beam would have killed you.”

She shook her head, continuing to busy her hands, arguing, “Well, I wouldn’t have even been standing there if you hadn’t felt the need to come over.”

She knew she wasn’t being fair. He had driven over in the rain and risked hypothermia and electrocution to help her. However, that moment after the beam fell, when everything had faded away but the feel of him pressing her against the wall, she had wanted to melt into him, and that frightened her more than a collapsed roof.

“You can’t know that. You should have left the drain for me.”

Her spine stiffened. She heard the tone, that low warning that said his patience could go again at any moment. Much to her surprise, it sent warmth spreading through her, settling annoyingly low in her stomach.

She turned so quickly she nearly collided with him. Somewhere along the way, he had shed his coat, and his damp shirt was clinging to his chest. One of his hands instinctively reached out to grasp her elbow, steadying her, and her eyes narrowed at the contact. His other hand rested on the counter beside her, effectively caging her in.

“It’s just a drain, Fergus. Not open-heart surgery.”

“And the roof? Look me in the eye. Tell me you aren’t foolish enough to climb up on that bloody ladder.”

Her mouth snapped shut, and the kettle began its low rumble as it built toward a boil. He moved in closer, and she didn’t retreat… not that she had anywhere to go. She momentarily forgot to breathe as his hand tightened around her elbow, just enough to let her know he was serious.

“I’m not afraid of much,” he said, his voice growing softer, the words slipping under her defenses far more effectively than his shouting had, “but what just happened scared me.” He paused. “Badly.”

He gently released her elbow, hand rising to hover by her cheek. He hesitated, as if waiting for permission, and the kitchen suddenly felt small and far too intimate.

Steam curled between them, blurring the edges of his face for half a second before clearing again. She became acutely aware of everything at once: the heat of his hand on her cheek, the way she unconsciously leaned into his touch without a second thought, and how his eyes widened with surprise, the anger fading completely.

The kettle suddenly rose from a soft whistle to a shriek, and they both jumped. His hand quickly fell to his side, and she turned away from him. Her own hands were shaking as she reached for it.

“What are you going to do when this place no longer needs saving?” she asked before she could stop herself. She kept her back to him as she asked it. The words sounded casual, almost teasing, but they weren’t. The question hung between them, and for a long moment, he didn’t answer.

She could still feel how close he was to her. His warmth pressed at her back, his breath ghosting against the nape of her neck. She resisted the temptation to turn and face him. She couldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing the worry in her face, the fear that someday he would decide he wanted more than The Roaring Stag and the quiet village. Or, more accurately, wanted more than her.

“It’s not about this place.” His voice was calm, but there was an edge to it. “And you know it.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, finally turning around and fixing him with an accusing stare. She wanted to believe Fergus was different. That he would stay. That he wasn’t just another man who couldn’t keep his word. “You can’t promise me that someday you won’t get sick of…” She cut herself off, startled at what she had almost blurted out. She glanced up at the ceiling, trying to rein in her thoughts, which were racing nearly as fast as her heart. “…of hauling kegs.”

His eyebrow raised a fraction, and she held her breath.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I did,” he replied.

“That’s not…” she objected, although she knew it was the truth. “…you don’t know that.”

“I know you,” he said, taking a small step back and leaning against the edge of the opposite counter.

“Then you know how much I hate having to depend on anyone,” she admitted finally, the words coming quieter than she’d intended. She realized then she was still trembling, and she cursed her body for giving away how she felt so easily.

“Aye, most people do,” he replied, pushing off the counter to reach for the forgotten kettle. She stepped aside to make room, and as he picked it up, he turned to look her straight in the eyes. “But the strongest beam still needs something to hold it up.”

He poured the water into the mugs, watching the tea darken.

“I’m not trying to take anything from you. Not your pub. Not your pride. Not the life you’ve built here. But Mags, it kills me to see you trying to do it all yourself, pretending it doesn’t hurt.” He nudged one of the mugs toward her, and her fingers wrapped around it, heat sinking instantly into her palms.

His confession tore down her guard, and she couldn’t meet his gaze when she said, “I promised Hannah, Fergus. The wedding. The courtyard. All of it. I gave my word! I’ve been trying to save enough to fix the courtyard for years… and still I said I could make it happen in weeks. I’m responsible for that. No one else. Me!” She felt a hint of tears welling up in the corners of her eyes, because somehow saying the words out loud had made them more real. “I got myself into this, Fergus. And no matter how good you might look carrying things around for me or how noble your intentions are, saving my ass is not your job!”

Her eyes widened, but to her relief, all he said was, “Aye, it’s not.”

Outside, the thunder rolled, but in the quiet kitchen, things seemed to settle once more. Whatever storm had been brewing between them for weeks had finally broken.

Turning, she reached for the sugar, adding two cubes to his steaming mug. The sugar hit the tea with two quiet plinks, and she paused for half a second, realizing how familiar the action was. She’d done it so easily because somewhere along the way, she’d learned how he took his tea. Fergus noticed, and a huff of laughter escaped him, but when he spoke again, there was no teasing in it.

“Can’t you just accept that someone might help because they want to? Because they care?” He looked away, and she spotted the pink at the tips of

his ears. They both took a sip of tea, and she desperately tried to find a lighthearted comeback, something to break the tension. But before she could, he recovered and looked at her again. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m not.”

He tilted his head in the direction of her mug. The liquid inside trembled, and she made a soft sound of annoyance as she set it down.

“Adrenaline,” she conceded.

“Mm.”

He moved closer, his arm brushing against hers, and she didn’t pull away. The contact was slight but felt deliberate, anchoring even, if she was being honest with herself. The tremor in her hands settled a bit, and the room no longer felt like it was pressing in. Outside, it was raining more softly, no longer battering the roof above their heads.

“Hannah doesn’t remember when I came back from London in absolute shambles. She still looks up to me. I can’t let her down, Fergus.”

“You won’t.” He said it like it was so certain, and she almost laughed out loud.

“You are quite the psychic tonight.”

He shrugged, brushing against her again, warmth radiating from him.

“I just know you,” he said. “You kept this place alive when everyone else thought it was done for. Sorted disasters that would have sent anyone else packing.” He placed his hand gently on her shoulder. “The wedding won’t be the thing that does you in.”

Her throat tightened before she could stop it.

“That’s very dramatic. For the record, no one in the village doubted me,” she insisted, then paused. “Alright. So maybe Mr. Davies did.”

Fergus huffed under his breath. “Davies doubts indoor plumbing.”

She laughed and added, “That man would rather use an outhouse than trust a toilet.”

His gaze drifted toward the window, and she let out a slow breath herself before taking another sip of her tea. What happened came a lot closer to being catastrophic than she was comfortable with.

“Jokes aside…” he said, quiet now. “That’s not just a beam.”

“It’s a modest ventilation feature.”

“Maggie…”

“And if it snows, Hannah and Ben can build a snowman in the middle of the reception.”

“Be serious,” he chuckled, giving her a playful shove with his shoulder, and for just a moment everything felt normal.

She nodded, biting her lip. She had rebuilt the Stag once already when the pandemic had ended. She had balanced invoices at two in the morning and negotiated with suppliers who assumed she had no idea what she was talking about. She would survive a hole in the roof.

“I don’t want this to turn into a thing,” she said finally.

“Doesn’t have to.” She glanced at him and found him watching her. There was something in the way he was looking at her that had her turning away to hide the sudden warming of her cheeks. “I’ll call Owen in the morning.”

That snapped her out of whatever spell he had temporarily placed on her, and she set the mug down on the counter with a soft thud.

“I am not having this turn into some sort of Merrick construction festival,” she told him, and his brow lifted although he didn’t look surprised. “You two will start arguing over load-bearing walls, and suddenly you’re scaring my hens.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his lips, and damned if she didn’t feel her heart give another uncharacteristic flutter.

“We don’t argue,” he replied, and she gave him a look. He fidgeted slightly, the tips of his ears turning pink once more. “…much.”

Despite herself, the corner of her mouth twitched. She could see it, though. Owen pacing the stones, Fergus squinting at the timber, both of them speaking through grunts and nods.

“Look, I just don’t want to owe anyone,” she said softly but defensively.

Feeling any sort of obligation toward someone complicated things. It usually came with guilt and judgment. It put a strain on relationships and was more trouble than it was worth. Usually, it meant there would likely be a point in the future when it would be tallied up and handed back to her to repay.

“You won’t.”

He said it with such certainty that she studied him for a moment, searching for the catch. But the way he looked at her, without flinching, she knew that, for now at least, there wasn’t one.

“Well, I’m not letting you work for free,” she added quickly, because it mattered. “And I won’t have Owen give me some ridiculously ‘best mate’ rate.”

“Got it.”

“One more thing, Fergus. If Owen comes,” she said slowly, “it has to be finished before Hannah walks down the aisle.”

“Right.”

Her eyes narrowed at his one-word responses, and she continued, “And if you two traumatize Britney and Christina, they’re going home with you. Those hens are sensitive.”

A faint smirk touched his mouth, and her shoulders finally relaxed completely. “Britney and Christina? Seriously, Mags?”

“What else should I have named a bunch of divas?”

“Guess that explains naming the rooster Freddie,” he mused.

“Very well… you can call Owen.”

The words came out easier than she expected, and to Fergus’s credit, he didn’t rub it in.

“Right,” he said, setting his mug down. “We’ll start with the beam. Then the flashing.”

“You don’t like the new ‘ventilation feature’?”

“Do you want a wedding or a baptism?” He smirked.

A laugh slipped out of her before she could stop it.

“God help me,” she muttered, shaking her head, her own mug joining his on the counter. “If this ends up being a full renovation, they’ll never find your body.”

He smiled, but then his face turned dead serious. “Fair enough, but promise you’ll never do something like that again, putting the scare into me. No more running into storms.”

The laugh still lingering in her chest softened into something else.

“I didn’t run into it,” she argued, failing to convince either of them.

“I mean it. Never again, Maggie.”

He said her name in that low, careful voice that seemed to slip past every bit of armor she’d put in place. Before she could muster something to lighten things up again, Fergus moved. He did so slowly enough that she could have stepped back if she wanted to, but she didn’t.

His arm wrapped around her shoulders, warm and solid, and he drew her gently into his side.

It was the sort of thing a very close friend might do.

Probably.

Maybe.

If that friend had broad shoulders, a heartbeat she could feel beneath her cheek, and a talent for making her forget every sensible thought she'd ever had.

For a moment, Maggie stood stiffly against him, one hand hovering uselessly near his chest. Then, the exhaustion of the night, and the relief she had no idea what to do with, all caught up to her at once. She relaxed, melting against him, and his arm tightened around her, holding her close.

For the first time since she'd said yes to Hannah, the knot in her stomach loosened just a little. And heaven help her, deep down, she liked that he was stepping in.

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October 29, 2025



-Fergus-

The roof looked no better in the morning light. Fergus had entered the courtyard, hoping it was somehow less of a disaster than he remembered. What he found was the same pile of water-soaked rubble from the night before.

He stopped just past the threshold, staring up at the gap where slate and beam had been. The pale gray sky stared back, calm now, almost innocent, as if it had not ripped through the courtyard hours earlier. He suppressed the shiver that ran down his spine as he considered what might have happened if he had not moved as quickly as he had.

Rain had washed the stones clean beneath the opening. Splintered wood lay off to one side, darkened and swollen. One half of the beam was still in place, clinging to its bracket, while the other half hung with one end resting on the ground at an angle. It wouldn’t take much at all for it to lose what little hold it had left and come crashing down.

He stepped forward, boots scraping against damp stone, and ran his palm along the exposed timber. It flaked under his touch, brittle and soft. This was not the work of one storm—the wood had been slowly deteriorating for years.

The image returned unbidden, making his stomach churn: the crack, her body colliding with his as he hauled her back, her hands clinging fiercely to his coat.

He shook the memory out of his head and scanned the rest of the roofline. With one support gone, the other would now be compromised. The flashing around the torn slate would need to be replaced, and the center brace would have to be removed entirely.

And if another storm were to hit before that was done…

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of gravel crunching on the other side of the courtyard wall.

“Please tell me it’s not as bad as you thought,” Owen called as he stepped through the gate that led to Maggie’s cottage.

“It’s worse.”

Owen joined him, took one look up, and let out a low whistle. “God have mercy…”

“Guess the courtyard wanted a skylight.”

Owen snorted, then crouched to examine the split beam. He ran his fingers along the grain, pressed at the softened edge with his thumb, then looked up at the remaining support.

“That’s done for,” Owen said with grim certainty.

“Aye.”

“And the other’s not far behind.”

“I know.”

Owen stood and stepped back. He didn’t rush or speculate out loud, which meant he understood how serious this was. His gaze tracked timber to bracket, flashing to guttering, measuring the problem before he ever reached for a tool.

“It’s not isolated,” he said finally. “The entire structure is compromised.”

Fergus frowned. He’d feared as much, but hearing Owen say so made it all too real.

Behind them, the pub stirred to life—the low hum of the ventilation system, a back door closing, distant clatter from the kitchen. Just another normal day at the Stag. Out in the courtyard, though, it was anything but.

“Miss Independent give you permission to call me?” Owen asked.

“Don’t want to discuss it.”

Owen huffed. “Right. So, this is delicate.”

Fergus’s gaze drifted toward the pub door, which thankfully remained closed. Maggie would be going through her normal morning routine, probably trying to pretend that this was an inconvenience, not major construction. At least she’d come to her senses and let him call Owen.

His brother wiped his hands on his jeans. “Materials won’t be cheap. And it’s not a one-day job. You ask her about filing an insurance claim?”

“Aye, before I left last night.”

“And?”

Fergus ran a hand through his hair, his eyes drifting back to the kitchen door before settling on the split beam again. “She won’t.”

“Storm damage usually falls under…”

“It’ll take months,” Fergus cut in. “Plus they’ll want inspection history and want to know why it wasn’t fixed before something like this happened.” Owen’s mouth flattened, and he continued, “And she’s right. Whether they help or not, they’ll jack up her rates.” For a moment, neither of them spoke. “Last thing she wants is some insurance prick in a suit talking down to her.”

“Well, that would be fun to watch,” Owen smirked. Fergus shot him a look. “Moving on, then. Bottom line, this is a big job.”

“And the wedding’s in less than a month.”

Their discussion was interrupted by the sound of a delivery van rumbling to a stop out front, its brakes complaining loudly. Freddie crowed from the other side of the fence, and Maggie’s hens drowned him out in reply.

This was the rhythm of the village, and the Stag had always been part of it. On match days, crowds spilled out onto the pavement, Christmas lunches were booked months in advance, and every Sunday after morning service folks still dressed in their Sunday best gathered around the tables. Fergus had seen half the village pass through those doors at one point or another. The Stag wasn’t just a pub. It was a staple of daily life in Great Missenden, even when times were hard.

“Right,” Owen said again, rubbing the back of his neck. “So, we’re fixing it then. If we strip the whole center run and replace the brace properly, that’ll stabilize the span. Flashing needs redoing along that seam. Slate’s salvageable in places, but not all of it.”

Fergus looked over and asked, “Materials?”

“Well, timber prices haven’t come down,” Owen said, scratching his jaw. “I have some left from another job, but it won’t be enough. She’s looking at a couple grand. Depends how much rot I find once it’s open. Not to mention labor.”

Fergus’s fears were now confirmed. There was a good reason the courtyard repairs had fallen behind. Maggie had planned to fix it a while back, but something else always came up—a broken oven, a burst pipe, a walk-in freezer failing. Life always seemed to bring a never-ending list of emergencies.

“I planned on helping.”

“Paying for both of us to be up there won’t make it much cheaper.”

“You’re the only one getting paid.”

Owen looked up slowly. “That’s not how jobs work.”

“I don’t work for you.” Fergus nudged a loose splinter with his boot, sending it skittering across the damp stone. “She already pays me…”

“…to pour pints!”

“To keep things running,” Fergus replied evenly. “That covers this, too.”

Owen straightened, folding his arms, and asked, “Are you asking me to hide half the labor? She’ll see right through it.”

Fergus didn’t answer immediately. His mind drifted back to the kitchen the previous night and what had almost happened.

“Just keep the cost down as much as you can,” he said, refusing to meet his brother’s eyes.

“If she suspects I’m giving her discounts, she’ll set her hens loose on us. Those buggers may be pint-size, but they’re vicious.”

Fergus smiled and shrugged, hoping Owen wouldn’t suspect how stressed he was about Maggie finding out.

Owen studied him before asking, “You’re already in trouble with her, aren’t you?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Fergus looked back up at the torn beam. “Just fix the bloody roof, Owen.”

For once, Owen was smart enough to know when to let it be.

“Right then. I’ll see what I can salvage from the Patel job. Might cover half the span if we’re lucky.”

“And the rest?”

“We’ll source it.” He glanced back up at the roofline. “But if we’re doing this, we do it properly. I’m not coming back in six months because the other side decided to give up.”

Fergus nodded once. “Can’t argue with that.”

The kitchen door creaked open and both men turned.

Maggie stepped into the courtyard, a mug clasped between both hands. Her gaze lifted automatically to the hole in the roof before dropping to the two of them beneath it.

“And here I thought somehow this would already be fixed. So disappointing,” she said, smiling dryly.

Neither man answered.

“No pithy comeback, Owen?” When they still didn’t answer, she added, “Well then, out with it, what have you two decided to do without asking me first?”

“We’ve had an epiphany, Magpie,” Owen said, and Fergus knew the time for seriousness was over. “Now hear me out, just three words: Open. Air. Venue.” He spread his hands, all but saying *ta-da*!

Her gaze lifted again. “Your life depends on you telling me you’re joking, Owen.”

Owen appeared to weigh the benefits and hazards of continuing to press his luck. He dropped his arms, his smile vanishing. He gestured toward the damaged span. “Center brace needs replacing. Once we open it up, we’ll know how much surrounding timber is worth saving. The structure itself isn’t complicated, but I’m not going to lie to you, Maggie, it’s a fair bit bigger than just replacing one beam.”

Fergus watched Maggie absorb that. Her mouth pressed into the thin line he’d seen a hundred times before, usually right before she dug her heels in. She walked silently into the heart of the courtyard and took a good, hard look at the damage.

“How much bigger?” she asked softly, still staring at the fallen beam.

Owen hesitated, his gaze shifting to the beam. The pause would have been imperceptible to anyone who didn’t know him well, but Fergus did. His brother had never been good at softening the truth, but he was trying, nonetheless.

“Materials will run a bit,” Owen said finally.

Her brow lifted. “A bit? Owen…”

“Well, we can’t know exactly until we open it, can we?” he answered defensively.

She went deathly still. Steam from her cup drifted up in front of her face, all but ignored. “The timeline?”

“A week, maybe two,” Owen said. “Depending on the weather.”

Maggie’s gaze drifted upward, following the gap in the roofline. Fergus knew what she was picturing before she said it: Hannah’s wedding.

When she spoke again, her voice was quieter. “Three weeks. Not a day longer.”

“If the weather cooperates…” Owen hedged.

She looked hard at Fergus and he assured her, “It’ll be done.”

Her face remained stern, but he saw her visibly relax, if only a little.

“That settles it, then,” she said. “But I want a proper estimate before you touch anything. And Owen… no one too young to buy a pint gets on a ladder. Is that clear?”

Owen huffed a laugh. “Crystal.”

Then there was a quiet pause, and she looked suspiciously at them. “You’re both being entirely too agreeable. Why?”

Fergus felt the corner of his mouth twitch. “You aren’t yelling at us.”

“The day is young.”

Owen pushed away from the beam. “I’ll measure the span and see what I’ve got in the van.”

He headed toward the gate, leaving Fergus and Maggie standing beneath the open slice of sky. For a moment, neither of them spoke. She looked up, shielding her eyes from the rising sun, the light pouring through the gaps.

“Well,” she said, letting out a slow breath, “this is not exactly the courtyard aesthetic I had in mind.”

Fergus followed her gaze.

“Kind of nice,” he said. “Lots of natural light.”

She snorted softly into her tea.

They stood there a little longer before she made her way back inside. As he reached down to start clearing the debris, he could only hope he could make good on his promise that everything would be done before the wedding.

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October 31, 2025



-Maggie-

Maggie shoved her hat back into place for what had to be the twelfth time in an hour, muttering something unkind about pointed headwear and the woman who'd talked her into it.

The Roaring Stag was packed, with people who'd apparently decided Halloween was a contact sport. Someone had put on a playlist that couldn't decide between novelty songs and bass-heavy nonsense Maggie didn't recognize. A pumpkin candle flickered on the mantel, and a fake cobweb had come loose from the beam above the till and was now trailing across her shoulder.

According to Jenny, she made a reasonably convincing witch. Black dress. Black boots. Smoky makeup. The ridiculous hat, which seemed determined to abandon her at the first opportunity… and all of it was because Jenny had begged.

“You look brilliant, Mags,” Jenny called as she passed with a tray of shots balanced on one hand.

Jenny, by contrast, had committed fully to her devil motif. She wore a red dress, sequined horns, and a tail pinned to the back of her belt that kept getting caught on things. Maggie thought she looked about twelve and was trying very hard not to feel maternal toward a member of her staff.

“Own it,” Jenny added.

“I’ll own it when I can see.”

Jenny grinned and vanished into the crowd, and Maggie went back to pulling pints. The taps hissed, and someone down the bar laughed too loudly at their own joke. A small boy in a skeleton onesie was solemnly eating chips at his father’s elbow, and Maggie made a mental note to send over a bag of the good sweets from behind the register when she got a minute.

There was always a rhythm to nights like this. You either found it, or you drowned. Tonight, she was just about finding it.

She turned to slide two ciders down the bar and caught Fergus watching her.

He wasn’t in costume, of course. Fergus dressing up was a concept so foreign it might have caused structural damage. He wore what he always wore on a busy night: dark jeans, a gray henley, and boots. He was carrying a heavy crate of clean glasses, deftly weaving through the crowd.

He looked up, catching her watching him, and she glanced away quickly. He set the crate down at her end of the bar, and she noticed him sneaking another look at her.

“If you dare laugh at me, Fergus, you will be cleaning the taps alone when we close… and the lines, too!”

She meant it lightly. She’d been throwing variations of these threats his way for years, so she waited for the inevitable dry, humorous comeback.

“I’m not laughing.”

She opened her mouth but closed it again. The tap in her hand hissed uselessly against the side of a pint glass.

“Right then,” she stammered. “Good.”

A flicker of a smile crossed his face. He reached past her to shelve the crate, standing a little closer than was strictly necessary, and then he was gone.

Maggie stood still for half a second too long and then realized she was overflowing a pint of stout.

“Bugger,” she said, and slapped the tap off.

She spent the next twenty minutes trying to stop ruminating about what had just transpired. The lack of his usual humor had thrown her off balance. Here she was, forty years old, running a pub on the busiest night of the autumn calendar, dressed like a schoolgirl who had escaped a school play only to find the boy she had a crush on had walked out early.

Even as she cursed herself, she couldn’t help but sneak glances toward the end of the bar.

Jenny slid in alongside her sometime after ten, smelling faintly of tequila from a spill. She’d looked tired when she’d started the shift but was positively knackered now. Her horns were listing slightly and the glitter on her cheek was migrating toward her temple.

“Everything alright?” Maggie asked, gesturing toward Jenny’s phone, which she’d managed to check not once but twice in the time it took to pour a round.

“Fine.”

Maggie crossed her arms and waited. Jenny started to subconsciously reach for her phone again but froze when she saw Maggie’s lifted eyebrow. In the end, she couldn’t resist, and she pulled her phone out hurriedly, looking at it before putting it away again.

“It’s my brother,” she blurted out. “He’s out with a couple of the older boys. He said he’d text me by nine, but he hasn’t.”

“Fifteen-year-old boys don’t text, Jenny.”

“This one does,” Jenny said. “Usually.”

Her hand started to reach for the phone again, and Maggie set the glass she was drying down on the towel. Around them, the pub roared on, but Jenny’s face told Maggie everything.

“How’s he been?”

Jenny shrugged. “Off. Withdrawn. He snaps at me if I so much as mention work. I don’t know what to do with him, Mags. He won’t talk to me. He goes out and comes back and won’t say where he’s been… last week he had a graze on his knuckles he refused to explain. And there’s a kid he’s been hanging around with.”

“Which kid?” Maggie asked.

“One of the sixth-formers. I don’t know. Older. Cocky.”

Maggie knew that kind of trouble. She'd seen it enough times: older boys collecting younger ones like accessories, making them feel important until they needed someone to take the blame.

"He's probably fine," Jenny said quickly. "You know what he's like. Wants to look hard. He's probably at someone's house eating Haribo and forgetting I exist."

"Probably."

"He's fine."

Maggie nodded and smiled reassuringly as two lads at the bar started calling for service before either could say anything else. Jenny straightened, forced a smile most people would find sincere, and headed their way.

Maggie turned her attention back to the patrons in her area to see if anyone needed anything. The pointed hat slid forward over one eye again, and as she fixed it, she felt increasingly uneasy about what Jenny had told her.

She clocked Dean Hollis a short time later. She probably should've taken notice of his behavior earlier, but she'd been admittedly distracted.

Dean had one of those faces permanently arranged into a smirk, as if the world existed for his amusement. He was in his early twenties, one of the local lads who'd stayed local and resented everyone who hadn't. He'd been in the Stag before, usually with a small cluster of mates who laughed too loudly at his jokes and paid for his rounds.

Tonight, though, he was more drunk than she'd ever seen him.

He'd installed himself at the far end of the bar an hour ago and hadn't moved except to intercept Jenny whenever she came within reach.

The first three times, Jenny handled him. The fourth time, Maggie was sliding change across the bar when she heard him mutter something about the devil costume that made the two lads beside him snicker. Jenny's jaw hardened, but she didn't stop moving.

Dean, however, had other plans and stepped into her path, asking what time she would be off.

"Not until after you are, Dean," Jenny said pleasantly. "Move, please."

"Come on, love." His voice was heavy with lager as he leaned into her. "You never smile at me. I only come in here to see you smile."

"Sorry to disappoint. Now move, please."

She tried to step around him, but he shifted with her. Maggie was already in motion, moving quickly out from behind the bar. Before she could reach

them, Dean had grabbed Jenny's wrist to stop her.

Jenny froze but recovered quickly. She kept her voice low and clipped as she ordered, "If you don't let go right now, Dean, I swear on my mother's grave I will end you."

"Alright, alright, Christ…" His grip loosened but didn't fully let go.

"Dean." Maggie's voice cut through, tone cold. She slipped quickly into the narrow space between them, hand coming to rest on Jenny's elbow, and turned to face Dean.

"Take your hand off her. Right now."

Slowly, still grinning stupidly, he removed his hand.

"There you go," he said, holding both palms up. "No harm done. We were just having a chat."

"You're done. Go home."

"Am I?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

He laughed, and around them people began to notice. Tables got quiet, and someone turned the music down a little. She registered the sound of a stool scraping on the floor, and from the corner of her eye, she saw one of the regulars head quickly into the back.

"Come on, Maggie." Dean took a step closer. "You're not really going to chuck me out over a joke. Not on Halloween. I've been coming in here since I was eighteen."

"And I've been throwing you out almost as long." She nodded her head toward the door. "You heard me. Move."

"Or what?" he asked, smiling as he took another half step forward. "You going to hex me? You a real witch now?" His gaze dragged down her body and back up. "Ooooh, we got a little scary witch," he mocked.

She could smell the alcohol on him, but Maggie didn't blink or flinch. She'd spent too many years in too many rooms with men who thought women could be bullied.

"Last chance," she said. The lack of any emotion with which she said it would have made most people call it quits right there.

Not Dean, though. He was too drunk to think straight, and he instead decided to crowd her, imposing his larger frame into her space menacingly. It was what men like him did when they ran out of clever quips.

"You know, you have always been such a stuck-up little bitch," he hissed as he reached up and slowly grabbed her arm. His hold wasn't that hard, but

she felt it, gripping her through the black sleeve of her dress, thumb pressing into the muscle above her elbow.

She reached her other hand up, intending to grab his wrist and maybe twist it to send a painful message. Dean's smirk faded before she could, his eyes flicking to something behind Maggie. She didn't have to guess what, or who he saw.

Fergus crossed the last few feet with the same calm stride he used when fetching coats at closing. Except the energy radiating from him was completely different.

Without slowing at all, he interposed himself between them, and Dean tried to whip his hand back to safety. Like a blur, Fergus's hand shot up and grabbed Dean's wrist. He easily spun him around, pulling the arm down behind his back and bending his wrist awkwardly. Dean let out a yelp.

Fergus bent down and spoke quietly into Dean's ear. "Out. Now."

Dean's face twisted in pain as he fought to free his wrist, and Fergus gave him a slight push as he released him. Dean stumbled forward and turned around to look at them. Maggie saw what happened next in pieces: the flash of embarrassment and humiliation, the sudden wave of drunken anger that overruled the tiny bit of sense he might have had left.

He charged, swinging at Fergus's head with all he had.

Fergus slipped ever so slightly to the left, but it wasn't enough to dodge completely. Dean's fist landed on Fergus's shoulder with a dull, ugly thud instead of his face. Fergus grunted but didn't budge.

A second later, he reached out with both hands and bent Dean forward, so he was no longer swinging at anyone. One of Fergus's hands landed on the scruff of his collar and the other restrained his arm.

"Alright, lad, you had your go. Now go home," Fergus said mildly, as if Dean had only knocked over a chair.

There was a scrape of stools, and two older regulars were on their feet. Maggie caught the flash of a fluorescent jacket near the door because Mike Jones—bless his stocky, meat-pie-loving heart—had apparently been close enough to hear the commotion.

She waved him in, and a moment later Fergus and Mike walked Dean out. Dean muttered several things on the way, and the door thudded shut behind them.

For a second, there was silence. Then someone near the fireplace let out a low whistle, and the pub seemed to exhale as the music rose again.

Maggie returned to her place behind the bar. She served the next three people with a smile and said the right words in the right order. But every time she paused, she looked down and saw her hands were shaking.

Jenny appeared beside her, red-rimmed eyes full of concern, clearly still rattled, and fighting to not lose control of her emotions.

“I’ve got the bar,” she said quietly. “Go. He’s in the back.”

“He’s what?”

“Fergus. He’s back. Came in the side entrance and went into the kitchen.”

Maggie went, forcing herself to walk slowly.

The kitchen had closed an hour ago, and the lights were dimmed. Maggie pushed through the kitchen door and stopped short.

Fergus was standing near one of the prep stools by the stainless-steel counter, his right hand now working slowly over his left shoulder, seeking a pressure point that would ease the obvious discomfort.

He looked over when she entered. His face looked tired and, annoyingly, faintly resigned, as if he’d already accepted this conversation wasn’t going to go his way.

“I’m fine, Maggie.”

She shut the door behind her abruptly and walked closer, looking at his shoulder.

“You are very obviously not fine.”

“Just sore, is all.”

“Sit.”

His eyebrow lifted. “Are all witches this way?”

“What way?”

“Ordering men about and all that.”

Maggie stared at him. “Would you like me to add a curse?”

He cocked his head at her as if he were considering it. “Well...”

“Fergus!”

“I’m sitting!” He sat down, and she didn’t miss the grimace he tried to hide.

She stepped between his knees without thinking and planted a hand on his good shoulder.

“Stay still,” she said gently, and to her amazement, he did.

This close, everything felt sharper, and she slid her hand carefully over his injured shoulder, feeling through the soft fabric of his shirt. The muscle was tight beneath her palm.

“You daft sod,” she muttered. “I had it sorted.”

“Did you?”

“I did,” she insisted, sharper than she intended. Her hand tightened slightly against his shoulder. “He’d have let go. I’ve dealt with blokes like him a hundred times. I don’t need you putting yourself in harm’s way like some bloody…”

He sucked in his breath sharply as she pressed her fingers gently into the top of the joint. She adjusted her hand, felt the tension there, the heat already building beneath the fabric.

“How bad?”

“I’ll live.”

“Not what I asked, Fergus.”

She was met with silence. Her thumb stayed near the top of his shoulder, just beneath the seam of his shirt. She could feel the muscle locked too tightly under her touch. He wasn’t moving. Wasn’t flinching. He just sat there and accepted it… It was getting under her skin.

“You’re doing that thing again,” she said.

His gaze stayed on her face. “What thing?”

“This.” She gestured vaguely with her free hand. “The pretending-you’re-completely-fine thing.”

“Learned from the best,” he quipped, and then grunted in pain as she squeezed his shoulder. “You did that on purpose.”

“I would never.”

He lapsed into silence, and she lifted her hand and moved to face him properly. His eyes met hers, his green looking earnestly into her amber.

“Fergus,” she said, softer. “I mean it. I had it.”

“I know you did, Maggie. Not the point.”

“What is it then?” Fergus started to answer, then stopped and looked away. “Tell me.”

He swallowed, staring down at the floor, and said softly, “I didn’t like it.” She blinked at him a few times, waiting for him to continue. Finally, he looked up at her. “I didn’t like seeing him putting his hands on you. I mean, I didn’t like that he did it to Jenny either. Obviously.” He took a small breath, and his cheeks looked a little pink, but he pressed on. “But it wasn’t the same as when he grabbed you.”

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

His eyes stayed on hers. For a second he looked like he might say the rest of it. Then he didn’t, and she understood, slowly, that this was all he intended to say. The rest of it—whatever the rest of it was—would remain locked away.

“Fergus,” she said, though she had no idea what was supposed to come after it.

He didn’t move; he just looked at her with that steady gaze, and she could feel him searching her face. The sound of a table bursting into song and laughter wafted in from the door, causing her to flinch.

The floor shook with the vibrations of rowdy dancing, and the Stag went on being the Stag. In the kitchen, things were now different between them, and no amount of pretending was going to put it back where it had been. Fergus couldn’t take back what he’d said. He couldn’t pretend he hadn’t meant it, because they both knew he had.

“Ice,” she said hoarsely, not knowing what else to say. “I’ll get you ice.”

He reached out toward her, voice low. “Maggie.”

She pulled away, though. “You need to ice your shoulder, Fergus.”

He dropped his arm and sat silently while she went to get the ice, and she was grateful he didn’t say anything else. She wasn’t sure what she’d have done if he had.

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November 3, 2025



-Maggie-

Maggie was halfway up the path to Elliot's front door before she realized she'd started calculating paint coverage in her head again. She told herself it was progress, as it wasn't timber lengths this time. Four days ago, she'd been standing beneath a hole in the courtyard roof, mentally adding up the cost of center braces, flashing, slate, labor, and whatever else might pop up. Since then, Owen had stripped out the worst of the rot, leaving the courtyard an unfinished mess, but at least it was no longer actively trying to kill anyone.

She forced the courtyard from her mind, trying not to spiral about timelines and paint colors. The weather wasn't helping matters. It had been gray and rainy since the storm. Owen had said they'd need a dry stretch before they could finish, and it didn't look like one was forthcoming anytime soon.

So, Maggie had done the only thing she could think to do without climbing a ladder and risking the wrath of the Merrick brothers.

She'd patched the walls.

For two evenings, after the pub closed and the kitchen had gone quiet, she'd been busy with filler, sandpaper, and paintbrushes, smoothing over cracks the years had exposed and sealing water stains she'd been pretending not to see for months. The first coat of warm white paint had gone up along the back wall yesterday. It softened the brick and made the courtyard look ever so slightly more suitable for a wedding. If she stood in exactly the right spot, ignored the tarp overhead, and squinted past the stack of timber near the gate, she could almost see it.

Before she could knock, the door flew open, and Hannah practically tackled her with a hug.

"You're late," she said with a grin as she released Maggie and pulled her by the arm into the house.

Maggie allowed herself to be dragged away and, as her eyes adjusted to the light, she froze.

The dining table had disappeared beneath a small mountain of wedding plans. Bridal magazines were spread open across the surface, ribbon samples draped over chair backs, and three separate notebooks sat open in the middle like competing battle strategies. Grace sat at one end of the table while Maggie's mother sat in an armchair near the window nursing a cup of tea, her legs crossed, and a disapproving scowl on her face as she regarded Maggie.

Hannah returned to her seat and, suddenly thinking of something, began feverishly scribbling on a pad.

Maggie slipped her coat off and draped it over the back of a chair. Her eyes drifted to the notebook Hannah was writing in, and she saw that the word *courtyard* was written across the top. Her knuckles whitened on the back of the chair.

"Well," she said, pulling it back and lowering herself into the seat, "this looks dangerously organized."

Hannah picked up the notebook and handed it to her, looking quite proud.

"Start here," she said. "The courtyard layout."

Maggie glanced down at the sketch, recognizing the familiar shape of the brick walls and the narrow gate that opened toward her cottage in the back. Hannah had even drawn the old heater stands in their usual spots.

“You’ve been busy,” Maggie said.

“She’s been planning this for months, before Ben even proposed,” Elliot remarked dryly, and Hannah’s cheeks flushed.

Maggie looked up to find her brother leaning against the kitchen doorway, a mug in one hand and the other braced against the frame. She wasn’t sure how long he had been standing there.

“Nonsense, Elliot…” Grace retorted as Hannah shot a defiant look at her father. “She started the day they met.”

Hannah whirled on her. “Mum!”

Grace just smiled sweetly at her, and Elliot raised the mug to Grace in a mock toast.

Hannah pointed her pen at them both. “It’s called being organized.”

“What it’s called can be found in psychology textbooks,” Elliot corrected.

He crossed to the table, and Maggie accepted the cup of tea when he held it out for her, the warmth of it welcome against her still-cold fingers.

“Last night she nearly ordered two hundred candles,” Elliot said.

“They were discounted,” Hannah replied, her voice taking on the same exasperated tone she used as a teenager.

“They were pine-scented,” Grace added.

To which Hannah exclaimed, “It sounded festive!”

Maggie’s mother sniffed from her chair, the entire room sobering when she spoke. “A wedding that smells like an air freshener. Who would want that?”

No one answered her and, lacking anyone to argue with, her mother went quiet once more. Maggie smiled behind the rim of her mug.

“So, where’s the groom-to-be?” she asked, noting Ben’s absence. “You lot haven’t scared him off already, have you?”

“He’s helping at the pitch,” Hannah said. “Youth practice. Fergus roped him in a few weeks ago.”

Maggie fumbled the mug as she set it down on the table, and all eyes went to her. She smiled weakly and shrugged.

Elliot regarded her for an instant, then, recovering, added, “Apparently the team needed an extra pair of hands. He said he’d stop by after.”

Hannah tapped the drawing again, looking up at Maggie. “So,” she said brightly, “this is where the lights go.”

Maggie’s gaze followed the line Hannah traced across the page.

“It’ll work,” she admitted as she tried not to think about the actual state of the courtyard.

“I knew it would.” Hannah beamed.

Elliot flipped a chair around and sat down opposite her, folding his arms across the back of it, earning a scoff from their mother.

“Before we get too far into decorating plans,” he said, “we should probably talk numbers.”

Hannah groaned as her smile faded as quickly as it had come. “Dad.”

“What?” he said. “It’s a wedding, not a surprise party.”

Grace pointedly sipped her tea in silence. She had always tried to stay out of father-daughter arguments. It was also the reason Hannah had ended up at Maggie’s door so often while she was growing up.

Elliot tapped the edge of the paper. “So, Mags, how much of my retirement fund is about to vanish in a puff of fairy dust?”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “You’re being very dramatic.”

“And you’re being very romantic, which is very… well… you,” Elliot said. “But I’d like to know roughly what we’re dealing with before you start ordering decorative lanterns from the internet.”

“I wish I could give you a good estimate,” Maggie said. “But it honestly depends on the headcount and what you actually want included.”

“Everything,” Hannah said immediately.

Grace reached over and gently pushed one of the ribbon samples aside so Maggie could see the notebook beneath it.

Elliot frowned. “We’ll see about ‘everything,’” he replied before turning back to Maggie. “We’re not expecting miracles. Just a range.”

Maggie’s mother cleared her throat. “Your brother shouldn’t be asked to pay full price for his own daughter’s wedding at the family pub.”

Maggie made a point of ignoring her again, and staring at the sketch, she bit her lip.

Her Uncle Peter had run the place for nearly forty years. Before that, it had been his father’s. Before that, his father’s again. It had gone from eldest son to eldest son, and it certainly had never been shared by siblings. So, it couldn’t rightfully be called “the family pub.”

However, their uncle had never had children of his own. So, when Peter’s will had been read, half the village had assumed Elliot’s name would be on it. Maggie had assumed that too, even though Elliot had never once shown any interest in the place, while she had spent nearly every day there

growing up. It must've been noticed, because Peter had left her the keys and the ledgers and a pub that had been one bad winter away from closing.

Her mother still hadn't made peace with it and, what's more, insisted on acting like Maggie had somehow orchestrated the whole thing.

"It's a business, Mum," Maggie said evenly, finally lifting her head, "and I still have to be able to keep the lights on, family or not."

Her mother's only response was to click her tongue disapprovingly and return to her tea.

"We've discussed this already, Mum," Elliot said quietly. "We are not doing this again."

Maggie glanced at her brother, realizing she had missed some sort of row before her arrival.

"And it should go without saying that Elliot is getting a family discount," Maggie said tiredly. Her mother shook her head, clearly unhappy that Elliot was paying anything at all.

"And I'm thankful for that," Elliot told her. He looked meaningfully at his mother, and his tone made it quite clear the matter was closed.

Hannah looked between them and, in a cautious tone, asked, "So… we're still having the wedding there, right?"

Maggie leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "Unless you've found another pub with better fairy lights and a courtyard that fits a hundred people."

Hannah's grin returned immediately. "Good."

Elliot glanced at Maggie again, more serious now.

"But," he said, "I do still need a number."

"For the full event?" she said, exhaling slowly. "Food, staff, drinks package, setup?" He nodded, and she did the math automatically. "Somewhere in the eight-to-ten thousand range," she said. "Depending on the final guest count."

There was an awkward silence and then Hannah said, brightly, "That's a lot less than Hampden House quoted."

The words landed a half-second too late, and Maggie looked up.

"Hampden House?" she repeated before she could stop herself.

Hannah blinked, clearly not expecting that to be the part Maggie focused on. She didn't miss the way her niece's cheeks started to turn pink.

"Just to compare," she said quickly. "Ben's mum thought we should look at a few other options, and her friend handles their bookings. They had a

last-minute cancellation."

From the armchair by the window, Maggie's mother made a humming sound. Maggie didn't say anything, but her fingers tightened slightly around her mug.

"So, you went to look at Hampden House," she said, a little more evenly this time.

Hannah's smile faltered. "We didn't book it or anything. I made it clear I wanted the Stag."

Maggie nodded once, believing her niece. Still, the thought settled somewhere uncomfortable in her chest. Hampden House didn't have leaky beams or weathered brick. It had dressing rooms and posh meals. It was polished and predictable, and the safe option.

Grace cleared her throat gently.

"Well," she said, folding one of the ribbon samples in half, not looking up, "Hampden House also wanted nearly triple before we even discussed catering."

Hannah nodded quickly. "And the courtyard's cozier."

That made Maggie's mouth twitch despite herself.

Across the table, Elliot leaned back in his chair, clearly deciding the safest position was slightly outside the blast radius of the women in the room.

"Well," he said, lifting his hands in surrender, "I think Maggie's quote is more than fair."

From the armchair, Maggie's mother sniffed again, clearly unconvinced, and said, "It's still a great deal of money."

"Nana, weddings cost a lot more than that now," Hannah replied calmly. "Trust me. I've looked."

Everything settled for a few moments after that, the conversation turning to the heaters and how many new strands of fairy lights they could realistically add.

It didn't last, though.

Hannah paused in the middle of her notes and looked up. "Where do the lights actually attach? To the center beam or the sides?"

Maggie's hand stilled on the paper, and her pen tapped against the sketch before she answered. So far, she had managed to keep the roof catastrophe quiet, even with Mr. Davies poking around. She knew she'd never hear the end of it if her mother found out.

“We’ll sort all the mounting points when we finalize the layout,” she said smoothly.

Hannah nodded, satisfied, and went back to scribbling. Across the table, though, Elliot watched her. He didn’t say anything, but she knew that look—he knew something was off. Maggie reached for her tea again and drained the last of it, already calculating how quickly she could get back to the pub.

It was nearing lunchtime when she finally pushed her chair back from the table.

“Well,” she said, reaching for her coat, “I should get going.”

“You’ve only been here an hour,” her mother said immediately.

“And I’ve got a pub with a hole in the roof,” Maggie replied, the words slipping out too quickly, and for a split second, the room went quiet.

Hannah blinked. “A what?”

Maggie waved a hand dismissively, already pulling her coat on. “Figure of speech.”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t say anything.

“I’ll come by next week,” Maggie added quickly. “We can talk about menus so I can order from my suppliers.”

Hannah nodded, already going back to her notes.

Outside, the autumn air felt sharper than it had when she’d arrived. Maggie pulled her coat tighter around herself as she walked back down the path.

When she pushed open the side gate to her cottage and stepped inside, she froze. For a moment, she simply stared. Then she closed her eyes and exhaled slowly through her nose because her chickens were not in their enclosure.

They were everywhere.

Mariah strutted confidently across the garden path. Celine perched on the low stone wall beside the coop, head cocked as if she had personally orchestrated the situation. And Madonna and Cher had somehow made it onto the small patio outside the cottage door, pecking curiously at the edge of the doormat.

Maggie blinked and started counting, her stomach dropping.

She turned slowly, scanning the garden again. The coop door hung open at a crooked angle, the latch dangling uselessly against the wood. Near the

wall that separated the miniature chickens from the courtyard, the hedges rustled faintly in the breeze.

“Brilliant,” she murmured.

Beyoncé appeared from beneath the rosemary bush, scratching enthusiastically at the soil like she’d discovered buried treasure. Maggie counted again, and her pulse started to pick up, the quiet calm she’d been holding onto all morning finally slipping.

“Don’t do this,” she said under her breath, already walking toward the coop.

Inside, the nesting boxes sat empty. Feathers clung to the straw like the aftermath of a very small rebellion. She stepped back out into the garden and looked around again, heart sinking further.

Britney and Christina were missing, but that wasn’t the worst of it. The hens never went far. But Freddie—traitorous rooster that he was—never wandered anywhere convenient.

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November 3, 2025



-Fergus-

The pitch was mostly mud, and Fergus had watched the grass disappear as practice progressed. Boots tore into it as boys skidded through the drills they were too tired to do properly. Fergus stood with his hands in his jacket pockets and watched the line set.

Seventeen boys. He counted again out of habit, eyes moving across muddy jerseys and red faces. It was still seventeen because Callum wasn't there. Fergus glanced toward the lane beyond the pitch, then the car park, but there was no slight figure in an oversized club top jogging across the grass.

Fergus pushed down the unease, reminding himself that missing one practice didn't mean disaster. Teenage boys missed sessions for homework, colds, bad moods, and various other reasons they thought sounded better in their own heads. Still, Callum had been so angry last week, and after what Owen had said about the Carter lads, his absence sat wrong.

"Shift left," he said, and the pod moved.

The ball spat off a pass and bounced the wrong way. Fergus stepped in a pace behind the fly-half.

“Square your hips,” he said, and the boy instantly adjusted. “Good.”

His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it. It was either a nuisance call or Hayes. He had managed to buy himself a couple of weeks. The job didn’t officially start until after the holidays, but he knew he couldn’t put off answering forever.

“Set,” he called, stepping back.

The scrimmage rolled on. One winger got tangled in his own feet and went down laughing, and the whistle at the far end shrilled a second too late.

“Use your reach,” Fergus called to the jumper who still wasn’t fully extending.

His phone buzzed again, but he still ignored it.

The boys reset cleaner this time as Ben was jogging cones back into place at the touchline, cheerful despite the damp. He could see why Elliot had approved of him for Hannah.

“Someone’s desperate,” he said, nodding toward Fergus’s pocket, phone still buzzing.

“Mm.”

The lads ran it right, then back left into the muddy slope. They were nearly done now, their legs heavy, and their voices louder as they complained. That was when the phone buzzed a third time.

Fergus pulled it out, intending to set it to *Do Not Disturb*, but the screen read Maggie. He frowned because she never called without a good reason. He looked up once at the pitch, figuring they’d survive without him for two minutes.

“Take them through a cool-down if the whistle goes,” he told Ben. “If they start showing off, separate the two with the hair.”

“On it,” Ben replied, then stopped short. “Wait, which two with the hair?”

Fergus was already walking away. He cut toward the pavilion where the boards took the worst of the wind and answered as soon as he hit the shelter.

“Maggie?”

“They’re gone,” she said, breathing fast and uneven. “They’re just—gone. I can’t find them anywhere.”

Fergus frowned at the line of mud on his boots. “What’s gone?”

“Two of them. No, wait! Three.”

“Three what?”

“Chickens.”

His brow furrowed. He had been at the Stag that morning when the shipment had arrived and had unloaded everything himself. Including the chicken for the upcoming week.

“Right,” he said. “Check the freezer.”

There was silence on the other end, and he glanced in the direction of the pub as if he could see it from the pitch. When Maggie finally spoke again, her tone was somewhere between exasperation and confusion.

“Why would I check the freezer?”

“You said the chicken’s gone.”

“I’m in my yard, Fergus.”

“So go in and check. Maybe one of the lads shifted things around after I left. Didn’t Daniel say he would be in at some point today to work on the specials?”

“Fergus! My… chickens… are… gone!”

Fergus’s brow furrowed, and he looked around to see if someone was recording this for an elaborate hoax. Then he had an idea.

“So, we’ll serve something else… Turkey?”

“Oh my God, no.”

“Duck?”

“Hens, Fergus! My hens! Two of them are gone, and Freddie is missing, and I’ve checked the beds and the bins and the stupid herb planters…” She cut herself off. “I do not have time for this today!”

The field noise dropped away in his head. He could hear her properly now—the way she was out of breath, the thickness she was trying to keep out of her voice and not quite managing.

“Right,” he said, immediately switching gears. “They escaped the coop?”

“The door was open. It’s shut now. I don’t know if I left it open, or if there was a fox, or…”

“You see feathers?”

“A few by the ramp. No blood. Just…” She broke off. “Freddie could be halfway to London by now!”

The uncharacteristic wobble in her voice nearly knocked the wind from his lungs, and Fergus looked back over the pitch. The boys had collapsed into stretches, Ben leading them like he had been doing this his whole life.

“Where’ve you checked?”

“Everywhere. Under the tables. Behind the bins. The woodpile. The crawl space. I’ve walked half of High Street rattling their feed bucket.”

He could see it as she spoke—the courtyard, the little bolt holes, the places anything small, feathered, and contrary could wedge itself into and call it strategy.

"I'm on my way," he said, turning to make his way over to Ben.

There was a pause on the other end, and then her voice was brisk when she replied, "Wait, I just remembered. You're at practice, aren't you? Dammit, I shouldn't have bothered you! Never mind. I'll sort it."

"I'm coming."

"Fergus…"

"Check behind the ale casks again," he said, crossing the field as Ben jogged over to meet him. "Slow this time. Quiet. You don't want to frighten them further."

There was a small breath, and then, "Right."

He ended the call and slid the phone into his pocket. He had heard Maggie fussing over those birds enough mornings to understand how important they were to her.

"All right?" Ben asked as Fergus reached him.

"Emergency at the pub," he said. "Finish taking them through stretches. Hips, hamstrings. No heroics."

A small boy in a loose scrum cap looked up sharply. "Is the Stag on fire?"

"Worse. It's her chickens."

That bought him a beat of perfect silence.

"Her chickens are on fire?" one of the lads asked.

Another frowned. "Can chickens catch fire without oil?"

"Shut up and stretch," Fergus said.

They bent back down, snickering. Fergus, however, turned his attention back to Ben.

"If you happen to come across any lost chickens on your way to see Hannah…"

"I'll let you know."

He jogged to the car park. Part of him couldn't believe he was actually leaving practice to chase chickens. Yet, the minute he'd heard her voice crack, he knew there was no way he was staying.

Before pulling out of his parking spot, Fergus took out his phone and sent Owen a message.

Three of Maggie's chickens are missing. Keep an eye out.

The reply came fast.

Do I bring breadcrumbs or a lasso?

Fergus’s mouth twitched.

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No lasso. If you see them, ring me. Catch them if you can.

He sent off one more text for backup before he set the phone down and started the engine. The short drive through the village took barely a minute—past the allotments, the row of cottages by the post office, the narrow bend where cars slowed whether they meant to or not. By the time the Roaring Stag sign came into view, he'd already mapped the property and surrounding area in his head.

At the back gate, he paused with his hand on the latch and listened. He could hear her shaking the feed bucket, gravel shifting under her feet. Maggie's voice tried one name, then another.

He opened the gate and found her crossing between the garden bench and the planters in a line that was being worn into the stones by repetition. Her hair had worked loose from its clip, and one knuckle was pinked up where she'd caught it on something. She rattled the bucket and called, "Freddie—come on, love—Christina—here, girls."

"Maggie."

She stopped and turned. The bucket swung once against her knee, but she stilled it with one hand and squared her shoulders.

"It's fine," she said, like she was trying to convince herself more than him. "They've only just wandered."

"We'll find them," Fergus said. "I'm sure they haven't gone far."

"They're ridiculous," she muttered. "And fast when it suits them."

He shut the gate behind him and checked the latch. Then he crouched by the nearest bench and peered underneath.

"See any sign of a fox?"

"No. Unless one's learned to stack crates and close gates behind itself."

"Mm."

He moved to the woodpile, and she followed a pace behind, bucket in hand, energy coming off her in quick, sharp bursts.

"The door to the coop was open?" he asked.

She sighed, and he saw her shoulders drop in defeat. "I was distracted this morning. I must have forgotten to latch it."

He didn't need to ask why. Instead, he checked behind the casks, the woodpile, the dark shadows under the decking. Maggie moved where he pointed without remarking on it.

At the rosemary planter, he lifted a hand.

“There,” he whispered, pointing. In the shade at the base of the brick wall, a tiny speckled hen blinked out at him.

Maggie didn’t rush it. She set the bucket down slowly, dipped a hand into the grain, and scattered a small trail across the stones.

“Come on, then, Britney,” she murmured.

Britney stretched her neck, suspicious, then took a cautious step forward. Then another. Maggie waited until she had committed, then moved in one smooth motion, scooping Britney up against her chest before she had time to protest properly.

The bird tried to flap once, angry about being caught, but Maggie secured her wings.

“Got you,” Maggie said, already turning toward the coop, and Fergus watched her carry her over.

“Well, that’s one,” he sighed when she latched the door behind the bird.

“She’ll be acting like a prisoner for the rest of the week,” Maggie replied, batting a loose strand of hair away from her face.

Before he could say anything, the gate swung open, and a woman in a waxed jacket stepped in, cradling a furious brown hen wrapped in her scarf.

“Found this by our compost,” the woman said, holding the bird carefully. “Is it yours?”

Maggie stepped forward before Fergus could answer, and a small breath left her.

“Christina,” she said.

Fergus looked from the bird to Maggie. To him, they were all the same—feathers, feet, attitudes meant for birds triple their size—but she’d named it without hesitation.

“That’s two,” she added, already taking the hen from the woman.

“Still missing one,” Fergus said.

“Freddie,” Maggie replied, her tone dripping with the annoyance of a naughty child’s parent.

She tucked Christina against her side and headed for the coop.

Villagers started arriving in small groups, as they always did when there was a problem. A teenager showed them a shaky video of a brown and red blur near the green, and then Mr. Davies confidently announced that chickens couldn’t fly over fences. Thankfully, he was ignored by everyone.

Maggie kept up with it all—thanking people, directing, taking reports, rattling the bucket when needed. She looked like she was holding herself together, but the frantic edge was still there in the way she moved.

Fergus pushed off the gatepost. “Right,” he said. The quiet came almost immediately. “If you see Freddie, don’t chase him,” he went on. “You’ll only send him further off.”

A few people nodded.

He pointed toward the lane. “Check the green and the museum side. Take a handful of feed.” Then toward the cottages. “Someone look round the allotments. He might head for shelter if he can.”

The woman from the compost garden scooped grain from Maggie’s bucket and started handing it out like sweets. Maggie watched the small pile in the bucket shrink, then glanced up.

“I’ll go to the green,” she said.

Fergus nodded once.

Within a minute, the courtyard began to empty again, people drifting off in pairs and groups of three, pockets full of feed, voices already lowering into conspiratorial whispers as if Freddie might be listening.

Soon it was just the two of them by the gate.

“Freddie… he could be anywhere by now,” she said, setting down the bucket.

Fergus glanced once at the phone, then back at the lane.

“I called in reinforcements,” he said.

Her head turned. “Who?”

He didn’t look at her when he answered. “That rooster’s biggest fan.”

She stared at him and then said, “You don’t mean…?” Fergus just smiled, and Maggie threw up her hands and muttered, “Well. That’ll end quietly.”

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November 3, 2025



-Fergus-

By the time Fergus reached the bottom of the lane, dusk was unrolling across Great Missenden like a heavy blue wool blanket. He stopped beneath the old lime trees and listened.

The village was starting to settle for the night. Birds were quieting as the crickets started their evening song, and occasionally, at irregular intervals, there was the unmistakable crow of a rooster who seemed to believe he had outwitted the entire human race.

Riley stood with his nose pressed to the ground and his tail rigid as a curtain rod. The enormous Irish Wolfhound looked back over his shoulder to confirm Fergus and, more importantly, his owners were witnessing his dedication. Then, he plodded another two paces forward, sniffed the hedge, and sneezed twice.

Ever since her permanent relocation from New York to Great Missenden, Sadie Reed, who now trailed behind the dog, had spent many afternoons

visiting Maggie at The Roaring Stag. Several of those visits had included Riley and her boyfriend, Corbyn Pearce. Riley had formed a love-hate relationship with the troublesome rooster. Riley wished to love Freddie, and Freddie… Freddie wanted to peck out Riley's eyes most days.

Behind Fergus, Sadie's breath steamed in the cooling air.

"So, we're placing our trust in Riley?" she asked. "He has many wonderful qualities, but I'm not so sure tracking runaway roosters is one of them."

Fergus glanced sideways at her with a knowing smile.

"Never underestimate a determined hound," he said.

Corbyn looked doubtfully at the dog. "Well, even if he does manage to find Freddie, does it end well for that rooster?"

Sadie nudged him with her elbow. "Says the man who said Freddie was, and I quote, 'a feathered anarchist who deserves to face the consequences of his actions.'"

"That was taken wildly out of context."

She snorted and grinned at him. The village's resident bestselling author looked rather out of his comfort zone here, away from his quiet study and piles of manuscripts. However, as Corbyn had grumbled upon their arrival, after receiving Fergus's text, Sadie had asked nicely with a sweet smile, and now he was carrying a cardboard box through the village at dusk.

Sadie tilted her head at him. "You said Edie should fry him up for dinner. Was that taken out of context, too?"

"That is called rhetoric."

Riley, who had been sniffing around aimlessly, suddenly froze and dropped his nose low to the ground. He started tracking a scent, the sound of his snuffling carrying down the lane.

Fergus followed, watching Riley's broad, shaggy back as the dog worked the edge of the street. If Maggie's rooster had any hope of returning alive, it would probably be thanks to the beast who had an inexplicable desire to be Freddie's best friend.

They followed the lane past the allotments. The hedges had grown thick, and Fergus could see the tangle of brush where Freddie had last been spotted.

"Explain something to me," Sadie began as she stepped carefully around a puddle. "How does one rooster create this much chaos?"

Corbyn answered before Fergus could.

“It’s quite simple, Reed. Freddie is not an innocent little pet. He’s a feathered psychopath who craves attention. So, what he’s doing,” he added, gesturing toward Riley, “is basically pest control.”

“Don’t let Maggie hear you say that,” she replied. “You’d be banned from the Stag for the rest of your life.”

Riley stopped abruptly. Hackles lifted, and he angled his head toward the rise ahead. Fergus froze beside him, and for a few seconds the only sound was the slow trickle of water down the hill. Then it came again, a triumphant crow.

Fergus tilted his head slightly. “Churchyard.”

“Excellent,” Corbyn replied. “Nothing says village ambiance like a chicken haunting the cemetery.”

Sadie laughed, and he smiled at her in return. The American had gone local faster than Fergus had imagined possible. She drank her tea properly, shouted at the television during football matches, and had somehow decided that rescuing Maggie’s miniature rooster was a matter of civic responsibility.

They crossed toward the old churchyard gate, and Riley paused at the lychgate, glancing back as if awaiting formal permission.

“Go on,” Corbyn murmured. “Find the little terrorist.”

The wolfhound bolted through, and wet leaves scattered as Riley made directly for the yew tree at the far edge of the churchyard. Fergus followed, boots sinking into the ancient turf. The graves here were old—many older than the pub itself—and most of the names were ones he recognized from old stories or faded plaques in the church hall.

Behind him, Sadie slowed to read a headstone.

“There’s something very Edgar Allan Poe about this,” she said.

“Don’t give the local birds ideas,” Corbyn responded. “Last thing we need is a raven.”

The yew tree loomed ahead, its drooping branches black against the darkening sky. Riley circled once, then dove headfirst into the hedge beneath it. There was a violent rustle, a burst of wings, and then Freddie exploded out of the undergrowth like a cork from a shaken bottle.

The rooster flapped wildly and shot upward, landing halfway up the yew tree. He dug his claws into the bark and crowed so loudly that it echoed. Riley backed out of the hedge, face full of twigs, and barked up at Freddie with clear satisfaction while Sadie clipped his leash to his collar.

Freddie, for his part, glared down at the dog coldly.

Fergus shook the grain tin, and the resulting rattle made the rooster's head snap around instantly.

"Right then," Fergus said. He scattered a thin line of grain at the base of the tree, and Freddie made a small hop further out on the branch. After another shake of the tin, the rooster dropped down to a lower branch, and then another. There was a snap, and he fell the rest of the way down, flapping his wings furiously and landing on the ground with all the grace of a sack of flour.

Fergus moved quickly, and in one smooth motion, he wrapped his hands around his wings before the rooster could launch himself skyward again. Freddie squawked and twisted indignantly.

"Box," Fergus said.

Corbyn was already there. He flipped the lid open while Fergus lowered the protesting bird inside. Freddie made one final outraged noise before settling into a deeply offended silence as Corbyn closed the lid.

"There," Corbyn said. "The prisoner is detained."

Fergus brushed feathers from his sleeve before taking the box.

"Let's get him home before Maggie tears the village apart," he told them, ignoring the squawk of betrayal from within the box.

He tucked it under his arm and started back up the lane, the others falling into step behind him like they'd done this a hundred times. When the residence behind the Stag came into view, Maggie was pacing on the porch. The moment she saw the little group, she stopped, eyes tracking from the box Fergus held to his face.

"You got him?" she asked.

"Betrayed by his best mate," Fergus answered. Behind him, Riley gave a triumphant bark.

Maggie took the porch steps two at a time, not even pretending to hide her relief.

"You're all heroes. Especially you, Riley," she said, scratching the wolfhound's giant head. "You lot get the first round on the house next time you stop by. No arguments."

Corbyn managed a nod and a crooked smile, and Sadie beamed, clearly satisfied that they had been successful. Maggie glanced over at Fergus, and the way her expression softened had the tips of his ears warming.

Fergus ignored it and kept hold of the box.

“Come on then,” she said, voice slightly unsteady as she turned toward the path behind the pub. “Let’s get His Majesty back to the coop before he files a formal complaint.”

Freddie chose that moment to begin filing said complaint, and Corbyn snorted. “Sounds like he’s demanding legal representation.”

Riley attempted to shove his nose toward the cardboard, but Sadie tugged him back, telling the dog, “Absolutely not. He’s still mad at you for turning him in.”

Maggie pushed open the door to the chicken enclosure while Fergus crouched and lowered the box to the ground. The moment he lifted the lid, Freddie shot out like a cannonball. The rooster strutted across the dirt, chest puffed out, clearly already forgetting he had spent the last five minutes imprisoned in a cardboard box. Freddie then fluffed his feathers, glared at Riley, who was watching intently, and stalked straight into the coop.

“Well,” Corbyn said dryly, “that was anticlimactic.”

Maggie rested her hands on her hips and let out a long breath. “You have no idea how much trouble that bird causes.”

“Probably not the last time we do this,” remarked Corbyn. “Sadie, we should get back.”

Sadie wrapped Maggie in a hug.

“Text me if he escapes again,” she said. “Riley will be more than happy to lead the search.”

Riley gave Fergus one last hopeful look before allowing himself to be steered toward where they had parked. He watched the three of them head around the corner, voices fading as night settled over the village. The gate clicked shut behind them, and the courtyard grew quiet.

Maggie pushed off the fence with a sigh.

“Well,” Maggie said, brushing dirt from her jeans, “that was quite a way to spend a Monday evening.” Suddenly her eyes grew wide. “Oh, no.”

Fergus frowned, instantly on edge. “What?”

“The heater brackets.”

“What about them?”

She groaned and dragged a hand over her face. “The supplier called Saturday and said they finally came in.” She pointed vaguely toward the pub and continued, “I completely forgot I was supposed to collect them this afternoon.”

“For the courtyard?” Fergus asked, and she nodded. “Mags, those won’t fit in your Mini.” She shot him a dirty look, and he spread his arms defensively. “I’ll come by in the morning.”

Maggie blinked. “Fergus...”

“I know, I know, you don’t want help. But that waste compactor you call a car isn’t big enough, and you need those brackets.”

“That’s true,” she conceded reluctantly, shoulders dropping.

“So, it’s done then. We’ll go get them in the morning, and Owen will help install them.”

Maggie stepped closer, crowding his space, and he startled. Before he could process what she was doing, she rose onto her toes and kissed him quickly. He registered the soft gentleness of her lips on his, and every nerve ending in his body sprang to life. His thoughts began spinning quickly, and on instinct, he started to lean forward.

Just as suddenly, it all came rushing back. Rowan… Leicester... the job offer… His hands had moved to her waist, and he was all too aware of the fact that she was warm and real, and here, in front of him. All he wanted to do was to pull her closer and kiss her back so, if only for a moment, he could abandon all thoughts of decisions, and consequences, and reasons that this was complicated.

“Mags…” he said roughly, forcing himself to step back.

Her eyes lifted to his, and for one suspended second, he saw uncertainty. Then she increased the distance between them further, and his hands fell back to his sides.

“Oh.”

“No,” Fergus said quickly. “No, it’s not… I mean…”

“It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. It wasn’t even close to fine, but Maggie had crossed her arms over herself, and her gaze drifted somewhere over his shoulder instead of meeting his eyes. Her walls were slamming back into place, and he had no idea how to stop it. He opened his mouth to explain, but the right words wouldn’t come.

Maggie broke the silence by clearing her throat. When she spoke, though, she was still avoiding looking at him.

“So... I suppose I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“Yeah, um... try not to lose any more livestock before then.”

Maggie blinked, and then, to his relief, chuckled. It was soft and slightly shaky, but it was real.

She turned and took a step toward the door, but over her shoulder she called back, “No promises.”

Fergus took a step toward the gate. Then he stopped, turned, and looked at her. “Night, Mags.”

She turned to face him, finally meeting his eyes. Her expression softened, and he felt a distinct ache in his chest. His hands clenched at his sides as he fought the urge to cross the small yard and kiss her again.

“Night, Ferg.”

When she turned and continued through the door, all he wanted to do was follow her, but Rowan’s voice echoed in his head. Just when he’d convinced himself to stop wanting something more, a real opportunity had come along.

Now Maggie, whom he had wanted from the moment he had walked into the Stag five years ago, was finally ready to let her guard down. This was why he’d kept his distance all this time, and he hated himself for pushing her away and making things complicated.

Now, though, he had to go home, because the next morning it would take everything in him to pretend things were normal… and he was not a man who knew how to pretend.

More importantly, nothing was normal anymore.

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November 4, 2025



-Maggie-

The next morning, Maggie stared at the list she had scribbled on the back of a beer mat, trying to determine if she missed anything. The list contained practical things like heater brackets, sausages, and lamp bulbs. It did not contain anything about feelings, and it certainly didn't include making impulsive decisions like kissing Fergus, or wishing he had kissed her back last night.

Which worked well until she found herself walking beside him into the store. Fergus had his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket; his stride shortened to match hers.

Neither of them had said much since leaving the Stag. It was a stark contrast to their usual lively exchanges, and it made her want to grind her teeth.

"You didn't have to come," Maggie said finally, mostly because the silence was starting to itch.

Fergus glanced at her, and then replied, “Were you planning to carry the brackets on your own? They weigh nearly as much as you do.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I would have managed.” When he looked at her and cocked his head as if he was assessing whether that could be true, she added, “Fine. I had no good way to carry or transport them. Happy?”

He smirked, one corner of his mouth tugging up, and the silence felt a little more natural after that.

The first stop was the hardware shop. Maggie handled payment while Fergus loaded the brackets into his pickup. She could see him through the window, easily lifting the awkward boxes. He hadn’t been lying about their size and weight; she would have struggled. He glanced at her after loading one, and she turned away, picking up some fasteners from a display, examining them for no good reason whatsoever.

Their next stop was Mrs. Webb’s bakery, mainly because Fergus insisted that a cup of coffee did not constitute “breakfast.” Maggie informed him she had no intention of eating anything, and he had shrugged before diving into his pastry. She lasted at most thirty seconds before swiping the other half from his plate, while smiling sweetly at him.

Fergus looked down at the remaining half in his hand.

“You’re impossible,” he chuckled, and took another bite.

“If you wanted the whole thing, you wouldn’t have broken it in half.”

He let out an amused sound, and for the first time that morning, she felt optimistic that everything would be okay. By the time they’d posted letters and collected sausages from the butcher, she was sure of it.

They turned down the lane behind the Stag with the bags between them, the courtyard gate coming into view ahead. Fergus parked the pick-up, reached for the door handle, then stopped.

“Mags.”

The seriousness in his voice surprised her, and she froze. For one brief, impossible second, Maggie thought he might say it. That he might put his feelings into words.

“Yes?” she asked, steeling herself.

Fergus looked at her and started to say something, but then his attention was caught by something behind her, and his expression hardened.

Maggie turned and looked out her window.

Jenny was crouched near the open gate between the courtyard and the back loading area. Her sleeves were shoved up to her elbows, and she was

scrubbing frantically at the flagstones. A bucket of murky pink water sat beside her, and her hair had come loose from its ponytail. Even from the pick-up, Maggie could see her face was blotchy from crying.

She opened the door, and Jenny looked up at her, surprised. Maggie had taken all of two steps when the young woman's face crumpled.

"I'm sorry," she said, the words coming out so quickly they ran together. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to get it cleaned before you saw it, but the paint won't come off…"

The lightness Maggie had been feeling vanished as if it had never existed.

"What paint?"

Jenny's mouth trembled, and Maggie stepped past her into the courtyard.

For a second, her mind didn't register the full extent of the damage, but it assembled itself bit by bit. The planters near the far wall had been knocked over, soil spilled across the flagstones leaving dark, wet streaks. The rosemary had been ripped loose, roots exposed and drying, and several strings of fairy lights had been pulled down from the hooks and left sagging.

On the newly repaired wall, someone had dragged something sharp across the surface, leaving ugly gouges in the fresh work, and red paint arced across it. It might have started as a word, but whoever had been writing it clearly gave up and settled on doing as much damage as possible.

Maggie just stared as her mind struggled to make sense of it.

"What happened?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain calm as she turned from the wreckage to face Jenny. She registered Fergus's heavy footsteps entering to stand beside her, and how they stopped the moment he took it all in.

Jenny stood there, the scrubbing brush hanging loosely from her hand, dripping pinkish water onto her jeans.

"It happened last night," she explained, still struggling to get words out. "I didn't know until this morning. I caught Callum sneaking in, but he left again before I could get the whole story."

"Callum," Maggie repeated.

Jenny flinched. "He and some older boys got in through the loading gate," she said. "I don't know if they meant to do all this or if it got out of hand, but…"

Her hand lifted toward the red paint, and Maggie looked at it again.

“Where is he now?” Fergus asked, and Maggie had no doubt what he intended to do.

Jenny shook her head. “I don’t know. He left before I could stop him. His phone’s off.”

Maggie watched as he turned briskly and started toward his pick-up. “I’ll unload and go find him.”

“I’ll come with you,” Maggie offered as she fell in behind him.

Fergus stopped short and turned, looking at her and then over at Jenny, who was looking down, hands raw and the brush still dripping onto her jeans. Maggie was sure she was about to burst into tears all over again.

“Stay here with Jenny,” Fergus told her, the anger fading for a moment.

She gave his arm a squeeze, knowing he was right. The damage in the courtyard wasn’t just physical.

“Find him, Fergus. Find him before those boys do.”

Fergus nodded, and his hand came up and brushed lightly against her cheek. She felt a wave of warmth flood through her at this small gesture. Then, he turned and walked through the gate, leaving only the quiet drip of Jenny’s scrubbing brush and the distant sounds of the village carrying on.

Maggie stared after him for a moment before turning back to Jenny. That was when she noted the dark circles under her eyes and the way Jenny held herself like she wanted to become invisible. Maggie had to swallow the lump that formed in her throat. Walking over, she put her arm around Jenny’s shoulders and guided her gently back toward the painted wall.

“Alright?” Maggie asked, and Jenny nodded slowly, managing a weak smile. “Good. Let’s get this sorted then.”

“It’s surface-level, mostly, I think,” Jenny explained as they knelt. “The scratches are deep in a few places, but nothing’s loose. I checked the stones as best I could, but I didn’t want to make it worse.”

Maggie nodded. “Good.”

“It’s not, though.” Jenny’s eyes filled again. “Maggie, I’m so sorry.”

“I know, Jenny.”

“He’s not a bad kid,” Jenny insisted, and Maggie sat back on her heels. As Jenny pressed on, the words tumbled over each other now that the first crack had opened. “I know everyone says that about their kid when they do something like this, but in this case, it’s true. He’s just...angry. And lonely. He wants to feel like he matters. Like he belongs. When those boys let him

tag along, he wants to prove to them that he deserves to be one of them, even if it means doing stupid, idiotic things he knows he shouldn't do."

Maggie looked across the courtyard. This had been building for weeks, months really, while Callum had been forced to grow up too fast.

"I know," Maggie said.

Jenny shook her head. "I keep thinking if I could just be enough, if I could be what he needs, then he'd stop doing things like this. But I don't know how to be his sister and the one who takes care of him and the person who tells him off and the person he runs to when everything goes wrong. I don't know how to be all those things."

Her voice broke, and Maggie reached over to rub the back of her shoulders gently.

Jenny wiped her face with her sleeve and continued, "I didn't want to tell you. I thought if I could clean it up before you saw it, then you wouldn't have to deal with one more thing." Maggie stilled as Jenny looked down at her raw hands. "You're already holding this whole place together on your own. The wedding, the roof, the inn, all of us. I didn't want Callum's behavior to create yet another problem you had to fix."

Maggie's first instinct was to tell Jenny it was fine, that she would take care of it, because that was what she always did. But Jenny wasn't suggesting that Maggie couldn't handle it—she was just scared for Callum, and herself, and the job that kept their lives steady. For the Stag, too, because Maggie could now see how much Jenny cared about this place, and not just because it was her job. The Stag mattered to her, and her brother had damaged it, and the shame was eating Jenny alive.

Maggie reached out and took the brush from Jenny's hand.

"It is exhausting, you're right about that," Maggie said, the words leaving her before she had fully decided to say them, and Jenny looked up. Maggie stared at the brush in her hands, bristles stained pink from the paint. "I'm going to tell you something, just between us, right? It only seems like I know what I'm doing half the time." Maggie picked up a broken sprig of rosemary off the ground, staring at it as her hands rested in her lap. "I've gotten quite good at pretending."

Jenny gave a wet, disbelieving laugh. "I've never looked at you and thought you were pretending."

"I've had years of practice." Maggie's mouth curved faintly, and they fell silent for a moment. The courtyard walls rose around them, patched and

scarred, and somewhere beyond the gate, Fergus was looking for Callum. Maggie wondered if the boy was hiding by the pitch, or under the old railway bridge, or somewhere painfully obvious, but too frightened and proud to come home.

“I’m not good at pretending,” Jenny told her. “Callum would see right through me.” She looked up at Maggie, eyes shining. “I am supposed to be enough for him, Maggie. But I’m not. I don’t know how.”

“Who sold you that bill of goods?” Maggie blurted out, immediately regretting it when Jenny flinched. Softening her tone, she said, “You’re very brave, Jenny, but real courage is admitting you can’t do it alone and letting the people who care about you stand beside you.”

It wasn’t lost on her that Fergus had been trying to tell her the same thing in his own, quiet way. Looking at Jenny, it was like holding up a mirror.

Maggie slowly stood and held out a hand to Jenny. She stared at it for a beat, then took it, and Maggie pulled her up. Standing, the damage looked worse as the full scope of it spread around them: paint, mud, scratches, broken pots, the drooping string of lights…

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Maggie said, “we’re going to clean what we can. Not with that water, because at this point, I think you’re mostly creating pink soup.” Jenny gave a watery snort. “I’ll get proper solvent from the shed. If that doesn’t work, we’ll sand and re-prime the wall.”

“I’ll pay for it,” Jenny said quickly.

“No, you won’t.”

“Maggie…”

“No,” Maggie repeated firmly. “Callum will work it off. He needs to learn accountability—you break something, you fix it. Time, money, trust… doesn’t matter. He needs to make it right.”

Jenny nodded, swallowing hard.

“And those older boys?” Maggie continued, and she saw Jenny’s face tighten, sure it was fear that those boys might retaliate. “If Fergus finds names, their parents will be hearing from me. If they won’t act, I’ll speak to the school. And as a last resort, I’ll speak to Constable Jones.” Maggie looked toward the red paint. “I have no interest in making this worse for Callum, but I’m not letting a pack of bored lads use my courtyard as target practice.”

Jenny wiped her cheeks. “He’ll think we all hate him.”

Maggie softened her voice, wrapping an arm around Jenny's shoulders. "We're angry and disappointed. We'll make sure he understands the difference."

The courtyard settled around them again, and a breeze moved through the gate, shifting the fallen fairy lights against the stone with a faint scrape. Maggie glanced toward the kitchen door, already making a mental list: solvent, gloves, primer…

Then Jenny bent to pick up the cracked pot, and Maggie noticed how badly her hands were trembling.

"Go inside," Maggie said.

Jenny looked up. "What?"

"Wash your hands. Make tea. Strong tea. Then come back with gloves before you lose the skin off your fingers."

"I can keep cleaning."

"I know, but that's not the point. Go."

Jenny hesitated, and Maggie raised an eyebrow. Finally, Jenny nodded and moved toward the kitchen door. At the threshold, she stopped.

"Maggie?"

"Mmm?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Your brother is about to discover exactly how many flagstones there are in this courtyard."

Jenny's laugh was small, but real; then she disappeared inside, and Maggie stood alone for a moment.

Or almost alone.

The hens muttered from the other side of the wall, and Freddie crowed like a victorious general, entirely too pleased with being a part of yesterday's chaos.

She picked up the fallen string of lights and wound it carefully around her hand. Fergus would return with Callum, and then there would be another conversation to try to untangle the mess that had been made.

Somehow, though, the Stag felt different than it had an hour ago. For the first time, the home she had fought so hard to build wasn't just hers. Jenny had tried to protect it. Fergus had gone after Callum to get the boy to make things right. Owen would come after lunch and grumble at the gate latch, but he would still fix it without giving it a second thought. And Mr. Davies would still be at the bar with questionable facts and wild theories.

It had taken thirteen years, but she had finally realized it wasn’t just her burden to carry.

The people who came through its doors, day in and day out, they were trying to shoulder it too.

Clumsily, imperfectly, and sometimes breaking things in the process.

But they were trying, and maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

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November 4, 2025



-Fergus-

It took everything in Fergus's power not to look back as he left the courtyard and quickly unloaded the pickup. Time was not on his side, and he needed to find Callum before anyone else did.

The peaceful place he had found with Maggie during the morning errands —the bakery, Maggie stealing half his pastry, the banter—all now felt like some other reality.

There was last night, though, and that still felt very real.

He forced the memory from his mind as he checked the narrow space between the Stag's side wall and the neighboring cottage. Teenagers sometimes wedged themselves in there to smoke and pretend no one could smell it from three streets away. It was empty aside from a crushed energy drink can in the gutter.

He dismissed the possibility that Callum had gone home immediately. Home meant possibly facing Jenny, and Fergus didn't think he would dare

to do that. Not yet, anyway. A boy like Callum could handle her yelling at him—he could always push back on that, but he had to know Jenny was just as likely to break down. Even someone as thick as Callum wouldn't have a defense for her tears.

He stopped beneath the bridge and listened. Pigeons muttered somewhere above him, and the place still had the cold, echoing feel he remembered from when he'd hidden there as a boy. That had been back when he'd been old enough to know better but lacked the maturity to realize disappearing never solved anything.

Callum wasn't there, but looking toward the path beyond the bridge, he had a good idea where he might be. The pitch lay at the end of it, its chewed-up green bordered by hedges on three sides and the low aluminum bleachers on the fourth. At first glance, it was empty, but then white trainers moved beneath the bleachers.

Callum had wedged himself into the narrow space under the first row with his knees drawn up and hood pulled low. He looked like he was trying to make himself small enough that shame might pass over him.

Instead of trying to drag the boy out, Fergus crossed the wet grass slowly and lowered himself onto the ground a few feet away, leaning back against the end support of the bleachers. His knee complained immediately, along with his hip and his shoulder.

"Christ," he muttered, and couldn't help thinking getting older was undignified rubbish.

Under the bleachers, Callum went very still, and Fergus stretched his legs out and said nothing. The silence lasted almost a full minute before the boy couldn't stand it any longer.

"Piss off."

The words were muffled by his hood and stripped of any real force.

"No."

There was a pause and then, "So give me your stupid adult speech, then piss off." Fergus remained silent, and eventually Callum asked, "Jenny send you?"

"No."

"Maggie?"

"Mm-mm."

"Why are you here, then?" Callum's tone was sharp and impatient, and Fergus leaned his head back against the metal support beam.

“I like it here. Good place to think.”

Callum made a sound that might have been a laugh if it hadn’t been so bitter. Fergus waited again, knowing the silence would be worse than any speech he could muster up.

“I didn’t do the paint,” Callum blurted out suddenly.

“Does that matter?”

“It should! I didn’t know they were going to do that. Tyler had it in his bag. I didn’t even see it until he started spraying.”

“Tyler,” Fergus repeated, filing the name away.

Callum turned white and looked away as the pieces began to fall into place. Tyler was the name of Dean Hollis’s younger brother. This wasn’t just some lads causing trouble for fun. This was retaliation for what happened on Halloween.

“Who else?” Fergus asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No!” The boy’s voice sharpened, anger rushing in to cover the crack beneath it. “But even if it did, if I told you, they’d know it was me.”

“They threatened you, then?”

“Not exactly.” His voice dropped back to a mutter. “They just said if anyone went crying about it, they’d know who.”

“Tyler picked the Stag because of what happened with Dean?”

There was another silence, and that was answer enough.

Callum’s voice came smaller when he finally spoke. “He said Maggie got Dean barred. Said she made him look pathetic in front of everyone.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Well, Tyler said it wasn’t fair. That Maggie thinks she can do whatever she wants because everyone likes her. They said it was just meant to scare her,” Callum muttered. “Mess up the planters and lights... make her too afraid to do that again.”

“And then they pulled out the paint.”

“Yeah.”

“Right. But you didn’t answer my question. What do *you* think?" Fergus asked again. He kept his voice calm, giving Callum the space to work things out for himself.

“I know what you want me to say. You want to hear that I think Dean made himself look pathetic and Tyler’s just too much of a coward to blame

the right person, right?" Callum glared at Fergus from under his hood, eyes appearing red-rimmed and furious. "Well, you don't know them. You don't know anything. You think because you coach the team and everyone listens to you, you know everything. You don't know what they're like because you are nothing like them."

"I was," Fergus said quietly. "Once."

Callum visibly startled for a beat but recovered quickly. "Well, you were never like me, then," he scoffed.

"Have you not wondered, even once, how I figured you were here?" That got silence. "These weren't always here," Fergus said, gesturing at the bleachers. "Council didn't think we deserved proper seating. But you can still get away from everyone out here on an old bench, and I often did." Callum said nothing, and Fergus pressed on, keeping his eyes on the pitch. "Especially after my dad passed. I did a lot of stupid things and didn't know how to make it right, so I'd come here. Sit where no one could see me and wait until I felt less like punching something."

"Did it work?" Callum asked eventually.

"Usually."

"What about the other times?"

"I punched something."

A tiny sound came from beneath the bleachers. It wasn't quite a laugh, but it was close enough, and they both lapsed into silence.

Eventually, Callum said, "I didn't mean for it to get that bad."

"I know." Fergus looked across the try line, where mud pooled in the low patches. "You didn't mean for it to happen. You didn't hold the paint. You didn't plan the damage." Callum's breathing changed, and he pressed on, "But you went with them. You knew how to get into the courtyard while the pub was closed. You helped them wreck things, and you were too afraid to lift a finger to stop them when it went too far."

He let that stand for a moment before he continued, "But then you did something even more cowardly. You went home and said nothing until Jenny found out. And now she—not you—is in tears scrubbing paint off Maggie's walls, feeling humiliated and alone." Callum flinched like he had been struck, and Fergus drove the point home. "But it's okay, because you didn't 'mean for it to happen.'"

Callum sniffed and brushed at an eye, his voice harsh when he said, "You're being cruel."

“I’m telling you how it is. Man to man.”

Callum had no response for that.

“Jenny’s going to hate me,” he said finally, “and she should.”

“She won’t.”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know her! She’s always trying to fix everything, and I keep making it worse. She’ll look at me like…”

He stopped, and Fergus did his best to gentle his tone as he prompted, “Like what?”

“Like she wishes I wasn’t there.”

Fergus turned his head then. Callum had pushed the hood back just enough for Fergus to see half his face. He took in the blotchy cheeks and wet eyes, and the way the boy’s jaw was clenched hard enough that it had to hurt. He looked young… so painfully young.

“She ever look at you that way before? Even once?” Callum looked down at the ground, giving Fergus his answer. “Jenny loves you. She’s trying to be a parent and a sister and hold it all together for you.”

“She shouldn’t have to. It’s not fair to her.”

“That’s the first smart thing you’ve said. Gives me hope for you,” Fergus said. “But you’re right. It’s not fair. She shouldn’t have to chase after you. She shouldn’t have to clean up your mess, and she shouldn’t have to wonder if you’re safe because you won’t answer your phone.”

The boy looked away first.

“I hate it when she cries,” Callum muttered.

“So stop making her cry.” Callum went still, and his face closed off so fast it was like watching a door slam. Fergus added quickly, “Jenny’s carrying more than is fair. Not your fault, so don’t put that on yourself. But you have a choice, lad. Make her life easier or make it harder. That *is* on you.”

Callum drew his knees tighter to his chest, the anger leaving him.

“Tyler and Mason told me I was some pathetic, useless kid, always hanging around the pub.” His voice roughened. “Said if I wanted to be one of them, I had to stop acting like I was scared of Maggie or anything else.”

Fergus’s expression hardened at the mention of Maggie, but still he kept his voice calm. “Are you?”

“No.” Callum stared at the mud between his trainers. “Well, not of Maggie, anyway.”

“Well, that makes one of us. She scares me to death sometimes.”

Callum couldn’t suppress a small laugh, and Fergus allowed himself a brief smile before going back to listening as Callum continued.

“I wanted them to change their minds about me,” he muttered, dragging one trainer through the mud, carving a dark line into the grass. “They said we were just going to mess about. The pub was shut. No one would be there. Tyler knew the gate latch by the kitchen was rubbish, and I thought we’d just mess with Maggie a bit.

“Then Tyler kicked the planter over, and Mason started throwing things everywhere. They were laughing, so I laughed too because…” His throat worked. “I didn’t know what else to do. Then Tyler pulled out the paint.”

“And you froze.”

Callum’s shoulders lifted. “Yeah.”

“What’s done is done. But you know what you have to do.”

Callum shrank back. “I know.” He looked up, and his lips quivered. “I know, alright? It’s not that easy. Jenny will be upset. Maggie… the way she’ll look at me…”

“I know. She’ll be furious. And she should be. The damage you all did is going to cost money and time she doesn’t have, with an expensive wedding right around the corner.”

Callum’s face flushed. “I know. You don’t have to keep rubbing my nose in it!”

“So, suck it up and do the work. Start with ‘I’m sorry’ and mean it.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Yes, you do.” Fergus paused. “And then you tell her who was with you.”

The boy shook his head hard. “No chance.”

“Callum.”

“They’ll kill me.”

Fergus snorted before he could stop himself. “Tyler and Mason?”

Callum’s head snapped up, eyes bright and furious. “You think it’s funny?”

“Shouldn’t have laughed, but they’re bigger in your head than they are in real life. I get that you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared of them.”

“Hm.”

“I’m not.”

“Alright.”

The boy’s mouth twisted, but the argument died before it reached his tongue.

After a moment, he said, “Mason said he would tell everyone I was the one who wanted to do it. Said they would believe him because I’m always hanging round the Stag and Jenny works there and I knew the gate and that no one would be there.”

Fergus closed his eyes for one beat. The older boys had found a lonely kid with a reason to be angry and made him useful by being easy to blame.

“Is Jenny going to lose her job because of me?” Callum asked finally.

“No.”

“What about me? Will Maggie ban me from the pub?”

“Can’t say for sure, but I doubt it,” Fergus told him. “Probably depends on what you do next. Maggie doesn’t give up on people easily.” Callum looked skeptical, and he added, “She gave me a job, didn’t she?”

“Well, you’re different.”

“Not as much as you think.”

“I mean, she finds you useful.”

Fergus flinched and hoped Callum didn’t notice.

He looked out over the pitch. Memories flashed into his mind, unbidden. A locker room that smelled of liniment and sweat. A coach’s hand on his shoulder. Then a hospital room, and a physio table… the silence while he waited for calls to come.

Callum looked down. “I don’t think anyone wants me around unless I’m useful.”

Fergus felt the words land somewhere old and buried, because there was that word again. Useful.

“You can’t earn your place by being whatever someone else wants.”

Callum seemed to consider that for a moment, and then in a quiet voice asked, “I’m going to get kicked off the team, aren’t I?”

Fergus looked at him properly then. Not at the anger he wore like armor, but at the boy beneath it, brittle and scared and still hoping someone might hand him a rulebook for belonging when life seemed to take everything from you.

“No,” Fergus replied. “But understand this: you can’t hide on a rugby field, but it can help you learn that what you do affects the people around you. So, stop hiding.”

He pushed slowly to his feet, and his knee popped loudly. Callum glanced at it, and Fergus grimaced. “Not a word.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You thought it.”

The boy’s mouth twitched, and Fergus brushed damp grass from the back of his jeans, which did nothing to help. Then he waited as Callum worked up the courage to emerge from his hiding place.

He wouldn’t drag him. That would ruin everything.

After a long moment, Callum crawled out from under the bleachers, all elbows and knees, hoodie riding up, one trainer slipping in the mud. He caught himself with one hand and swore under his breath. Finally, he stood with his arms crossed tight over his chest, and head bowed.

Fergus started walking, making sure to match his strides to Callum’s. They crossed the pitch in silence, boots pressing into soft ground. Callum kept his arms crossed for the first twenty yards. Then he uncrossed them and shoved his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie, his head down against the wind.

At the gate, his stride faltered.

From there, the village was visible beyond the hedgerow, and Callum stared in the direction of the Stag as if it were miles away instead of a short walk down the lane. Fergus stopped beside him.

“I don’t know what to say,” Callum whispered.

Fergus looked in the general direction of the pub. He pictured Maggie standing in the courtyard, hurt and furious and still choosing mercy before the boy had earned it, and Jenny’s hands trembling as she tried to clean up her brother’s mess.

“You start with the truth,” Fergus said.

Callum swallowed. “And if the truth’s ugly?”

“Then let it be. Just be honest.”

The boy nodded once, and they passed through the gate onto the lane.

The Stag’s chimney came into view over the roofs, a thin line of smoke threading into the gray sky. Callum slowed again, and Fergus matched him. Every step from there took effort. Fergus could feel the shame pouring off him, but they kept walking.

When they made it to the back lane, the courtyard gate stood open, and Callum froze. Through the gap, Fergus could see some of the damage. Then, voices drifted out. First Maggie’s, in the soft, steady tone she used

when she was trying to keep her emotions under control. It was followed by Jenny's, which was shakier and still sounded fragile.

Callum's face went pale. "I don't think I can do this."

"You can," he said. "Tell it like it is. You won't be alone. I'll be right behind you."

Before they could take the final steps, Jenny appeared in the opening. Her hair was still loose from its ponytail, and her hands were wrapped around a mug, still red from scrubbing despite the gloves tucked under one arm.

When she saw Callum, her whole face changed. First to relief, then to hurt and anger.

"Callum," she said.

Fergus watched the boy's shoulders fold inward as he took a small step back.

Maggie appeared behind Jenny a second later, her face like stone. Her gaze moved over Callum, then to Fergus, and for half a heartbeat their eyes met. He saw her shoulders ease by the smallest amount.

Callum stood at the threshold of the courtyard, hands buried in his hoodie pocket, face pale and blotchy, every scrap of bravado gone. He looked at Jenny first and then at Maggie. His mouth opened, but nothing came out. The boy swallowed hard, then dragged his gaze to the damaged wall behind them.

"I'm sorry," he managed weakly.

Jenny pressed a hand over her mouth, eyes shining again. Callum's face crumpled, but still, he kept standing. Maggie didn't move or react.

"I was there," he said, voice shaking now. "I knocked over some of the planters, but I didn't do the paint… I didn't stop them, though." He took a shuddering breath that almost sounded like it hurt before adding, "I should have."

The courtyard went very still, and Maggie's tone had an icy edge when she replied, "Yes. You should have." Callum didn't meet her eyes and kept his gaze fixed on the ground. "I'm not going to lie to you, Callum. I'm angry." Then, her voice softened ever so slightly. "But more than that, I'm disappointed and hurt that you were involved. That's not going to go away anytime soon."

Jenny's face fell, and she looked like she might start crying again at any moment.

Maggie glanced at her, then looked at Callum and took a step toward him. He didn't move but kept staring intently at the ground. She reached out and cupped her hand under his chin and lifted it slowly, so he had to meet her eyes. She looked at him earnestly and continued. "Still, you came back and faced it, and that's the right first step. Now, before we talk about consequences, I need you to tell me who was with you."

His face tightened, and Fergus watched the fear cross it. Maggie saw it too—her expression sharpened, and he knew it wasn't meant for Callum.

He whispered, "Tyler and Mason."

"Right," Maggie said. "Then we'll be having a few conversations today." Callum looked like he might be sick. "But first," she pressed on, "you're going to wash your hands, have some tea, and then you're going to start with the soil in the cracks between the stones. Because next time it rains, I'd rather not have everyone's boots get stuck in the mud. Mr. Davies is already here enough."

Callum blinked, and Jenny's expression matched his in that way only siblings could manage. Fergus had to look down to hide the small smile pulling at his mouth.

Maggie raised an eyebrow at the boy and added, "Unless you'd prefer scrubbing the guest room toilets?"

Callum wiped at his face with his sleeve, cheeks still blotchy, but the tension was no longer vibrating through his body.

"No," he muttered. "I'll do it."

"Good." Maggie held his gaze for a long moment. "We are angry, Callum, but we're giving you a second chance."

The boy's face twisted, and Fergus could see how much he resembled Jenny as he fought to hide his emotions. He nodded, quick and jerky, and looked away before anyone could see too much. Jenny stepped forward then, wrapping Callum in a hug. He resisted for half a second, body stiff, but then folded into her.

Fergus looked away, giving the siblings a moment. Maggie went to his side and gave him a gentle squeeze on the arm.

"Thank you," she said with a grateful smile.

Fergus kept his gaze on the courtyard. "He came back on his own feet."

"Because you found him."

"Aye."

"And because you knew where to look."

He glanced at her then. Her eyes were tired, but beneath all of it there was something else. Something that wasn’t there until today. Something meant just for him.

“Well,” she said, drawing a breath and turning her attention back to the pub, “if we’re all done having feelings before lunch, there’s a courtyard to rescue.”

Fergus huffed. “There she is.”

She cut him a sideways look. “Careful, Merrick. You’re dangerously close to disciplinary action.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Her eyebrow lifted, and he looked back toward the damaged wall, then to the siblings who were heading inside, and decided, not for the first time, that Great Missenden had a talent for turning disaster into a group activity.

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November 4, 2025



-Maggie-

The last customers finally rolled themselves out sometime after eleven, and when the latch clicked shut behind them, the only remaining sound was the ticking of an antique clock on the mantel. Chairs were perched upside down on tables, and empty pint glasses gathered along the bar. The fire, which had kept the chill from the pub, had burned down to stubborn embers.

Maggie moved through the bar, tidying as she went. Bottle caps went into the bin, coasters back into their holders, and the lanterns along the windows flicked off one by one until only the low glow from behind the bar remained. Her footsteps seemed to echo as she made her way to the office.

The little room off the kitchen was barely larger than a cupboard, but it was hers. Receipts were tucked into mugs. A corkboard overflowed with delivery notes, booking reminders, and scribbled warnings about repairs she couldn’t afford to forget. Next to her laptop, as usual, sat a half-finished cup of tea that had gone cold hours ago.

She picked it up and almost took a sip anyway, but she set it back down and pushed it away.

Maggie dropped into the chair and reluctantly opened the sales report on her laptop, its cold white glow lighting up her face in the dim office. She blinked and turned the brightness down, then tried to extract a pattern from the numbers, spotting trends, anticipating needs. The harder she tried, the more she found her thoughts wandering back to Fergus, who was likely still moving casks in the cellar before calling it a night. The way he walked beside her through the village that morning, bags in hand, shortening his stride to match hers. Then there was the way his hand had brushed her cheek with such surprising gentleness.

Maggie clicked the trackpad loudly in frustration.

For years, the success or failure had been her responsibility. Every decision, every crisis, every long night that ended in this office with her wondering how she'd keep the place afloat another month. She was used to it being that way. Which was exactly why today felt so foreign.

Across the hallway, she heard movement—boots on wood, the low thud of a crate being set down near the steps.

Maggie sighed and gave up on the sales report. Closing the laptop, she leaned forward, resting her head briefly in her hands. Suddenly, a soft knock sounded on the doorframe, and Maggie straightened automatically, smoothing her hair back as if that would somehow hide the mess of her thoughts.

"Come in," she called.

Fergus ducked his head through the doorway first, then the rest of him followed, filling the little office without seeming to mean to. He'd changed out of his work shirt and into a plain black T-shirt, sleeves pushed high enough to show the faint bruises and scrapes that came with hauling crates and wrestling with cellar doors.

In one hand he held two glasses. In the other was a bottle with no label beyond a strip of masking tape on which Maggie had written: DO NOT SERVE TO LOCALS.

"That whisky was in a box marked 'Save for Christmas.'"

Fergus glanced at the bottle, then back at her. "Fine print underneath said 'or when Maggie needs it.'"

"You made that up!"

He spread his arms as if to say "Who, me?" and winked at her.

She laughed, trying to ignore the warmth suddenly running through her, and motioned for him to sit. He set the glasses down carefully, nudging aside a stack of receipts and a highlighter that needed replacing.

“I didn’t think you’d be done yet,” he said gently. “Thought you might want one.”

He unscrewed the cap and poured without ceremony. The whisky caught the yellow light from her desk lamp, and Maggie studied him over the rim of her laptop screen.

“You trying to get me drunk, Merrick?” she asked.

He handed her one of the glasses. “I’m not that stupid.”

“No?”

He leaned one shoulder against the doorframe rather than taking the other chair, the fact that he always seemed to give her room not going unnoticed.

“You’d get a good deal louder, and your jokes would be less funny.”

She glared at him as she picked up the glass. “For the record, that is slander.”

She took a sip, feeling the tingle against her lips and the way it burned her throat as it went down. She could feel its heat almost immediately.

He raised his glass to her and replied, “I’m willing to risk it.”

He took a sip and savored it, and for the next minute or two, they only talked about safe things. Like the mop bucket Fergus had left for morning, and Owen’s assessment of the gate latch. Eventually, though, the conversation returned to the events of the day.

“Callum stayed until Jenny made him go home,” Fergus said, swirling the whisky idly, pondering it.

“He looked terrified when he came back,” Maggie replied, leaning back in her chair.

“He was.”

“Jenny said you knew right where to find him.”

“I guessed, is all.”

“Fergus.”

He looked up, his expression uncharacteristically hesitant as he explained, “I used to hide there... as a kid. Not under the bleachers. They weren’t there then.”

Maybe it was the whisky kicking in, but Fergus looked unusually vulnerable when he said that, and she decided against pressing him.

“Good guess, then.”

He nodded and took another sip.

It was easy after that.

Too easy.

Maggie could feel herself relaxing despite all good sense, the tight band between her shoulders loosening one notch at a time. That was the dangerous thing about Fergus. He made it all feel easy.

“You going to tell me what’s keeping you in here?” he asked suddenly.

Maggie stared at him. There was no judgment in the question, no pressure, just that maddening steadiness of his. It was the same tone he used when asking if she wanted a heavy box lifted or if she’d remembered to eat something other than peanuts and stale crisps during a busy shift. She could have lied. In fact, she usually did, but everything felt too different tonight.

“Not if you’re going to stand there all night—makes me tired just looking at you. Go on, sit down.” She reached with her foot under her desk and pushed back the opposite chair.

He looked down at it for a moment, then shrugged, and pulled it the rest of the way out and sat down.

“Numbers,” she said at last. “Or pretending to do numbers.”

His eyes flicked to the laptop, then back to her face. “That bad?”

“Worse. They’re fine. I’m the problem.”

He stared at her in disbelief. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Most days she’d have a smart comeback for that, but not tonight.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she admitted, then took another drink.

The honesty of it hung in the air between them, and Fergus said nothing. He just waited, and maybe it was the drink, or maybe she was too worn out to keep pretending. Either way, she plunged on.

“When I left here, I thought my life was finally going to start. I would get the right part and meet the right people. I waited tables, tended bar, worked the box office... Whatever made ends meet.” She laughed sadly. “All the while, I told myself I was one audition away from making it.”

She paused, the weight of that life pressing in. She had been so sure back then, and the failure still felt like a physical ache.

Fergus must’ve sensed it. His voice was soft when he said, “You were good at it.”

“At the time I thought I was, too,” she replied, without a trace of conceit in her voice. “Well, maybe not famous-good, or dazzling, but good enough.

People kept saying things like ‘almost there’ or ‘maybe next time’ or even ‘you are great, just not for this part.’”

Despite the whisky, a knot of that old humiliation had her wanting to curl up and hide from the world. It had never been about the failure, though. It was how often she had heard “almost” and the endless succession of shattered hopes.

“And then I found someone.” She paused for a moment, weighing her words before adding, “He wasn’t a bad person, not really. That’s the worst of it. He was kind… and ambitious and charming. So, when he asked, I said yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. We had made a deal…” She still remembered how good it had all sounded in the beginning. Shaking her head, she continued, “I’d find a steady job and cover the bills while he finished school. Then, once he was done, once he had his footing, I could start auditioning and try again.”

The radiator gave a small, complaining click as it kicked on.

“I trusted him,” she said, finally looking up. He was watching her patiently, and she took another hurried sip of her drink before continuing. “He got a dream job offer right after graduation. The only catch was it wasn’t in London. And just like that, the deal changed.”

She set the glass down on the desk with a thunk, but Fergus still said nothing.

“I tried to be happy for him, but my dreams took a back seat for him for years. Just when it was supposed to be my turn, he left. He tried to rationalize it, saying how hard long-distance relationships were, and maybe my dreams weren’t realistic anyway. At the end of the day, he didn’t see me as his wife… I was the thing standing between him and the life he wanted.

“So now you know why I get a bit twitchy about having to depend on people to be there for me.” She looked down at her hands, not daring to meet his eyes after sharing all of that.

Fergus set his empty glass down carefully on the edge of the desk, and when he spoke, she didn’t miss the roughness in his voice.

“Maggie.” The pause after he said her name had her looking up to meet his gaze. “I’m not him.”

“No,” she said, almost too quietly to hear, hating that her eyes were stinging. “You’re not.”

“Rugby ended, and I came back here thinking I had maybe one useful thing left in me,” he said. “Lift heavy things. Fix what breaks.” A faint smile tugged at his mouth, humorless and brief. “Not much of a life plan… but you gave me this place. A place where I still mattered. With people who needed me and counted on me. You did that.”

That, more than anything, nearly undid her, and she looked down before he could see too much.

“You make it sound very noble.”

“Maybe, but it’s true.”

She let that settle. The old defenses were still there, but tired now and paper-thin in places. They were no match for the honesty of the man sitting across from her, looking at her like his wanting her didn’t come with conditions.

“If I say thank you,” she muttered, “you’ll get weird about it.”

His mouth tipped at one corner. “Most likely.”

“Good. Then I won’t.”

She reached for the bottle and poured another splash into each glass. Her hand brushed his when she handed the glass back to him.

Fergus raised it but seemed to change his mind, and he set the glass down slowly on the table. Instead, he took her free hand in his, green eyes never wavering when he said, “You got a long list of reasons not to let anyone in. But have you even once made a list of reasons why you should?”

The question landed in a place she had no easy answer for. Looking at Fergus, though, she knew she didn’t need something tidy. She needed real.

“Maybe I could,” she admitted slowly. “With you, I keep forgetting to brace.”

He didn’t smile this time, but his voice was low when he said, “Then don’t.”

Maggie set her glass down with a soft clink and rose from the chair, but she didn’t let go of his hand. The office suddenly seemed absurdly small, and Fergus guided her gently as she came around the desk. She stopped in front of him, just barely between his knees, and was close enough that the scent of him was intoxicating.

“If I’m doing this,” she said, her voice lower than she intended, “don’t do what you did before.”

“What did I do?” he asked, looking truly confused.

Maggie watched him, taking in the restraint written through every line of him. The patience. The care. The way he never pushed, never demanded, never made her feel cornered. And somehow that made it harder, because there was nowhere left to hide.

“You pulled back,” she told him, and he winced. She pressed on, “When we kissed. You kissed me back, but then you stopped, and I did what I always do. I got in my head.”

“Maggie…”

“I thought I’d read it wrong,” she said, words coming faster now. “That I’d pushed too far and maybe I wanted something you didn’t.”

The silence stretched between them, and finally he replied, “I... I hesitated. I did want to keep kissing you, but in that moment, it stopped feeling simple.”

Maggie frowned, trying desperately to ignore the heat climbing up her cheeks. “I don’t understand.”

“Aye. I know... I’m not explaining this well.”

“Try again. I’ll wait,” she told him as the room started to swim.

“When you kissed me,” he said quietly, “everything changed.”

“And that spooked you?”

“Aye, it did.”

The honesty of it hit harder than she expected because it wasn’t rejection or regret, but something she never considered him capable of. Fear.

“I panicked,” he said, voice rougher now. “Then you panicked.”

“Of course I panicked, you idiot.” She allowed a smile to cross her face, breaking the tension.

A corner of his mouth twitched, and a sound like a chuckle escaped him as he said, “Aye.”

She shook her head, feeling something between disbelief and exasperation. “This is ridiculous.”

“Probably.”

For a second, neither of them moved.

Then she said, “We’re adults, Fergus.” He went still, and her pulse hammered, but she held his gaze. “This doesn’t have to be some grand declaration.” His eyes searched hers. She brought her free hand up, running her fingers along his jaw, and added, “We don’t need to solve everything tonight. We don’t need to map out the next six months or define whatever this is before it starts.”

His expression softened, and he leaned into her touch, his beard tickling her fingertips. His voice dropped low when he said, “Maggie…”

“No.” She shook her head once. “You were right about me. I never made myself make a list of reasons why I should let anyone in.” She stepped closer, close enough now that the space between them barely existed, and her hand moved to rest under his chin so he would hold her gaze. “But there’s at least one, and he’s right in front of me.”

His breath hitched, and his expression grew tender. Before she could overthink it, she brushed her lips over his. She felt his hand come to rest on her waist, and this time he pulled her closer.

“I know this is messy,” she told him, lips brushing against his as she spoke. “And I know this could be a complete disaster.”

A corner of his mouth twitched. “That’s reassuring.”

“But right now,” she said quietly, fingers finding their way to the hair at the nape of his neck, “I know exactly what I want.”

“You sure?” he asked, voice rough as his fingers curled into the back of her jumper.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

She kissed him again, more deeply this time. For half a second, he didn’t move, and then something in him buckled. His hand slid to her back, pulling her flush against him, and he kissed her back. This time there was no hesitation, and her knees nearly buckled when his tongue brushed against her lips.

Maggie curled her fingers into his shirt with both hands, needing something solid to anchor herself to. When they finally broke apart, both of them gasping for breath, she stayed close enough to feel the rise and fall of his chest against her own, and she dropped her forehead to rest against his.

“We don’t have to figure everything out tonight?” he asked one more time, voice raspy.

She let out a breath that might have been a laugh.

“I’m really not in the mood for emotional paperwork.”

A real laugh escaped him then, low and warm, and she felt the vibration everywhere they touched. “That’s the Maggie I’ve been hoping to see.”

Something about the words made her chest tighten, and she kissed him again before she could say something that would ruin the moment.

Fergus’s hand slid into her hair, keeping her flush against him, and Maggie felt years of tension crack open. She didn’t know when her arms

had come to rest on his shoulders, only that they were there now, and there wasn't an inch of space between them.

He stood, arms wrapping around her so she wouldn't lose her balance. His lips brushed the corner of her mouth, then her cheek, and then the place just below her ear that made her knees feel dangerously unreliable.

"Maggie…"

There was a question in his voice, and she drew back just enough to look at him.

"Stay with me," she said.

The words came out breathless, but steady. His gaze searched hers, careful and quiet and so painfully Fergus it took her breath away.

"You sure?" he asked again.

Maggie reached up, brushing her fingers along his jaw again.

"Aye," she said softly, borrowing his word. "I'm sure."

For the first time that night, his face seemed to relax. Taking his hand in hers, finally, she led him from the office.

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November 4, 2025



-Maggie-

The office door clicked shut behind them, and Maggie stood in the corridor for half a second too long.

She'd said it… *Stay the night*… and he'd said yes.

The only problem was, now they had to actually walk somewhere, and her knees felt like those of a newborn fawn.

"Right," she said, mostly to the keys in her hand.

Fergus made a low sound behind her that might've been a laugh, if he'd been the kind of man who usually laughed audibly. She turned, and there he was, hands loose at his sides, waiting calmly for her in that way that made her feel like she was the only person who mattered.

"Take your time, Mags."

"I've been taking my time since you came home."

Finally, she forced herself to move, and when she opened the courtyard door, the cold hit them. The flagstones were slick where the earlier drizzle

had frozen in the seams, and Maggie wrapped her arms around her middle as they started across. She felt rather than saw Fergus take the outer path, the one closer to the puddles, without saying a word about it, and his hand found its way to the small of her back.

Halfway to the cottage, her boot skidded a fraction. It was barely a wobble, but his arm wrapped around her and steadied her. She inhaled sharply but kept walking, wondering how much of her unsteadiness could plausibly be blamed on the whisky.

Standing in the dimly lit entry, she felt a wave of awkwardness wash over her. Whatever confidence she had found in the office had fled, and that mask slipped when she asked, “Tea?”

“Maggie.”

“Right. No tea.”

He looked at her, a trace of amusement on his face, no hurry in him at all, and she felt the ridiculous urge to laugh, or cry, or say something spectacularly stupid to see if he’d flinch. He wouldn’t, and that was the problem. He did, however, raise a hand to her cheek, and she leaned into his touch. His lips brushed over hers, and for a moment the noise in her head stopped.

“Better?” he asked, pulling back just enough to look at her.

“Much,” she whispered, taking his hand and leading him upstairs.

The stairs in her cottage were narrow and old. She went first and pushed open the bedroom door at the top. When she flipped the switch on at the wall, the lamp on the nightstand cast the room in warm, comforting gold.

Fergus paused in the doorway.

She’d seen him in this room before. He’d fixed the sash on the window last October when it wouldn’t stay up. Before that, he’d carried a bedframe up, swearing under his breath at the tight turn of the stairs. She’d made him tea afterward… both times.

“You going to stand out there all night?” she asked. She meant for it to come out playful, and it did… mostly. But there was a wobble in it she couldn’t quite hide.

Fergus stepped over the threshold, his eyes never leaving hers. Maggie felt her knees trembling and sat on the edge of the bed, hoping to hide it from him.

She set her hands flat on the quilt on either side of her thighs, looking up at him. He was still near the door, and when he shifted his weight, she could

see it—the restraint humming in him, the way he held his hands as if they might suddenly act of their own accord.

“Mags,” he said, his voice low, “I want to ask you something, and I don’t want you to make a joke.”

“Well, that’s just cruel.”

“Maggie.”

His tone took a slight edge, and she swallowed. “Sorry. Go on.”

“It’s been a long day,” he said, still not coming any closer, “and a hard one. I…” He looked down at his hands, then back up at her. “I don’t want you waking up tomorrow feeling like you did something because you were tired, or because it was easier than saying no. I’d rather sleep on the sofa. I’d rather sleep in my pickup… I mean that.”

“I know you do.”

She looked away, trying to gather her thoughts. Her mind was a mess, as all the old baggage fought to bubble to the surface and make her do or say something foolish that would just drive him away.

“There’s no rush,” he told her gently when she hesitated.

She had no doubt he meant it, and she took him in. The broad shoulders, the crooked line of his nose, the way his eyes softened when he looked at her… even if it took months, he would wait.

The realization sank in. Fergus didn’t want her to be smaller, or quieter, or less than she was. He would rather leave than bear to see her suffer a moment of regret or pretend to be someone she wasn’t.

She felt her eyes begin to well up with tears. Crying was the last thing she wanted to do right now, and she felt panic surge through her. She had to do something—say something—to put a stop to it.

“Obviously, it’s been a bloody long day. But that’s not…” She pressed her palms into the quilt. “Look, I’m not doing this because it’s late and you’re here and it’s easier than saying no. There is no chance I will wake up tomorrow furious with myself. I want to be really clear about that, because I know that’s what you’re worried about, and it’s very sweet… even if a bit patronizing..."

“Mags...”

“…but it’s also—thank you.” She stopped, trying to pull herself together. “Thank you for saying that. I mean it. Most men wouldn’t.”

“I’m not that special, Mags. You’ve just had horrible luck.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she said, pausing to weigh her next words. “Fergus, I’ve been thinking about this for a long time… fighting this for a long time. The thing is, I’m tired of fighting it, and you’ve made me begin to believe I don’t have to anymore. I want you here, but not because I’m tired or because you’re available.” She paused, took a deep breath, and continued. “Because it’s you, Fergus, and not anyone else. Do you want me to get more specific? Because I can. I can get embarrassingly specific.”

“No,” he said, and his voice had gone rough. “I got it.”

“Good, now for the love of God, would you please stop standing there and come here?”

He crossed slowly to her, kneeling in front of where she sat on the edge of the bed. He didn’t touch her. Instead, he studied her face for a moment, as if he were still looking for any sign of hesitation, his eyes nearly level with her own.

“You’re sure,” he said. It was softer this time, and it wasn’t a question.

“I’m sure.”

“If you change your mind...”

“I promise I’ll tell you.”

“Anything, Mags. Slow down, stop, go home…”

“For the love of God, Fergus, kiss me already!”

That was all it took for the last of his restraint to snap, and his lips met hers once more. There was no hesitation this time, no slow build up. This was years of pent-up desire finally finding release.

When he tilted his head and the kiss deepened, her brain went silent and time seemed to slow. Her hands, which had been sitting stupidly on the quilt, went to the front of his shirt, and then one continued to the back of his neck, tangling in the short strands of hair there. A low sound caught in his throat, and one of his hands slid down from her jaw and along her neck, still so extraordinarily gentle.

“Fergus,” she breathed as his lips followed the path his hand had taken.

“Mm.”

“You can…” She didn’t know what she was trying to say, and she laughed a little. “I won’t break. You don’t have to be quite so careful.”

He drew back just enough to look at her. His eyes had gone dark in the lamplight, and his hand was still in its exploration, warm against her skin.

“Yes, I do.”

“Fergus…”

“Trust me.”

She swallowed, and then nodded and kissed him again, because she didn’t trust herself to make words.

They moved further up the bed, and he ended up over her, braced on one forearm. Her jumper was somewhere on the floor, and his shirt had disappeared too, though she couldn’t remember which of them had done it. She could feel the warm plane of his chest under her palm, the steady thud of his heart against her hand.

His mouth lingered on her neck as he worked his way over to the soft spot under her ear, and she was sure he could feel her pulse start doing something ridiculous. A soft sound, somewhere between a gasp and a moan, escaped her, and she felt the exact moment he registered it. She could feel his lips curve against her skin before he came back to that same spot, testing her reactions.

Suddenly, she was thinking too much. She could feel herself doing it—cataloging every movement and sound. Was she making a face? Was her hair alright? Was her stomach doing that thing? Was she moving the way she was supposed to? Should she…

Fergus stopped, but he didn’t pull away. He just went very, very still above her before shifting so he could look at her. His fingers brushed the hair away from her forehead, his own brow creased in concern.

“Mags?”

“I’m fine…”

“Maggie…”

She opened her eyes, and he was so close. His breath was warm on her lips, and his hand had come to rest on the side of her face, cradling her cheek. He was looking at her the way he sometimes looked at her across the pub when she was three orders behind and pretending she wasn’t drowning.

“Where’d you go?”

She let out a breath, and it came out unsteady.

“In my head,” she admitted.

“Thought so.”

“I’m sorry.”

He kissed her forehead, lips lingering there before he breathed, “Don’t be sorry. Just come back.”

“I’m here.”

“All of you?”

She closed her eyes again, and to her horror, she felt a tear slide down into her hair. Just one. She didn't know what to do with it, and Fergus, who seemed to notice everything, brushed it away like it was nothing… like it wasn't a whole confession all on its own.

"I'm out of practice," she said. She'd meant it to be dry, but it just came out sounding tired.

"It's not a rugby match, Mags. You don't forget how to do this."

She gestured vaguely, uselessly, at herself. "I know, but I keep waiting for the part where you realize you want someone I'm not… I'm very good at putting on a mask and pretending, but it's… it's exhausting."

"That part will never come," he answered, his tone so earnest it made her eyes snap open to find his. "I've had years to see all the versions of you, all the masks. And I want them all." She opened her mouth to speak, and he gently put a finger over her lips. "I want *you*, Maggie."

The flood of relief and emotion that washed over her threatened to overcome her again. Her shoulders sank into the mattress beneath her, and her hand, which had been braced against his chest, went flat over his heart and stayed there.

"Okay," was all she could manage to whisper.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Come here."

He kissed her again, and this time she didn't think. She let herself feel it. The slow drag of his mouth. The warm weight of him. The rasp of his beard along her jaw. Her hands went where they wanted—his shoulders, his hair, the old scar at his ribs—and Fergus met her there, careful still, but less so than before.

The rest of their clothes came off in pieces, and there was nothing graceful about it. A button that refused to give. Her laugh into his mouth when he muttered at it. The cold of the room on newly bare skin, then the quilt dragged up because of course he noticed. When there was nothing left between them but warmth and the faint smell of the pub still clinging to his hair, he went still again.

Not pulling away, just waiting.

Maggie looked at him, the soft lamplight glowing gold around him. His mouth was a little swollen, and he was watching her as if the next second belonged entirely to her.

"Still here," she said.

“Good.”

She reached for him, drawing him down, and when he finally settled into her, it was slow enough that she felt every inch of the decision… the stretch, the heat, the way his breath left him in one rough sound against her cheek.

He didn’t move.

“Mags.”

“I’m all right.” Her hands found his back. “I’m here. You can…”

He kissed her once, quiet, and then he did.

They found a rhythm the way they found most things: a little awkwardly at first, then with the sort of attention that made her throat tight. He kept his weight on his forearms, and she felt the hitch when his bad shoulder took too much. She shifted them without making a speech of it, and his mouth curved against her neck like gratitude.

“There,” she whispered.

“Aye.”

It wasn’t frantic, and it didn’t need to be. Years of looking and not touching had already done the frantic part. This was the opposite. This was him learning her by simply paying attention. When she made a sound she would have swallowed in any other room, he followed it. When she went quiet, he slowed. When her fingers tightened in his hair, he stayed exactly there until her breath broke.

She did almost leave again. There was a flicker… the old inventory starting up behind her eyes.

Then he said her name in that low tone, and for once she was only in her body, only in this bed, only under the man who had spent years standing on the other side of a bar pretending this wasn’t what he wanted. The pleasure built—warmth gathering, her hips answering his as the quilt slipped off one side of the bed, neither of them caring. When it broke, she turned her face into the crook of his neck, and his hand cradled the back of her head. He followed not long after, her name the only word he seemed to have left, and then he was still, breathing hard into her hair.

They stayed like that.

Maggie stared at the ceiling over his shoulder and waited for the usual wreckage. The planning. The polite exit. The version of herself that sat up too quickly and reached for a shirt.

It didn’t come.

She let herself have him. She let herself be wanted. And somewhere in the warmth and the quiet and the whispered breath of her name, Maggie Hartwell, who had spent more than a decade being the woman who never needed anyone, let go.

***

The lamp was still on, casting an amber glow on the ceiling. Maggie had meant to turn it off at some point, but that meant not being able to see him, and she wasn't ready to give that up just yet.

Fergus was on his back beside her, one arm folded behind his head, the other wrapped around her. She was tucked against his side with her cheek on his chest, listening to his heartbeat slow. The quilt had ended up mostly over them, and they hadn't moved to fix it.

For a long time neither of them spoke. It was such an unusual thing for her—being in a room with another person and not filling the quiet. In the end, it got the best of her, and she said playfully, "So that was a bad idea."

She felt his laugh before she heard it—a rare, low rumble under her ear. "Awful."

"Truly reckless of us."

"Mm."

"Whole thing's a scandal."

He turned his head and kissed the top of hers. He didn't say anything for a while after that, and his hand trailed idly along her arm, tracing patterns she couldn't quite follow. She tilted her face up and looked at him.

His hair was rumpled, and there was a faint pink mark on his throat that she'd very possibly put there. She thought he looked more at rest than she had ever seen him, with his eyes half-lidded and calm.

"What?" he said without looking at her.

"Nothing."

"Mags."

"I'm allowed to look at you."

He huffed, and his hand found hers on his chest and threaded their fingers together.

"I was thinking," she said, but then didn't finish the sentence.

"Yeah?"

“I don’t know.” He waited, and she tried to find the right words. “I’m not… I’m not doing the thing.”

“What thing?”

“The thing where I’m already three moves ahead. Planning the polite way you leave. Rehearsing the conversation we’ll have in the morning where we both agree it doesn’t have to mean anything so no one has to be embarrassed.”

His thumb stilled on the back of her hand.

“You do that?” he said quietly.

“I used to.” She swallowed, and then told him, “I’m not doing it now. I keep waiting for my brain to start, and it hasn’t.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then all he said was, “Good.”

Not a whole speech. Not a promise. Just good, in the same tone he used when he was telling her the roof was going to hold, or the boiler could last another winter, or the wine order she’d panicked about was already sorted.

Good, meaning *I’ve got this*.

Good, meaning *I’ve got you*.

She pressed her face into his chest.

She was going to cry again.

He seemed to understand what was happening without her having to explain it, and he shifted, gathering her close. His cheek rested against the top of her head and stayed there.

She didn’t know how long this would last. She wasn’t naïve… tomorrow her brain would find things to do with itself, and she’d probably say something unnecessary at breakfast to see if he’d run. That was all coming, but right now, in this bed under her sloped cottage ceiling, with the lamp still on and his hand still around hers, she could finally just... relax.

“Fergus.”

“Yeah, Mags?”

“Turn the lamp off, would you?”

“In a minute.”

“Why in a minute?”

She felt his mouth curve against her hair before he said in a lazy tone, “Want to see you like this a bit longer.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

She closed her eyes and let him. Drifting off, wrapped in the warmth of him.

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November 11, 2025



-Fergus-

The door to Maggie’s cottage closed behind him with a soft click as Fergus tried to shut it as quietly as possible. For almost a week he had managed to sneak home and change before Owen showed up to work on the courtyard. Crossing the gravel drive, he was just unlocking his pickup when a voice behind him nearly made him jump out of his skin.

“Morning, Romeo.”

He turned to see Owen casually leaning up against the gate that separated the courtyard from the cottage. He had a takeaway cup in each hand and an expression that said this was no accident.

“Don’t.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Not at this time of the morning.”

Owen grinned and held out a coffee. “Fair.”

Fergus took the coffee without meeting his brother’s eyes. He could feel Owen getting a good look at his crumpled shirt, the boots he’d pulled on in the dark without tying them, and the hair that hadn’t been near a comb in sixteen hours.

“So, how long has this been going on, hmm?”

“None of your business, Owen.”

Pushing past Owen, Fergus knew there was no point in pretending he hadn’t spent the night with Maggie. Taking a mouthful of coffee, which was no longer hot, he then set it aside to open the ladder. It squeaked and rattled as Fergus climbed, the metal cold through his gloves. Owen followed, and they crossed to a stack of reclaimed slate waiting under a tarp that was weighted down by two bricks and a length of chain.

“You know,” Owen said, kneeling beside him and lining up the batten, “I could’ve stopped by your place… grabbed you a change of clothes.”

“Owen.”

“I’m just saying. Brothers have been known to help each other out when things... happen.”

Fergus gave him a dirty look as he passed him a slate. “Something you won’t like is going to happen if you don’t shut up and help me with the roof.”

“I am helping. I can inquire about your love life at the same time. It’s called multitasking. You should try it sometime.”

“If I wanted to be a nuisance, I would.”

“The implication offends me.”

“Wasn’t implying it. Here,” Fergus said, passing another slate.

Owen fitted it, checked the line with his palm, and drove the nail in with a few precise strikes. Below them, in the courtyard, the tarp over the new folding chairs shivered in the breeze. The wedding was a couple of weeks away, and every time Fergus looked down at the courtyard, all he saw was what they still had to finish.

“She feed you breakfast?” Owen asked. Fergus stopped and glared at him. “I’m just asking.”

“She’s still asleep.”

“Is that so?” Owen sounded delighted. “Ahh, the bliss of domesticity. Are you going to start pressing the paper for her next?”

“It would be more relaxing than listening to you.”

He passed another slate, and Owen fitted it. For a while, they settled into a rhythm—pass, place, tap, repeat. Fergus felt strangely... peaceful. Everything just felt... right.

“You’re smiling,” Owen observed.

“I’m not.”

“You are. You’ve smiled twice.”

“Have not.”

“You just did it again! That makes three!”

Fergus reached for the hammer, but Owen beat him to it by a fraction and pulled it out of reach. He gave him the same smug look he’d been perfecting his entire life.

“Give me the hammer, Owen.”

“Say something nice about her first.”

“Owen.”

“One thing. That’s the toll.”

Fergus knew it was no use. Unless he was going to assault Owen and risk one or both of them falling off the roof, he was not getting that hammer without doing what Owen wanted.

“She...” He lapsed into silence. He wasn’t great with words, but as much as he hated to admit it, maybe Owen had a point. It shouldn’t be that hard. “She makes me believe I’m more than just someone people just keep around when he’s useful.” He felt the tips of his ears warm, and, shaking his head, asked, “Good enough?”

Owen let out a low whistle. “Christ, that was almost poetry.”

“Shut up.”

Owen then actually lapsed into silence, which was such a rare occurrence that Fergus glanced sideways. His brother was still looking at the slate in his hand, but the smirk was gone, and he looked almost thoughtful.

“You look better,” Owen said after a moment. “Just so you know.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah. You’ve looked knackered for about four years. You look less… knackered.” He handed Fergus the hammer.

Fergus turned it over in his hand, lined up the next nail, and drove it in. He worked quietly for a few minutes as thoughts tumbled through his head. Finally, he decided to voice what he was thinking, hoping Owen would for once be more helpful than difficult.

“I keep waiting for the catch. There’s always been a catch.”

“Or maybe you’re trying too hard to find one,” Owen replied like it was such an obvious thing.

“It’s just...easy with her. Maybe too easy. She laughs at the stupid stuff. She doesn’t try to make me into anything I’m not.” Owen nodded slowly, passing another slate. “Mind you, she nearly bit my head off on Tuesday.”

“Future sister-in-law material!”

“All I did was her dishes, Owen!”

“You’re lucky to be alive.”

“She came down at half past seven, and there they were, clean, in the drainer, and she stood in the kitchen doorway looking like I’d rearranged her furniture. Arms folded. Full glare… the one she usually saves for you.”

“And?”

“And she said she could wash her own dishes, thank you, and had done so her whole life without my help.”

“Anything else?” Owen asked, and Fergus could see him fighting back laughter.

“Yes, she said if I was going to stay over, I could bloody well leave her sink alone, or she’d start charging me rent.”

“What did you do?”

“I apologized.”

“Get out.”

“I did. Then she made me toast, still cheesed off. I thought it was best if I accepted it and ate quietly.”

Owen couldn’t contain it any longer and erupted in laughter. The sound rolled off the roof and startled a pigeon off the neighbor’s chimney. They worked in silence for a while after that. The sun, weak and reluctant, edged over the roof of the post office and put a strip of pale gold along the ridge tile. Owen hummed something tuneless under his breath, and at a certain point Freddie decided it was time for everyone to be awake. His call echoed up from below, causing the neighboring dogs to howl in reply.

They got through the first bundle before Owen spoke again, and when he did, it was on the exhale, the way he always did when he’d been sitting on a question.

“How’s Jenny’s brother, by the way?”

“Callum? He’s alright,” Fergus replied, passing a slate. “Trying to make up for what he did.”

“I’m aware. I see him here every day, but that’s not what I asked, Ferg. How’s he doing?”

Fergus sat back on his heels, one hand braced on the ridge, and thought about how to say it. The trouble with Callum was that the boy was trying so hard that he kept overshooting the mark. Every task Maggie or Fergus set for him, he wanted to finish twice as fast and perfectly on the first try.

“He wants it too much,” Fergus said eventually. “You know that thing where they’re so worried you’re going to give up on them, they run at everything.”

“Yeah.”

“He keeps overreaching.”

Owen nodded and tapped a nail. “Give me a for-instance.”

“Beer keg.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Yesterday afternoon, I’d told him to help stock the cellar. Help, mind… stand there, count things, pass me the small ones. I went to find a pen, and when I came back, he’d gotten his arms around one of the full ones and was trying to walk it toward the trapdoor by himself.”

“How full?”

“*Full* full.”

“He’s what, sixty-five kilos?”

“On a good day.”

“Was he going to lift it?”

“You could see him thinking about it. He had that face on.”

Owen shook his head slowly. “What did you do?”

“Said his name.”

“And?”

“He let go of it like it had bitten him and started apologizing before I’d even said anything.” Fergus reached for another slate. It was heavier than the last, and he steadied it against his knee before passing it over. “So, I sat him down and told him he didn’t need to hurt himself to prove something to us.”

Owen looked at him for a beat. “That’s a good line, Ferg.”

“It’s not a line,” Fergus replied, shifting his stance and preparing for an argument.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Owen told him, holding up a placating hand. “I meant it was the right thing to say.”

“Oh.”

“Take the compliment.”

“I am.”

“You’re not. You’re turning red.”

Fergus could feel the heat creeping up his neck, and his response came out as a grumble. “Do you ever stop? Just do the roof, Owen.”

Owen did for a moment, but then asked, this time more gently, “Did he listen?”

“I think so,” Fergus replied, replaying the last few days. “He didn’t argue, which is unusual. He just asked if he could help me count the small ones.”

“So, progress.”

“A bit.”

“He’s not always like that, mind,” Fergus said after a pause. “There are still bad days.”

“With Jenny?”

“Mostly with Jenny. He snapped at her two days ago. She asked him if he’d eaten and he just about took her head off in front of a table of tourists.”

“Ouch.”

“He was in the yard ten minutes later, beating himself up over it. Eventually he found her… said sorry about six times in a row and then went and hid in the cellar for an hour.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“It’s fear, Owen,” he said. “He’s afraid she’ll reject him, plain and simple. But then he lashes out and risks being rejected. Makes no sense.”

“He’s still a kid, Ferg. We didn’t make sense, either; give him time. What about Jenny?” he asked.

“Worn out.”

“Of course.”

“She’s twenty, but she looks so much older sometimes.” Fergus paused, hating feeling like he was gossiping, so he chose his words carefully as he continued. “I said something to her end of last week about not always cleaning up after him. That’s her thing—he drops a glass, she picks up the pieces before Maggie’s even heard the sound. He forgets his shift, she covers it. I told her she needs to let him face the consequences. That it’s not abandoning him if she does.”

“What’d she say?”

“She burst into tears.”

“Oh, mate.”

“Only for about a minute. Then she went and made me a cup of tea, which I guess was her way of either thanking me or telling me to butt out.” He let out a small laugh, shaking his head. “Even so, she pulled back. Let him work out his own shift swap on Friday. Didn’t do it for him.”

“That’s big.”

“Yeah.” He passed the next slate. Owen fitted it and checked the line. “Maggie’s been letting Jenny help more,” Fergus said after another silence. “You know what she’s like. She doesn’t make a thing of it, but she’s started asking Jenny to sit in on the wedding stuff.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He looked down into the courtyard. The kitchen door was closed, and the fairy lights they’d strung between the beams the day before were useless in the daylight, just a thin dark thread against the stone.

“She’s standing up straighter,” he said. “Jenny. You can see it.”

Owen didn’t answer that, and he didn’t need to. He handed Fergus a nail, and Fergus hammered it home. There was a long, easy silence after that. Fergus finished the last slate in the bundle and stood carefully to stretch his back.

“So,” Owen said.

“So?”

Owen set his hammer down. “Have you decided about Leicester?”

Fergus didn’t answer immediately. He crouched again and tidied the offcuts of slate, stacking them at the eaves to buy himself a moment. Owen waited, which he was good at. It was the most annoying thing about him.

“I haven’t,” Fergus said.

“I see.” Owen tipped his coffee cup, saw it was empty, and set it back down on the ridge. “Have you told her?”

Fergus didn’t have to ask who he meant. “No.”

“Ferg.” The disappointment was obvious in Owen’s face.

“I know!” Fergus replied, looking away so he didn’t have to see it. “It’s just… I haven’t been able to find the right time.”

Owen picked up his hammer again and turned it slowly in his hand, watching the head catch the light. Then, he said, “Sure you have. You just ignored it, and now it’s in the past.”

Fergus opened his mouth to tell Owen off but stopped. His brother was right, even if he was being an obnoxious prick about it.

Instead, he looked out at Great Missenden. The roof of the Stag was higher than it seemed from the ground, and from here, the village was small and tidy—High Street running down toward the church, the post office with its faded sign, the butcher's awning, the strip of green at the far end. He could even see the corner of the rugby pitch from up here, if he looked hard enough.

"Rowan's made a good offer," he said.

"What are you talking about? It's a great offer."

"I keep laying it out in my head. The salary. The house. The coaching. I lay it all out, and it looks good. It looks like the answer."

"And?"

"And then I put the phone down, and I go to the pub because I'm the one who hauls the kegs and knows which pump sticks, and I…" He stopped. He hadn't meant to say that much, and Owen just sat quietly, which gave Fergus the space to work it out. "I didn't notice, Owen."

"Notice what?"

"That I had stopped waiting and started living." Owen stared at him, and he forced himself to continue. "I had a plan. Get my legs under me after rugby and wait for the next thing to come along. Now someone's come and offered it, and I realized I wasn't waiting for anything anymore."

He shook his head once. "I know when Callum has PE, Owen. I don't even know why, but I do. I have the rugby boys three times a week, Sunday lunches at your place." He looked over at his brother finally. "I see you three, four days a week. I haven't seen you this much since we were kids."

"I like seeing you, Ferg..." Owen looked at his own hands, at the callus on the side of his thumb. "...if we're being honest."

Fergus looked away, because there were some things you didn't push at, even between brothers.

"And then there's Maggie," Owen added gently.

Fergus sighed. "Right. Maggie."

"But it's not just her, is what you're saying."

"It's not." Fergus dragged a hand over his face. "She's the middle of it, but she's not all of it. I don't know if that makes it better or worse."

"It makes it honest. The real question," Owen said, sliding the hammer back into its spot on his belt, "isn't whether Leicester's a good offer. It

obviously is—I can hear it when you talk about it… Rowan's good, the money's good, all of it."

"Yeah."

"The question is whether you want it more than all of this."

"Thanks for telling me exactly nothing."

"Not my place to give you answers. I'm here to ask you the hard questions and to illuminate your choices, as it were. And now that I've accomplished that, I'm going to put the ridge tile on because frankly, dear brother, it's cold, your indecisiveness is starting to bore me, and I want breakfast."

Fergus resisted the urge to hit him with a mallet and instead tossed it at him. Owen caught it with a self-satisfied "ha!", and at that very moment, the door to the cottage opened. Maggie came out with a mug in one hand and a bucket of chicken feed in the other. Her hair wasn't done yet and her sweater sleeves were pulled down over her wrists to ward off the cold.

She went about feeding the chickens, fussing over each of them. Freddie managed to launch himself and, flapping wildly, slammed into Maggie's shoulder with all the airborne grace of a prop trying to catch a high ball. Once he was steady, she reached up and scratched his chest, and the tiny terrorist actually fluffed his feathers with enjoyment.

"You look jealous of the bird, mate," Owen said, coming to stand next to Fergus.

"Just finish the roof, Owen."

Owen chuckled, but went back to it, the sound of hammering filling the air once more. Maggie glanced up, and the smile that accompanied the little wave she gave him nearly knocked the air from his lungs. That was when the realization washed over him. He'd thought, at some point in the last week, that the choice was between two jobs. In fact, he'd been laying it out that way in his head for days. Yet as he watched her quietly fussing over her birds, he knew it was no longer about picking a job. It was about picking which life he wanted most.

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November 15, 2025



-Maggie-

Saturdays at the pub were always a balancing act. Throwing a Hartwell wedding planning party into the mix made it impossible to relax for even a moment.

At the long table by the window, Hannah had spread out claiming this was the final wedding review, though Maggie suspected that nothing would be truly final until the wedding was over. It was two weeks away now, close enough that the major decisions had been made, deposits paid, menus chosen, and color arguments resolved.

Now they were down to the details that were always left to the last minute, as they seemed so unimportant. That is, until they were suddenly very important, and it was too late to do anything about them.

A marked-up courtyard layout sat in the middle of the table, weighed down by Hannah’s phone, a mug of tea, and three ribbon samples that had somehow survived every previous cull. Beside it were notes on item

placement and a handwritten reminder in Maggie's own script that read: *Do not let anyone put the gift table near the kitchen door.*

Jenny sat beside Hannah with a clipboard balanced on one knee and a pencil tapping lightly on it, ready to write down any notes that might seem important. She still looked a little nervous, but her confidence had grown the last few weeks, although she still glanced at Maggie regularly, seeking reassurance.

Jenny had spent the past week looking over plans and picking up on the sort of things Maggie usually had to catch herself: where people gathered, where servers got blocked, which doors stuck, and which guests would absolutely set a drink down on top of a guest book if given the opportunity.

She spotted Callum moving between the tables, clearing empty glasses and resetting chairs. He had been at it since three, working silently, except for the occasional *sorry* when he had to squeeze between chairs. His hoodie had been replaced with one of the Stag's black staff shirts, which was slightly too large for his shoulders.

He was still working off the damage he'd done to the courtyard, doing everything from scrubbing flagstones and hauling broken planters to helping Owen sand and re-prime the damaged wall. Now, because Saturday evenings at the Stag had their own violent educational value, he was bussing tables before the rush. The parents of the other boys had been quick to pay and make the issue go away. Maggie couldn't help but be proud of Jenny for trusting them and sticking to the plan of making him work to pay for the damage.

He was showing signs of growth. It wasn't perfect, of course. Sometimes he would slip and snap at Jenny, but he would catch himself and apologize to her. They'd both muster a weak smile before carrying on.

"Right, then," Maggie said, leaning over the layout. "We're not making big changes here. We are only confirming the details, which means no one is allowed to suddenly come up with a brand-new idea for centerpieces." She fixed Hannah with a stern look, and Hannah's mouth opened to object. Maggie raised a finger in warning, and Hannah's mouth quickly closed.

Jenny lifted her clipboard, and Maggie knew she was smiling behind it.

"If we're doing this," Maggie continued, forcing her voice back into business mode, "then the final layout matters. We've got the headcount. We've got the tables. We know where the heaters are going. What we're checking now is traffic and guest management."

Hannah immediately leaned forward. Jenny did too, and that, more than anything, caught Maggie's attention.

"Traffic?" Hannah asked. "You mean like… walking around traffic?"

"Unless you've found a way to fit cars in the courtyard, yes, walking around," replied Maggie with a wry smile. She tapped the corner of the drawing with a pen. "Guests move slower once they've had two glasses of wine, especially if they're wearing heels or pretending they can still dance. So, the aisles need to stay wider than you think."

Jenny studied the sketch, brow furrowed. "And if the blanket basket goes here," she said, pointing with the eraser end of her pencil, "people will stop right inside the gate to grab one. Then everyone behind them gets stuck, and now you have an actual traffic jam!" Maggie looked at her, and Jenny recoiled. "Sorry. I just…"

"No," Maggie said reassuringly, "you're absolutely right."

Hannah glanced at her with sudden interest. "You're good at this."

Jenny gave a small, uncertain laugh. "I mostly know where drunk people stand and how they get in the way."

"In that case, you're hired to manage the reception," Maggie said with a grin.

Jenny looked down quickly, but Maggie caught the pleased little curve at the corner of her mouth before she hid it.

Across the room, Fergus passed with a tray of clean glasses. He had changed out of whatever he'd worn to the youth match that morning, but there was still mud on the edge of one boot, and his hair hadn't fully recovered from whatever battle it had with the wind. He occasionally glanced at Callum, especially when the lad reached for a stack of plates at the table nearest Mr. Davies.

"Careful with that lot," Mr. Davies said gravely. "Plates are more fragile this time of year."

"That's nonsense," Maggie called without looking up from the sketch, although she could see Callum relax out of the corner of her eye. "Ignore him."

Mr. Davies looked wounded. "I read it somewhere."

"You read a pub menu upside down last week and thought we were serving roast badger."

"Shame, that... It would have been delicious. Instead of being so judgmental, you should have taken it as a sign your menu needed a new

entree. It was meant to be!”

Callum choked down a laugh, but as he carried the plates toward the kitchen, he looked a bit more at ease.

Fergus caught Maggie’s eye from across the room and gave her a little knowing smile. Something private enough that she looked away first, because her niece, her mother, Jenny, Callum, and half the village were all within gossiping distance, and Maggie was not in the mood to provide Gareth Davies with enough material to last through Christmas.

Unfortunately, though, her mother had a way of noticing everything.

She sat at the head of the wedding table, ruler-straight and perfectly composed in a cream jumper that looked wildly impractical for a woman spending the afternoon in a pub. She had contributed very little to the final logistics except the occasional hum of disapproval, which she wielded with the precision of a surgeon.

When Maggie heard the sound again, loaded with all the things she had been holding back since walking through the door, she didn’t look up. She didn’t need to. She had grown up fluent in those sounds, and they had followed her through most of her adult life. Keeping the Stag running had never earned even the smallest bit of credit from her mother because all she saw was the failure who came crawling back home.

“Okay,” Hannah said, pointing to a spot on the page, and drawing Maggie back to the present. “If we move the blankets closer to the fireplace, where do we put the guest book?”

“Keep it away from the bar,” Maggie replied immediately. “That’s just asking for an accident.”

Jenny leaned forward again, eyes scanning the layout. After a moment, she asked, “What if we set up a gift table inside? People will see it when they come in, but it won’t block the servers. Plus, they can sign during the cocktail hour.”

Maggie watched her for a moment, pride swelling in her chest. While Jenny had never been timid, Maggie had clearly missed the signs that she could handle more than waiting tables. Leaning closer, she said, “Talk me through the rest.”

Jenny’s eyes widened slightly, but she looked back at the sketch. “Right. So, heaters are mostly good where they are in the corners. They’re out of the way, but they keep the area warm. We put the blankets near the fireplace since guests will congregate there if they’re cold, and the guest book goes

inside so it doesn’t get damp. Cake table stays along the wall, but not too close to the kitchen door, because everyone will stop for photos and block staff.”

Hannah stared at her. “Oh, my God. That is exactly what my dad would do.”

“Most people do,” Jenny said. “They stop wherever they shouldn’t.”

“Well,” Maggie said, placing a hand on Jenny’s arm, “look at you.”

Jenny’s cheeks went bright red. “It’s just tables.”

“It is absolutely not just tables,” Hannah said, already adjusting the sketch. “You’re hired.”

“She already is,” Maggie said.

Hannah pointed her pen at Jenny. “Then promoted.”

Jenny let out a surprised laugh, and Maggie felt an idea take shape in her mind. Special events had always been the thing she told herself she would handle properly when there was more time… more money… more staff… more… everything. The courtyard renovation was supposed to make that possible and would be a whole new income source if she could get it right.

She had always pictured herself running it though, because who else could?

Jenny leaned over the sketch beside Hannah, both talking over one another now, the awkwardness between staff member and bride-to-be dissolving into the easy energy of two women close enough in age to understand each other’s shorthand. Hannah was all bright ideas and confident flourishes. Jenny was practical, quieter, but on top of her game. Maggie watched them, and suddenly the idea of letting go of this one piece didn’t seem so terrifying.

Her mother’s voice cut softly across the table. “It’s good of you to give her more responsibility.”

Maggie glanced at Jenny, thankful she didn’t seem to hear. She and Hannah were too busy debating whether the place-card table needed its own lamp.

Maggie turned her head, keeping her voice down. “She’s earned it.”

Her mother smoothed one hand over the edge of the lace runner Hannah had brought to test against the tables before answering. “I’m sure. Though I hope you’ve learned to tell if someone is worth trusting to stay.”

Maggie shot her mother a withering glare. “Sometimes it’s worth the risk not to grow old alone.”

Her mother stared at her, for once unable to find a suitable retort, then her eyes drifted to the other side of the bar. Maggie couldn't help but look and followed her mother's gaze right to Fergus, who was saying something to Callum.

"He seems very settled here these days," her mother said.

Maggie looked back at the lace in front of her, trying to appear unbothered. "He works here."

"Yes, of course," her mother said, and then paused before adding, "I wasn't sure he would last this long. Especially not after making a name for himself."

Maggie didn't answer. The last thing her mother needed was more ammunition.

The pub gradually began to fill around them. The early regulars gave way to the first stirrings of the dinner crowd. The door opened more frequently, and cold air swept in and out.

Callum passed behind her with a tray of empty plates. "Table six is asking if the steak pie is on yet."

"Five o'clock," Maggie said.

He nodded and turned to go, then hesitated. "Do I tell them that, or do I say I'll check?"

Maggie almost smiled. "Tell them five o'clock. If they grumble, say I'm very sorry in a tone that suggests you aren't."

His brow furrowed. "How?"

Fergus was passing behind him and said, "Watch Maggie. She has a talent for it."

Maggie pointed the pen at him. "I heard that."

"Am I wrong?" he asked, winking at her before continuing on toward the kitchen.

Maggie bit her lip before she could stop herself. Meanwhile, Callum looked at each of them in turn, then quickly made himself scarce.

When she turned back to the table, Hannah was watching with a sly smile, eyes lit up with delight.

"What?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing."

"That is not a nothing face."

Hannah pressed her lips together, badly hiding a smile. "It's just nice."

"What is?"

“This.” Hannah gestured vaguely around the pub. “You. Seeing you smile like that.”

Before she could react, the front door swung open again, and a gust of cold air made her shiver. A man stepped inside, pausing just long enough to shake drizzle from his collar before letting the door close behind him.

Maggie was more than grateful for the interruption, and she walked toward the new arrival, positioning herself behind the lectern where reservations were kept.

His eyes swept over the bar and tables, seemingly looking for someone, and she had a moment to take him in. He was tall. Not quite Fergus tall, but close enough that the comparison arrived in her mind immediately. He had broad shoulders under his dark coat, and even the way he walked felt faintly familiar.

“Evening. How many in your party?” she asked, glancing down at the list of reservations.

“Evening,” he said when he reached her, offering a polite half-smile. “I’m looking for someone who works here. Fergus Merrick.”

Maggie froze, looking up at him.

“He’s here,” she said. “Kitchen, most likely.”

The man nodded, glancing briefly toward the swinging door behind the bar. “Would you mind letting him know Rowan Hayes is looking for him?”

The name tugged faintly at Maggie’s memory, though she couldn’t quite place it.

“Of course.”

She carefully made her way toward the bar and then pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen. Warm air wrapped around her immediately, thick with the smell of onions, and butter, and whatever stew the kitchen staff had started earlier.

Fergus stood at the counter with his back to her, sleeves rolled to the elbows, methodically slicing bread. He looked over his shoulder as soon as the door swung closed behind her.

“Someone here for you,” Maggie said.

His knife slowed. “Who?”

“Rowan Hayes.”

Fergus looked genuinely surprised, and the knife stopped halfway through the loaf.

“Rowan?”

“That’s what he said. Is there a problem?”

For a moment, he didn’t move. Then he set the knife down carefully, wiped his hands on a towel, and walked wordlessly past her toward the bar.

Maggie blinked, watching him go. She felt a pit form in her stomach at how quickly he had dismissed her, but she still followed him back through the door.

Rowan was now leaning casually against the bar, studying the beer taps with mild curiosity. He looked up, and for a fraction of a second, both men froze.

Then Rowan broke into a wide grin.

“Christ, Merrick,” he said, pushing off the bar. “I was starting to think you’d changed your name and gone into hiding.”

Fergus recovered quickly, then closed the gap. “Hayes.”

They shook hands, the greeting turning briefly into the sort of shoulder-clap men used when they’d known each other a long time.

“Good to see you, Ferg,” Rowan said.

“You too.” Fergus glanced toward Maggie for a brief moment, then back to Rowan. “Didn’t expect you out here.”

“Had a scouting trip in Aylesbury this morning,” Rowan said. “Figured I’d swing by in person since you’ve apparently forgotten how to respond to an email.”

Fergus’s jaw ticked, and Maggie felt her attention sharpen.

“So,” Rowan said casually, leaning an elbow on the bar, “are we pretending the email doesn’t exist? The official offer’s been sitting in your inbox for almost two weeks.”

Maggie grabbed a cloth, trying to look like she wasn’t listening. The pit in her stomach only grew, and across the way she saw her mother watching with a smug sort of expression.

“I saw it.”

“Did you?” Rowan said. “Because from my end, it looks an awful lot like you’ve been ignoring the Academy’s offer.”

At the end of the bar, Callum had gone still with two empty glasses in his hands, then, in an attempt to recover, he shifted them to one hand, clinking them together too hard. He bowed his head, eyes looking anywhere but toward Fergus.

“They’re not even asking for an interview,” Rowan continued. “They offered you the job. Forwards coach. Facilities, staff, the lot. It’s there on a

silver platter, mate. What's the holdup?"

The pub seemed to keep moving and stop at the same time. Someone at the bar laughed. A chair scraped. Hannah whispered something to one of her bridesmaids and was immediately shushed by Grace. Maggie's mother, of course, was watching, her expression saying, *I told you so*.

Fergus leaned back, folding his arms over his chest, seemingly completely unaware of what was happening around him. "It's a big decision."

"Aye," Rowan agreed. "But why is it a hard one? What more could they possibly have done to sweeten the deal?" He tapped the bar lightly with his knuckles. When Fergus didn't respond, he went on. "They're serious about you, Ferg. Committee signed off before I even finished the call. They want you in Leicester."

"That was quick."

"You've been coaching half the under-sixteens in Buckinghamshire," Rowan said. "Word travels."

Fergus looked faintly uncomfortable as she watched him shift his weight. The tips of his ears, as always, betrayed emotions. "Just keeping them busy."

"Don't sell yourself short," Rowan said. "You're good at it."

Maggie reached for a stack of coasters on the bar, trying to give herself something else to do with her hands. As she pretended to straighten them, her mind raced as she did the math in her head.

Two weeks.

Betrayal was rising up inside of her. It was an all-too-familiar feeling made worse by the fact that her mother was there, silently watching and judging. Her earlier words returned with vicious timing.

I hope you've learned to tell if someone is worth trusting to stay.

Rowan continued, pulling her back, "I saw the video of those sessions you run with the village kids—tight drills. Proper structure. Those kids move like an actual squad."

Most people would have smiled at this praise, but Fergus seemed frozen in place.

Callum was cleaning table four, and Maggie saw the boy's gaze snap to the dish in his hand when he noticed her looking. The lad wasn't daft; he understood enough. Maybe not everything, but enough to know that Leicester was not Great Missenden. That the lavish facilities and the title

sounded like something important, and a lot like the sort of thing people left small muddy pitches for.

Rowan checked his watch. “Look, if the email feels like too much pressure, forget the paperwork. Just come up to Leicester. Tour the facilities. Meet the committee.”

Fergus’s eyes dropped to the bar. “That’s a bit of a drive.”

“It’s two hours, mate,” Rowan said. “What is wrong with you? This kind of opportunity doesn’t come around often.”

Silence stretched between them, and Maggie could hear the murmurs of patrons. Everything else carried on with appalling indifference.

“Look, I’m not asking you to sign anything today,” Rowan said.

Fergus let out a slow breath. “I said I’m thinking about it.”

“Think faster.” Rowan clapped him on the shoulder. Then, his smile softened. “Come up Monday if this place can survive without you for a day. See what we’ve already built.”

Maggie looked down at the coasters.

This place.

As if the Stag and Fergus’s life here didn’t matter. She hated that the thought hurt. She hated more that Fergus still had not looked at her.

Rowan turned toward Maggie with an easy smile. “Sorry to have interrupted your evening.”

“No,” Maggie said, forcing a smile. “Not at all.”

“Pleasure meeting you,” Rowan said.

“You too.”

Rowan gave her another smile, lifted a hand in farewell, and headed toward the door. A moment later it swung open, cold air sweeping in before he stepped out into the gray afternoon.

The door thudded shut behind him, and the room settled.

Across the pub, Hannah had gone quiet, and Jenny’s eyes moved from Maggie to her brother. Callum set the glasses he was holding down on his tray with extra care, not looking at anyone.

Maggie’s mother raised one eyebrow as she stared at Maggie, causing her to turn away.

And Fergus… he was still frozen, staring down at the polished wood of the bar.

“Maggie,” he said quietly, finally looking at her.

She set the coasters down, the urge to flee overwhelming.

“I need to check the booking diary before the evening crowd,” she lied, turning toward the kitchen door.

“Maggie…”

“Not now, Fergus,” she said, not daring to look at him.

She knew her tone was sharp enough to cut, but she didn’t stop as she pushed through the door. She wanted him to feel just a fraction of what she was. To feel that sharp pain that felt like being stabbed in the chest.

Closing the office door, she let out a slow, shaky breath and leaned her forehead against it. Inside, the little room felt too small, the overhead light too bright. Outside the office, Fergus’s voice drifted down the hallway, low and steady as he answered a question from one of the kitchen staff.

Maggie closed her eyes and whispered, “Don’t come in. Don’t come in.” Deep down, though, she wished he would do just that.

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November 15, 2025



-Fergus-

The hour after closing was usually a time to unwind, and most nights Fergus welcomed it. The slow settling of the Roaring Stag once the last voices faded, the hum of the dishwasher, the clink of glass as he stacked the clean pints. Tonight, however, there was no peace.

He should have gone home an hour ago; most of the staff had. Jenny had left with Callum just after ten, her hand resting lightly on the back of his shoulder as she steered him toward the door. He had stolen a glance back at Fergus. It had only been for a second, but Fergus saw the question in the look.

Are you leaving me too?

Maggie had been scarce the rest of the night. She'd pop out for a few moments to check on everyone, then would make some excuse to disappear back into the office. Paperwork. Supplies. Reservations.

He ran his thumb along the tap handles, checking for stickiness out of habit. When he reached the stout tap, he wiped it again, remembering the first time Maggie had caught him doing that.

She'd laughed then, leaning across the bar with that crooked smile of hers. *Inspection day, Merrick?*

That felt like a long time ago.

Fergus checked his phone again out of habit.

The email was still there. He'd opened it almost two weeks ago and stared at the formal offer until the words lost shape. The salary alone was incredible, and the thought of being able to work solely in the sport that ran through his veins again felt utterly ridiculous.

He'd left it unanswered on purpose because it was easier not to decide, not with so much going on. He'd told himself he'd think about it after Callum settled, and after Maggie had one quiet day where something wasn't leaking, breaking, burning, or demanding a deposit.

There was always another after, and underneath all those reasons sat the one very likely outcome he dreaded most. That Maggie was going to slam her walls back into place, and there would be no getting her to lower them a second time.

Eventually he knew he couldn't put off the inevitable, and he made his way back to the office. He knocked once before opening the door, bracing himself for whatever was about to happen.

The heat hit him first. The room was warmer than the pub, the radiator clicking quietly against the wall, and Maggie sat behind the desk with her computer screen dark in front of her. Both hands rested flat on the scarred wood as if she were holding the desk steady, and the whisky he'd brought in days ago sat open next to a nearly empty glass.

"I thought you'd gone home," she said without looking up.

"No," he said. "Still here."

Her shoulders shifted slightly. "Naturally."

"I can come back later," he offered, the edge in her voice cutting through him like a knife.

"No point."

She finally looked up, her eyes meeting his. Her hair was down, the ends tangled where she'd clearly been dragging her hands through it. It was the fact that her eyes were a little glassy, though, that made him feel like he'd been punched in the gut.

“We may as well get it over with,” she added.

She nudged the second chair toward him with the toe of her boot, just like she had before. This time, it felt less like an invitation and more like a subpoena. He sat down without a word.

“Talk,” she ordered after a moment of silence.

“About the offer? Maggie, I haven’t decided anything yet.”

“That’s not what this is about, and you know it.”

“Then what’s it about?” he asked, instantly regretting it when her eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s about the fact that this is how I had to find out. Maybe it’s about the fact that you didn’t think this was something you should have told me before we...” Her cheeks turned a little pink, and she looked too embarrassed to finish that thought.

“I wanted to, but you were already dealing with so much.”

“Fergus Merrick, don’t you dare insult my intelligence.” She pointed a finger at him, and he put up his hands.

“Well, it’s true, though. It wasn’t only that, alright? But it is why I pulled back when you kissed me. It didn’t seem like the right time to say something.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “Actually, that would have been the *perfect* time to say something!”

“I know that now!”

“You knew it then, too,” she corrected him icily.

Nodding slowly, he stared down at the desk. She was right, and that sent a wave of guilt through him that was heavier than any keg he’d carried over the years.

“Fine,” she said as she placed her palms on the table. “You could have said something, and you didn’t, but what about when we were in my cottage? Why didn’t you say something then?”

“I started to, but then you said we didn’t have to figure it all out right then. No ‘grand declarations’, you said. So, I set it aside again.”

“You are so thick! I meant we didn’t need to plan our entire relationship right then. How did you hear that and think ‘I don’t have to tell her I’m thinking of leaving’?” She had lowered her pitch in her best imitation of his voice. It made him sound like a big, stupid oaf, and it stung more than he cared to admit.

“I’m not saying I was right! I’m just saying what I thought at the time.”

“Well, you thought wrong.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Fergus had no more answers, and Maggie finally sat back and took a slow breath.

“Fine. Good. Moving on then. It’s all out now. The damage is done. So, what’s the deal with this offer?”

Fergus rubbed his palm against his knee. “It’s just a coaching job.”

“Sounded like a lot more than that.”

“Well, it’s not as grand as he made it sound.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t downplay it,” she snapped. Then, more softly, added, “It’s what you want, deep down. Isn’t it?”

He considered for a moment before answering.

“I thought it was. But then, things changed here, and I wasn’t so sure anymore. I wanted to tell you, but then things got out of hand, and I was afraid to tell you. I didn’t mean for this to happen,” he said.

At that, Maggie suddenly laughed. It lacked any real humor, and Fergus tensed.

“My God, you are such a hypocrite, Fergus.”

“Excuse me?”

“You and Callum… both too afraid, so you betrayed my trust and did real damage, because you didn’t have the courage to stand up and do the right thing. The difference is, Callum is a child, and he’s trying to fix the damage he did. Meanwhile, the adult is sitting in my office trying to justify his actions.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“You’re right. It’s not. What you did was worse, and I don’t think it is as easily repaired as my courtyard. In fact, I don’t even know if it can be repaired.” He felt the blood drain from his face, and before he could answer, she continued, “And speaking of Callum. Did you see his reaction to this little visit from Rowan? He’s a boy, Fergus. A scared one who’s only just started believing there might be adults who mean what they say. And now he finds out this way that the man he opened up to has a foot out the door.”

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” Fergus said.

“Before or after someone else says something clever about Leicester over Sunday lunch?”

“Tomorrow. I promise.”

She snorted, then suddenly her eyes narrowed again and she asked, “Did Owen know about all this?” His face must have given it away because she

nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. “I see. So you did confide in someone. Just not the people most affected.”

He swallowed. “I should’ve told you.”

“You think?”

“I was trying to work out what I wanted.”

“You could have told me that too.”

“Aye.”

“Instead, you let me stand there like a fool.”

His jaw tightened. “You’re not a fool.”

“I felt like one.”

He had nothing for that. There was no defense, no useful thing to do with his hands, just the ugly truth of it sitting between them.

Seeing he had no answer, she continued. “So why don’t you tell me now why you haven’t already accepted this offer? What’s keeping you from taking it?”

Fergus felt a slight bit of relief. Talking, he could handle. Her ability to make him feel small was a different matter.

“The offer is good. The problem is, it’s too good. I just keep thinking maybe Leicester wants the bloke I used to be,” he said. The thought had been sitting there for days, and after the way things went earlier, he hated himself enough to finally let it out.

Maggie’s expression softened. “No. They want the coach you are now. They’re not stupid. They know who they’re getting.” She drummed her fingers on the desk for a moment, then looked up at him. “Take the job, Fergus,” she said abruptly, her tone the same one she used with suppliers and contractors.

“What?”

“You can’t make up your mind, so let me help you. Take the job. Walk away. Don’t stay here because you feel guilty about Callum or the Stag. But most of all, Fergus Merrick, do not stay here because of me. I don’t want your pity. I don’t want you to be a martyr, giving up your dreams because poor Maggie just can’t get along without you. I can manage on my own. So, go. Go live your dream, and don’t look back.”

“Maggie...”

“No, Fergus. I don’t want to keep rehashing this. I won’t have you destroying your dreams for me or anyone else in this village. I’ve built

something real here, and I'll be fine, with or without you. So, go. It's obvious this is what you want."

Somewhere deep inside of Fergus, there was an ache unlike anything he had felt before. He swallowed, feeling a lump forming in his throat.

"I don't know if I even want that life anymore," he admitted. "I do want the job, but I want this, too. This is the hardest decision I've had to make, and I didn't expect it to be."

Maggie's eyes shone, though no tears fell. He didn't miss the thickness in her voice when she said, "Fergus, I want to trust you, but right now I don't. I can't talk about this anymore tonight. You wanted to make this decision alone, and now you can. Go home."

He paused for a moment, looking at her, unsure if she really meant it or if she was pushing him away to protect herself. Eventually, he got up and turned to the door. He was at the threshold and looked back. Maggie had lowered her head, resting it in her palms, her shoulders bowed with the weight of a day that hadn't gone the way either of them had imagined.

"Fergus..." she said quietly, without looking up.

"Yes?"

"If you do take it..." She paused and swallowed hard. "Don't just disappear. Have the guts to face me and say goodbye properly."

"Aye," he said quietly, and left the office, shutting the door behind him.

As he made his way through the pub, he took a long, hard look at the bar and the dining room. This place had become a part of him, a part he loved.

The mornings before the doors opened.

Owen on the roof giving him grief.

Callum learning how to belong.

Jenny standing behind the bar with a clipboard and a spine that got straighter every day.

Maggie with flour on her sleeve and a pen in her hair and that look she gave him when he did something right without making a fuss.

Locking the door behind him, the visions in his head changed.

The academy pitches under the floodlights. The feeling before kickoff. The chance to coach boys who still believed the game could change their lives because once, he'd believed it too. His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he didn't need to look at it. It would be Rowan with another polite reminder.

As he climbed into his pickup, he knew one thing he told Maggie was painfully true. This would be the most difficult decision of his life.

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November 17, 2025



-Maggie-

By the time Maggie walked up the drive to Pearce House, she was fifteen minutes late. She carried a bottle of Malbec, which felt appropriately celebratory without seeming like she was trying too hard. She'd spent longer than she would ever admit selecting it at the shop in Amersham, and longer still standing in her kitchen wondering whether she should change her jumper.

She could have sent the wine and a note, but in this village that would have been read as a slight, or a crisis, or both, and dissected before the starter plates were cleared. Special occasions in Great Missenden were rarely only about the person being celebrated. They were an excuse to gather, and gathering was how the village kept its accounts.

The door opened before she reached it and Edie greeted her with a warm smile. Her sleeves were rolled to the elbow, and a tea towel draped over one shoulder like a general's sash. She had kept Pearce House running for years,

though calling her a housekeeper was selling her short. Edie was more mother hen than employee, the sort of woman who could feed you, scold you, and make you feel loved in the same breath.

"You're frozen through," Edie said, taking Maggie's coat with one hand and pressing the other briefly to her cheek. "Come in. Everyone's in the kitchen already making a mess of my table arrangement."

"Edie, I brought…"

"I can see what you brought, and it's lovely. Give it here and come in where it's warm."

Maggie surrendered the bottle and followed the sound of overlapping voices down the corridor.

She'd been to the manor house several times over the years, and for a long time it had seemed like the residents had moved through its halls without actually living in them. Now, with Sadie's arrival, there was laughter and books left open on surfaces. There was even a half-finished mug of tea sitting abandoned on a windowsill beside a stack of manuscripts.

She made it three steps into the kitchen when she was almost toppled over as a familiar giant furry presence shot out from beneath the table, mashing his head affectionately against her side with the force of a battering ram. Riley did not know his own strength and clearly could not contain his need for love and affection.

"Hello, you ridiculous animal." Maggie scratched behind his ears, letting his warmth steady her for a moment before she looked up and took in the room.

Sadie stood near the old cast-iron range, a glass of something sparkling in her hand, looking completely at home. Corbyn stood beside her, and when Sadie laughed at something Ellie, his sister, said, his mouth curved in a way Maggie suspected he didn't even notice.

"Maggie!" Sadie crossed through the kitchen in two steps and hugged her with surprising force. "I'm so glad you came."

"Wouldn't have missed it." Maggie squeezed her back. "Congratulations, love!"

"She's been saying 'it's not a big deal' all week," Ellie called. "We've all been very brave about it."

Sadie gave her a look. "Twice. I said it twice. Be accurate," she scolded with a grin.

“Eight times, if we’re being ‘accurate,’” Corbyn murmured, picking up his own glass and drifting away before Sadie could retaliate.

A woman Maggie hadn’t met before lifted her glass from beside the stove. She was well dressed, poised and watching the exchange with obvious enjoyment.

“And I’ve told her if she downplays this book deal one more time, I’m framing the contract and mailing it to her mother,” she said, her accent placing her as a visiting American.

“You must be Jess,” Maggie said, and the woman nodded.

“You wouldn’t,” Sadie said.

Jess took a sip from her glass. “Try me.”

When Edie called, they all settled around the long dining room table in the kind of haphazard arrangement that happened when there were too many people and not enough matching chairs. Paul appeared from somewhere—the garden, possibly, judging by the cold still clinging to his jacket—and took his seat at the end with a nod to Maggie and nothing else, which was perfectly Paul. Edie’s husband had looked after the grounds at Pearce House for years, steady and broad-shouldered and Yorkshire to his bones.

Edie served dinner, and, to no one’s surprise, it was perfect. The lamb was tender, paired perfectly with the green beans and almonds. It was a meal made with care and out of love for the people gathered around the table.

The conversation revolved mostly around Sadie’s book—the one she had begun after coming to Great Missenden, when she was still trying to remember what it felt like to write for herself. Now it had been picked up by the publisher she worked for, and the whole table seemed determined to celebrate it loudly enough to make up for Sadie’s embarrassed attempts to downplay the achievement.

At one point, when Sadie was describing the moment she had received the call, Corbyn reached beneath the table, and Sadie shifted, moving her arm in a way that suggested her hand had found his. It was lovely, truly, watching this woman who had arrived in Great Missenden with nothing but a suitcase and bruised confidence now sitting in this kitchen surrounded by people who adored her. The fact that they were celebrating something she had made with her own two hands made it all the more poignant.

“I stopped by the Stag yesterday,” Edie said when she returned from the kitchen with the gravy boat and set it near Paul’s elbow.

Maggie looked up, trying to refocus after being pulled abruptly from her thoughts. “You did?”

“Just for lunch.”

Paul made a low sound. “She says ‘just for lunch’ like she wasn’t catching up on the village gossip.”

“I was doing no such thing.”

“You absolutely were, love.”

Edie ignored him and settled back into her chair. “There was a mix-up with the butcher.”

Maggie frowned, brow furrowing. “What mix-up?”

“He brought the wrong order.”

“I didn’t hear about that.”

“No.” Edie reached for the potatoes. “I suppose you weren’t meant to.”

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Maggie blinked. “What does that mean?”

“Jenny caught it before anyone started prep. Phoned him, sorted the replacement delivery, and talked him into sending extra sausages since he’d caused the trouble.”

Paul chuckled. “Poor chap never stood a chance.”

“She was very polite,” Edie said. “She did well. Very well.”

Maggie stared at her plate for a moment. “She should have told me.”

Edie tipped her head slightly. “It wouldn’t have changed the fact that it had been sorted, and from what Jenny said, you already have half the village, three invoices, and a wedding checklist pulling at you.”

She gave Maggie a significant look, almost daring her to say she was wrong.

“She said that?”

“She said you had enough on your plate.”

“That’s not her call.”

“No,” Edie said gently, “but perhaps it was her way of taking something off it.”

Maggie looked down again, willing her emotions to stay in check. Meanwhile, Edie continued serving potatoes as if she hadn’t just cracked open a hornet’s nest.

“People getting more capable doesn’t mean they’ve stopped needing you, love,” Edie continued, spooning carrots onto Paul’s plate. “Sometimes it means you’ve given them enough confidence to stand on their own for a while.”

Paul glanced at her. “I still need you.”

“You need reminding where you’ve left your glasses.”

“Exactly.”

A ripple of laughter broke the moment, and the conversation moved on. Maggie smiled when she was supposed to and laughed at the right places, but Edie’s words lingered uncomfortably.

Corbyn eventually took Riley out for his nighttime circuit of the grounds, and Paul retreated to wherever it was that he went when social energy exceeded his tolerance… which was roughly ninety minutes into the gathering. The remaining women migrated to the sitting room with mugs of tea and the last of the wine. Normally, Maggie would have preferred tea, but tonight she filled another glass of wine.

It wasn’t until Ellie spoke that Maggie realized she had walked into a trap.

“So.” Ellie tucked her legs beneath her on the sofa, cradling her mug with both hands and fixing Maggie with the kind of direct gaze that probably worked beautifully on difficult patients. “Are we going to talk about it, Maggie?”

Maggie’s jaw, predictably, tightened. “Talk about what?”

“Maggie, love,” Edie said from the armchair, warm and steady and utterly impossible to argue with. “You know how word travels. You and Fergus have had the whole village talking since he came home. Even more so the last few weeks.”

“And he did hunt down Freddie for you,” Sadie said gently.

“Freddie?” Jess asked from the end of the sofa.

“Her rooster,” Sadie replied, like this was a normal contribution to a serious conversation.

“Oh! Yes, of course,” Jess said, taking a sip of wine. Maggie wondered if perhaps she thought she had just become the victim of a prank.

Maggie looked down at her own wine and swirled it uneasily, choosing not to look up when she answered, “It’s not that simple. He has a very good offer. Forwards coach at the academy in Leicester. That’s rugby again… in a way that matters.”

No one spoke; they just waited expectantly as if they knew there was more coming.

“Problem is,” she admitted, needing to fill the silence, “he didn’t have the guts to tell me about it. I only found out because an old friend of his stopped by and dropped it like a bomb in the middle of the Stag. Right in front of everyone.” No one looked surprised, thus confirming Edie’s earlier statement about the village. “So, he and I had to have a discussion about it.”

Edie looked at her and said flatly, “You mean you had a right go at him.” Maggie’s only answer was another small sip of wine, and she added, “I thought as much.”

Then, Edie took a sip of tea, looking smug in a way only she could.

“I did, if you must know. After telling him off for keeping it from me, I told him he should take the job, that he shouldn’t stick around for me or anyone else.”

“Oh, dear,” Jess mumbled.

Maggie shot her a sharp look. “What does that mean?”

“Well, is that all that was said?” Jess asked.

“More or less, that’s how it went down. Yes.” Maggie’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“So, you weren’t honest with him, either,” Jess stated matter-of-factly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I was. You know, I’m starting to understand why Corbyn prefers Riley’s company to that of people,” she said, trying to make it a joke with a slight smirk.

Ellie gave a quiet snort into her wine. “She has a point, though, Maggie.”

Sadie leaned forward slightly, her expression softening. “Maggie, telling him not to stay out of obligation was the right thing. But telling him to leave, while not telling him what he means to you... What do you want him to do with that?”

Maggie froze. She had deliberately avoided telling him how she felt because she had been too busy giving him a tongue-lashing for his cowardice. The truth was, not only had she avoided being honest, but she’d gone to great lengths to make it seem as if she didn’t care.

“He knows how I feel,” Maggie said, but the words sounded thin even to her own ears.

Ellie tilted her head. “Are you sure? There’s a difference between needing him as a helping hand and needing him as... well... more.”

“That is an extremely irritating distinction.”

“One of my many gifts,” Ellie said.

Sadie’s voice was gentle when she said, “You told me once some people put up walls to see who might climb over. If you keep building them higher, he’ll never reach the top.”

Outside, the wind brushed through the bare branches, scratching lightly against the window. Maggie opened her mouth to refute the claim but immediately closed it again.

Edie’s lips twitched, but her eyes stayed kind as she patted Maggie’s arm. “You don’t have to ask him to stay, love,” she said, “but if you love him, or if you’re anywhere near it, you owe him the truth of that. Not because it should be decided for him, but because it’s part of what he’s choosing.”

Maggie hated how simple it sounded, and how impossible it felt.

“If I tell him, it’s pressure.”

“No,” Sadie said, letting go of Maggie’s hand and leaning back against the sofa. “It’s truth. You owe it to him to tell him that his leaving would hurt.”

“Paul spent years refusing to admit he wanted more,” Edie told her, setting her teacup aside. “I told myself I was being patient, but I was frightened. Thought if I asked too much, I would ruin our friendship.”

Maggie looked away, trying to ignore the way her eyes stung. She had told herself she was giving Fergus his freedom, but really, she’d been trying to keep her dignity intact if he left.

“I really don’t need this right now. There’s so much going on that I’m responsible for. People are counting on me.”

“You know,” Edie said, voice taking on an almost maternal tone, “I think you’ve spent so long carrying everyone else that you’ve forgotten there’s a difference between helping and holding.”

Maggie frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“You think if you put something down, no one else will pick it up. The Stag… Jenny… Callum... Hannah and the wedding.”

“Someone has to keep things steady,” Maggie insisted.

“Sometimes, and sometimes the kindest thing you can do is trust people to carry a bit of it with you. Even Fergus.”

“You know, you don’t have to choose between loving the Stag and wanting a life outside of running it every minute of every day,” Ellie added, her voice uncharacteristically soft.

Maggie gave her a look. “I don’t do that.”

Ellie lifted an eyebrow, but before she could continue, Sadie jumped in.

“You told Fergus to choose Leicester over you. Just like you’re choosing the pub over yourself. Maggie… that’s not living.”

The words landed so quietly that Maggie almost missed the force of them, and for a moment, no one spoke.

Then Jess lifted her mug. “For what it’s worth, I’ve only known you for a couple of hours, and even I think that one hit bone.”

Maggie let out a weak laugh despite herself. “Is this a dinner party or an ambush?”

“Both,” Jess said, smiling sweetly, and giving a mock salute with her wine.

Corbyn appeared in the doorway, Riley at his side and the November cold wafting off both of them. His gaze flicked around the room, taking in the women… the tea… Maggie’s expression, and he frowned.

“Should I fetch the wine from the kitchen?”

“Very subtle, Corbie,” Ellie said.

“I wasn’t trying to be subtle. And for the thousandth time...”

“...don’t call me Corbie!” finished Ellie and Sadie simultaneously.

Corbyn threw up his hands in exasperation, disappearing around the corner.

Riley, however, padded directly over to Maggie, and before she knew what was happening, he had shoved his enormous head into her lap. He did it with such force that she nearly spilled what was left of her wine, but she moved it out of his path just in time. His tail swung in a slow, heavy rhythm against the leg of the sofa, and once there, Riley didn’t move. He simply fixed her with an affectionate stare.

“Oh, you great lump.” Maggie chuckled, sinking her fingers into the wiry fur behind his ears. She couldn’t help thinking about how easy it was with dogs. You didn’t have to articulate the specific nature of your emotional constipation; they just put their heads in your lap and breathed warm air onto your thigh until you felt like weeping.

“I should go,” Maggie said softly, still fixed on her fingers in Riley’s fur. “It’s getting late, and Freddie likes his breakfast promptly at sunrise.”

She rose, gently dislodging Riley’s head from her lap. He let out a reproachful groan, because apparently even dogs in this village had opinions about her emotional growth, and the room shifted into farewell mode.

Edie stood, accepted the wine glass from Maggie, and passed it off to Ellie. Then she pressed Maggie’s face between her warm palms.

“You’ll be all right, love,” Edie said tenderly. “Deep down, you already know what to do, and like always, you’ll do it, and everything will work out.”

“Course it will,” Maggie said, her voice coming out scratchier than she intended.

Sadie hugged her next.

“Take a chance,” she whispered near Maggie’s ear. “Even when it’s terrifying. You deserve happiness.”

Maggie closed her eyes for half a second.

Eventually, she made it to the door. Pausing, she turned back and said to the group, “Thank you. All of you. For… whatever the hell this was.”

“It’s called dinner, dear,” Edie said with that smile.

“Dinner, intervention, same thing,” Maggie forced a laugh.

The November air quickly wiped away the warmth and drowsiness from dinner and drinks. Maggie pulled her coat tighter as she walked to her car, being careful to watch her step in the darkness. Overhead, the sky was clear and black and scattered with stars, and she sat in the driver's seat for a long moment without turning the key.

She didn't have a plan, or the right words. Even if she did, there wasn't much she could do while he was away. Driving up to Leicester and surprising him was not even a consideration.

She understood something now that she hadn't before. It settled deep in the place where Edie's quiet wisdom, Ellie's precision, and Sadie's gentleness had all converged.

She owed him honesty, or she was no better than he had been. There were so many choices before them, and deep down, she wanted to make them with him.

Maybe the fact that the Stag could survive without her hands on every moving part didn't mean it was no longer hers.

Maybe loving something didn't require suffocating it.

Maybe Fergus could want Leicester and still want home, and she could want him and still let him choose.

Maybe one person's dream didn't have to die so that someone else's could live.

Maggie turned the key, and the engine caught, headlights spilling across the darkened garden. As she pulled slowly down the drive, she glanced once in the rearview mirror. Pearce House glowed behind her, golden windows set into all that old stone, warm and lived-in and no longer quite so lonely.

Looking ahead, she was still afraid, but underneath the fear, struggling to get out, was an unfamiliar feeling: hope.

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November 17, 2025



-Fergus-

The smell hit him first. Cut grass and damp earth mixing with the sharp bite of fresh pitch markings. Fergus stood at the edge of the training field with his hands in his jacket pockets, taking it all in.

Fifteen boys in academy kits moved through a contact drill on the far side, their breath rising white against the gray November sky. Bodies met pad with a heavy, familiar thud, then a coach's whistle cut through the noise —two short blasts, one long—and the formation reset.

"Second row kid. Number six," Rowan said beside him. "Watch his footwork on the next carry."

The boy was sixteen, maybe seventeen, and still growing into his frame. He took the ball from the nine and drove into contact. He had good body height, and decent leg drive, but his feet stuttered right before the hit. The hesitation cost him momentum.

“He’s thinking too much,” Fergus said before he could stop himself. “Needs to commit his weight earlier. He’s got the power, but he’s second-guessing where the hit’s coming from.”

Rowan looked at him sideways, with a small, knowing smile.

“See? You can’t help yourself.”

Fergus exhaled through his nose. “Doesn’t take a genius.”

“No,” Rowan said, turning to walk along the perimeter path. “Takes someone who’s been there.”

Fergus followed him.

The facilities had everything a team might need. There was an indoor training barn, a fully stocked weight room, and even a recovery suite with ice baths and physio tables that made Fergus’s knee ache as the memories hit him. He couldn’t deny that the sights and sounds were working their magic on him. Even the familiar smells of rubber, leather, and a well-tended pitch were intoxicating.

The academy director, Priya, gave him a tour of the welfare offices and the education block. Every detail seemed to matter to her—not just tackles and fixtures, but sleep, nutrition, and schoolwork were all accounted for.

“We’re not trying to just build players, but capable young men,” she said, pausing beside a classroom. There was a whiteboard covered in biology notes, and next to it stood a tactics board that had a defensive formation drawn in colorful dry wipe. “Not all of these boys will get contracts, but they’ll be ready for whatever comes next.”

Fergus thought of Callum and all the restless anger and shame looking for somewhere to go. He was the kind of boy who could still go either way depending on who got to him first. The kind of boy who could use a place like this.

They circled back outside for the tail end of a scrummaging session. An assistant coach, a thick-necked man with a voice like gravel, was working the forwards through engagement sequences. Fergus’s eyes tracked bind positions, spine angles, the way one loosehead dipped his head a fraction too early.

“You’re doing it again,” Rowan murmured with amusement.

“Doing what?”

“Coaching in your head. It’s all over your face.”

“Nonsense.”

“You’re not fooling anyone, mate. You have the same look you had in Coventry when I dropped that ball in the twenty-two. You looked at me like I’d personally insulted your family.”

Fergus snorted. “You did insult my family. You dropped the ball and blamed my pass.”

“It was a shit pass, and you know it.”

“It was perfectly weighted to where you would’ve been if your hamstring hadn’t already been hanging on by a thread.”

Rowan laughed, the sound drawing a glance from the assistant coach. “Fair. My hamstring was a disaster that season, but I seem to remember you playing a match with two fingers strapped together and didn’t tell anyone that one of them was probably broken?”

“I told the physio bloke.”

“In the car park. After three pints.”

They walked in silence for a moment. A group of younger boys ran sevens drills on the far field, and Fergus watched a flanker sidestep clean past three defenders with natural balance that couldn’t be taught.

These boys had no idea what it felt like to have your body be able to do extraordinary things and then suddenly fail completely. They needed someone who could help them see that discipline wasn’t the same as grinding yourself into dust… and he could be that person.

Rowan had lapsed into silence, letting Fergus have a moment, seeming to understand in the way only a former teammate could.

Finally, the whistle blew, and the boys reset. Boots thudded against turf in a rhythm Fergus had spent years trying not to miss.

“Come on,” Rowan said eventually, tilting his head toward the car park. “I’ll buy you dinner and bore you with the contractual details.”

The pub Rowan chose didn’t try too hard—dark wood, brass taps, a chalkboard menu with four options and no apologies. They took a corner table beneath a framed photograph of a Leicester squad from the late nineties, which Rowan acknowledged with a raised eyebrow and no comment.

Fergus wrapped his hands around a pint of bitter while Rowan laid it out.

“Salary’s here.” Rowan slid his phone across the table, a figure glowing on the screen. No fanfare, just numbers.

Fergus looked at it and almost choked. It was a bit higher than it had been in the email, which had already been more than triple what he made at the

Stag. Money had never been the problem—he'd been careful with his savings—but this would mean comfort and breathing room. Something he hadn't truly had in years.

"They're also willing to pay for you to relocate," Rowan continued. "Starts in January."

"January." Fergus took a drink. "That's quick."

"We're flexible on the exact start, but we need someone in post. The current coach is already gone. Medical leave that became permanent. These forwards have been without consistent leadership since September."

Fergus understood Rowan's position. He knew firsthand how a lack of structure could affect teenage boys, having seen it on a smaller scale back in the village.

"What's the catch?" Fergus asked.

Rowan smiled. "It's hard work. The hours during the season are relentless, and teenagers are ungrateful little bastards about eighty percent of the time, but you know that already."

"I do."

"So, stop looking for a catch. It's a real position with real responsibility, and we want you specifically."

Fergus looked at him. "Why?"

"Because you know what happens when a lad gets too much praise too young. And what happens when a career becomes the only thing holding a person together, or what an injury can do to a man's head if no one is honest with him early enough." He leaned forward slightly and added, "And because the man you are now might be better for these boys than the player you were then."

Fergus looked up from his pint at Rowan, who had managed to see through all the hesitation. For the first time in years, he was being offered a way to bring both the former player and the current coach into one whole. If only the timing weren't so awful. If it had happened just a few months earlier, everything would have been so much simpler.

Rowan looked hard at him.

"There shouldn't even be a question at this point. But I can see there is—a big one. So, forget talking to me as a recruiter. Talk to me as your mate, Ferg." He put the phone away and rested his hands on the table. "What's stopping you from saying yes right now?" he asked earnestly.

Fergus turned his glass slowly on the table, watching condensation slide down the side. Behind the bar, a woman with short gray hair pulled a pint. She reminded him of no one in particular, and somehow still made him think of Maggie.

Maggie, who was probably in her cottage with paperwork spread across her kitchen table, pretending she wasn't working because she'd changed out of her apron. Maggie, who had stood in the office two nights ago and practically ordered him out of her life, even as she looked angry and stricken.

"I've got commitments," Fergus said carefully. "Back in the village. Things I can't easily walk away from."

Rowan leaned back, arms folded. "The pub."

"The pub… the local team… and other things."

"Other things? As in people? Like the lass I met at the pub, maybe?"

"Rowan..." he said in a warning tone, wondering if he really was that easy to read.

"Alright. I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but I've known you for twenty years, Ferg. Used to be nothing that would stop you. Rugby is in your blood, mate. There are precious few things that would have pulled you away from it. It would take something—or someone—more powerful than a job at a village pub to make you hesitate."

"Aye, it would."

"Look, you obviously can't have it both ways. But Ferg, listen to me," he said, leaning a little closer, "if this is about her, if she really cares about you, she won't wreck this for you."

Fergus had no good reply other than to take a deep pull of his pint.

"Can I have until Friday?" Fergus asked finally.

Rowan nodded without hesitation. "Friday. Call me by six. After that, I have to start talking to other candidates. I don't want to, but I will."

"Fair enough."

They ordered food, and the conversation drifted to safer ground.

Old matches and former teammates who had gone into coaching or commentary boxes. The ongoing mystery of how certain coaches kept their jobs. A prop they had both known who once tried to fix a dislocated finger by biting a towel and pulling it himself, only to faint before he finished counting to three.

Fergus laughed more than he expected to. The ease was real, and so was the temptation.

Underneath it all, though, the deadline made his stomach twist.

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After, Fergus sat on the edge of the bed with damp hair and a hollow feeling the shower hadn’t touched.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand, and Owen’s name lit up on the screen.

Fergus picked up. “Alright?”

“Alright. Quick one. The gasket for the immersion tank at the Stag… Maggie said you ordered it from the place in Amersham, but they’ve sent a twenty-two mil instead of a twenty-eight. Did you specify or did they guess?”

“I specified. They’re useless. Send it back.”

“Right.” There was a pause on Owen’s end, and then he said, “Maggie said you’re in Leicester.”

His voice was carefully neutral, which meant he had already formed several opinions and was choosing not to detonate them all at once.

“Yeah.”

“The coaching thing with Rowan.”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” There was another pause, and then, “Good for you.”

Fergus leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and stared at the thin carpet. Gray chevrons on darker gray. The sort of boring pattern one could get lost staring at while sorting life’s issues.

“It was just a conversation. Nothing’s decided.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. It’s a good opportunity,” Owen said, tone staying even. “You should take it if it’s what you want.”

“How’s everything else?” Fergus asked.

“Fine. Quiet. Davies’ ewes are starting to lamb early, so he’s been charming company.”

“That bad?”

“Man accused me of conspiring with sheep.”

Fergus huffed. Gareth Davies was consistent; there was no denying that.

“Jenny’s been helping finalize wedding bits,” Owen continued.

“And Maggie?” Fergus asked before he could stop himself.

Owen thankfully didn’t tease him for once. “Still trying to do six people’s jobs at once.”

“Sounds about right.”

“She’s managing, Ferg. As always.”

He said it the way you said someone was managing when what you really meant was they were running on fumes and refusing to admit it. Fergus knew that inflection because he’d heard it from Owen years ago.

Mum’s managing.

Then the words that had meant someone should be here, and it probably should be you, but I won’t say it because I’ve already decided to handle it myself.

“Jenny’s taking more on. Whether Maggie notices or not,” Owen continued, drawing Fergus from his thoughts.

“Oh, she notices.” Fergus couldn’t help smiling, picturing that.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Owen said, “Can I ask something without you getting all tragic and eldest-brother about it?”

“No promises.”

“Have you considered that there might be a way to make this work?”

Fergus opened his eyes. “What?”

“Leicester. The Stag. Maggie. All of it.”

“I’ve thought about that,” Fergus said, pushing off the bed and crossing to the window. The curtains were open on the car park and behind it lay the M1 with cars whizzing by. “But either I’d be gone most of the week or she’d have to leave the Stag in someone else’s hands.”

“That would be rough. But I’m not saying you should commute yourself into an early grave, and I’m certainly not saying Maggie should sell the pub and follow you around with packed lunches and inspirational speeches.”

“God help us.”

“Exactly, no one wants that. I’m just saying maybe there’s a middle bit you haven’t looked at because you’re too busy acting like it’s exile or nothing.”

Fergus stared out at the car park.

A middle bit.

He could see all the problems immediately.

The distance…

The cost…

The training hours…

The match weekends…

Maggie’s refusal to loosen her grip on the Stag…

Under all of it was something quieter. Fear. Long distance meant absence, and that had never done much good in his life.

“She’ll never go for it.”

“Listen to you, assuming the worst of her. She’s not the person you think she is. Here’s a novel idea: Ask her!”

“Even if she agreed, I’d be gone most of the time. You’d have to pick up the slack,” Fergus said.

“I already do, a lot more than you think, dear brother. You’re even thicker than I thought if you don’t know that.”

“I know you do, Owen. I’m not that thick. I’m just saying, it would be even more.”

“I can handle it, Ferg. I’m not fifteen years old anymore.”

“I know.”

“Just tell me what you decide before you tell the whole village.”

“I will.”

“Good. Now, about this gasket…”

Fergus let out a rough laugh. “Night, Owen.”

“Night, Ferg.”

The line went dead and Fergus stared out the window for a long moment. Then he unlocked the phone. The email from Rowan was still there, opened but unanswered, and he scrolled through it again.

Owen’s words about the middle bit echoed through his mind.

Leicester wasn’t an escape, and Great Missenden wasn’t something he’d settled for.

They were both real, and the more honest he was about wanting each of them, the less willing he was to pretend choosing one meant he had stopped wanting the other.

He closed the email without replying. Climbing into bed, he set the phone face-down on the nightstand and shut out the light, praying silently that morning would give him the answers he needed.

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November 18, 2025



-Maggie-

Maggie took a sip of her tea and immediately grimaced. It was cold. She let out a groan, setting it down on the table, wondering how at forty years old she never managed to finish a hot cup of tea.

The hum of the fridge and the ticking of the clock were the only noises keeping her company, except for the occasional sound of the wind rustling in the beech behind her cottage. They were drowned out by the voices in her head that would not settle.

She'd thought she handled Fergus entirely appropriately three days ago, being the adult in the room and telling him to chase his dreams. The truth was, she hadn't really given him a choice—she'd given him a push to protect herself.

She pondered brewing a fresh cup of hot tea but instead opted for a small glass of wine, thinking it might help quiet her mind. Her phone buzzed on the table as she took a sip, and Fergus's name popped up with a text box.

Home safe. Long drive. Talk tomorrow.

That was all.

No flourish. No attempt to soften it. Just the fact that he was back and letting her know.

Tomorrow was sensible.

Tomorrow had customers and schedules and enough interruptions to hide behind if either of them lost their nerve. It was the perfect call on his part.

It was also entirely unacceptable tonight.

She stood so quickly the chair scraped loudly against the tile. Grabbing her coat off the hook, she shoved her feet into her boots without tying them, and wrapped a scarf around her neck one-handed while checking the back door was locked with the other. She strode out the front door quickly and stepped out into the darkness, her warm breath visible in the cold.

Fergus's cottage sat at the end of a short lane on the far side of the churchyard, which was possibly the least practical route to walk in the middle of the night. But it was the quickest, and she'd done it enough times in the past.

A light was still on in the front window, and she quickened her pace, making sure she got to the door before it had a chance to go out. Bounding up the steps, she knocked before she could second-guess herself.

A beat later, the door opened, and there he was, standing there in a soft gray jumper and socks, looking unkempt and tired. He was holding a mug of something that steamed faintly in the cold air between them, looking completely unsurprised by her presence.

"Hi," she said.

"Maggie."

"I know it's late."

"Come in," he said, shaking his head, and stepped back as he gestured with his free hand.

He shut the door and stood in the hall for a moment, as if he wasn't sure whether to lead her somewhere or wait for her to lead him.

"Kitchen?" she asked, thinking it felt safer than the sitting room. Sitting meant staying, and that wasn't part of the half-baked plan she had come up with on the walk over.

He went wordlessly ahead of her, and she followed the broad line of his shoulders down the short corridor. The kettle was still hot, and she leaned

against the counter while he grabbed another mug. She had rehearsed everything on the way, but when he finally handed her the tea, everything she'd practiced left her head.

"Right," she said. "Well. This is going to be dreadful, so I'm going to do it quickly."

"Has something happened?" he asked, his voice suddenly taking on an anxious tone.

"No…" she told him, setting down the mug. "I mean, not like that. Everyone is okay. Well, I mean, technically yes, but you may not find it okay, that is to say..."

His hand came to rest on her shoulder, pausing her ramblings long enough for him to say, "Maggie, slow down."

She forced herself to take a deep breath, trying to fight the urge to lean into him.

"I've come to apologize," she said. "I'm not apologizing for being angry that you didn't tell me... I'm still getting over that. And I'm not apologizing for telling you that you'd be right to take the job because I'd tell you that again tomorrow. That part I meant."

"That's fair. So, what are you apologizing for?"

"I'm apologizing for leading you to believe I didn't care whether you left or not." She looked down at the tea on the counter, willing herself to say the words. "It was a very good performance, and I was extremely proud of it for about twelve hours… but it was rubbish."

Fergus opened his mouth to say something, but she reached up and placed her fingers on his lips.

"It wasn't fair to you," she stammered, lowering her hand. "I pushed you away. Hard. I told myself I was doing it for you, forcing you to leave for your own good, but I was really trying to protect myself. I was terrified that if I told you how I felt, you might actually stay, and then one day you would hate me for convincing you to give up this opportunity." She paused, turning to face the counter and the untouched tea. "So, I was calling you a coward while being an even bigger one. Very attractive, I'm sure."

"Mags."

"No, let me finish before I lose my nerve." She risked a glance over, and he nodded once. "This isn't about the pub, or Callum, or Jenny. This is about me. I don't want a future that doesn't have you in it. I'm not asking you to choose me over the offer. I'm not saying you should stay. If you leave, it will hurt

like hell. I can admit that. I'm telling you this because you deserve the truth, and whatever your choice is, I will make my peace with it."

She felt her eyes begin to brim and swallowed hard, resisting the urge to give the game away by wiping at them.

Fergus set his mug down slowly. For a moment, he said nothing. Then he turned and put both hands flat on the counter, as if he didn't trust them to stay still.

"Maggie. I need to tell you something. About Leicester."

She held her breath, waiting for the inevitable.

"The academy's good," he said. "Really good. Better than I expected. The facilities are top-notch."

"I see," she replied, finally taking a sip of tea, her mouth suddenly dry.

"The boys are the thing, though. Watching them train, being asked what I thought, feeling like what I did and said mattered… I didn't realize how much I missed it until I was standing there." He paused, then added softly, "And I hated myself for missing it."

"I don't understand."

"It felt disloyal to everyone and everything here."

His face looked truly broken, as if his strength had finally failed him, and a pit formed in her stomach. She placed her hand on the counter next to his, their fingers barely touching, and asked, "Well, what was your favorite part?"

He blinked. "What?"

"Of Leicester. Tell me your favorite part."

The expression on his face said he was waiting for it to be a trap. Waiting for her to get angry and yell. Instead, she just remained quiet.

"I don't know."

"You do."

"There was a lad," he said after a moment. "Second row. Good size, but he kept hesitating right before contact. Losing momentum because he was bracing for the hit instead of committing to it."

"What would you do with him?"

"Work his foot placement. Build up the contact drills slowly. Get him used to choosing the hit instead of waiting for it. He's strong enough. He doesn't trust it yet."

Fergus stopped then, apparently hearing himself, and Maggie couldn't help but smile. "That was your favorite part, wasn't it? Knowing you could help him."

"Aye."

She wanted to resent him for wanting the job, but hearing him explain…

"That's who you are, Fergus," she said.

They sat with that for a moment. The kettle clicked as it cooled, and somewhere outside, wind moved against the window. The silence was comfortable, and neither rushed to fill it.

"Owen said something, though," Fergus told her eventually.

"That sounds dangerous. What did he say?"

"That maybe there's a way to make it work. Leicester. Here. Us." His mouth tightened, but he continued, "Some middle bit we haven't considered."

"What did you say?"

"What could I say? It's a two-hour drive. It's complicated. I don't have any easy answers."

"No," she said. "Me neither."

"I want to figure it out, Mags. I mean, would you consider leaving the Stag behind, even part-time?"

There had been a time when she would have called him mad and laughed in his face. Now, though…

"Did you know Jenny handled a supplier problem before I even knew there was one?" she asked, and his brows lifted.

"Did she?"

"She did. Very well, apparently. Edie told me at dinner. Which reminds me, never let me accept a dinner invitation to the Pearce House unaccompanied again."

"Oh?"

"You weren't the only one to receive unsolicited advice," she told him before pushing on. "A week ago, I'd have sworn Jenny wasn't ready for that. I'd have sworn the whole thing would land back on my desk."

"I'm guessing it didn't."

"It didn't... so maybe I've been wrong, thinking I have to control every little thing at the Stag." She watched him carefully, already seeing the crooked smile forming on his lips. "Don't you dare gloat," she warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Listen, I'm not saying I'd leave," she added quickly. "Because I wouldn't. It's my home. It's ridiculous and expensive, but it's mine. But maybe…" She paused, looking down at where her hand still sat next to his. "Maybe it doesn't all have to be one way or the other."

"What would that mean, though?"

"I have no earthly idea."

At this, they both laughed, and for the first time since the whole wedding mess started, she felt herself relax.

“I don’t want you commuting yourself into the ground,” she said. “And I don’t want to pretend I’d be fine if you were gone most of the week and miserable the rest of it.”

“I would never ask that of you.”

“I know. That’s why I’m saying it first.” His pinky brushed against her thumb on the counter, and she continued, “And I don’t want you giving up Leicester for me. I can see how torn you are.”

“Can you?”

“Everyone can, Fergus. Even Owen in his own special way. We all see it.”

“I could do without Owen seeing it.”

He turned to her then, and the kitchen suddenly felt smaller. But he didn’t move closer, and it wasn’t lost on her that he was giving her the last inch. Even now.

“Maggie, I...” he said.

“I know,” she whispered.

His hand lifted but paused. She closed the distance, and his palm settled against her cheek. His skin was warm and rough, and she closed her eyes when he leaned in.

His lips brushed over hers, softly and carefully, and she returned it, her hand resting against his chest. She wanted to stay there, to let the warmth and the closeness do what words couldn’t.

Decisions still needed to be made though, and she forced herself to pull away.

“I should go.”

He lowered his hand slowly, almost reluctantly. “Yeah.”

“I mean it,” she said, because apparently she could not leave without making things more difficult. “Don’t make any decisions tonight. Not because I came over. Not because I said any of this.”

“I won’t.”

For a few seconds, neither of them moved. Then Maggie picked up her scarf from where she had left it and wound it around her neck with hands that were only slightly unsteady.

“Get some sleep,” she said.

“Bossy woman.”

“Don’t you forget it.”

He walked her to the door. The hallway was dim, and the house was quiet around them. At the threshold, she turned back, meaning to say something light. Something about roosters or invoices or not dying on the M1.

Instead, she said, “Thank you for telling me.”

His gaze grew tender in a way she hadn’t seen before. “Thank you for asking.”

That nearly undid her, and she opened the door before her resolve could falter. She stepped onto the path and didn’t look back until she reached the gate. Fergus was still there in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame.

She lifted a hand, and he lifted his, then she turned toward the churchyard and started home.

She hadn’t fixed anything. Not really. Leicester still existed. The Stag still existed. The distance between them still had a shape neither of them knew how to manage, but the conversation was no longer happening in separate rooms. Whatever was decided, it could be decided together, for better or worse.

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November 19, 2025



-Fergus-

Fergus arrived at the Stag ten minutes early, making his way through the side door into the kitchen. It already smelled of fresh coffee, along with rosemary from whatever the kitchen staff had simmering. Maggie was already there, of course, elbow-deep in a crate of lemons, and she looked up when he came in. There was a brief, unusual pause as they took each other in.

“Morning,” she said finally.

“Morning.”

She poured him a coffee and slid it across the counter. Their fingers brushed on the handle, and they both lingered for a moment.

“Deliveries are late,” she said. “Naturally.”

“Naturally.”

He drank his coffee, and she returned to the lemons. Outside, a wood pigeon made its usual disappointed noise from the roof of the coal shed.

Jenny came through the swing door with a clipboard and headed straight past Maggie to the till. She cracked it open and started counting the float. Fergus watched as Maggie took notice and began to step in, but then she stopped. With a frown, she set a lemon down and picked up another, pretending she hadn't even spotted Jenny. With some effort, he kept his face neutral and took another sip of his coffee.

"What are you staring at?" she asked.

"I'm drinking."

"You're staring while drinking."

"I can do both. I'm very talented."

She choked back a laugh, but he still heard it, and the sound cracked some of the remaining tension.

"She's good," he observed when Jenny disappeared back through the swinging door.

"I know."

"Keep letting her be good."

Maggie paused, a slow breath leaving her as she looked at him. Her voice was soft when she admitted, "I'm trying."

"It's a good look for you."

"Don't push it, Merrick," she shot back.

He just smiled, and she went back to the lemons.

It was ten past eleven when Jenny's phone rang.

Fergus was on the other side of the bar wrestling with a pump clip, but he heard her voice change. It was that quick, anxious tone that came when bad news arrived. He set the clip down, his focus on Jenny.

"Yes… yes, this is…" Jenny turned away, one hand going to the back of her neck. "He what? No, he… no, I dropped him off. I saw him go in." Maggie was already crossing the room. Jenny lowered the phone, her face suddenly pale. "He made registration. Made first lesson. He's not in his second, and they can't find him."

"Have they tried his…"

"Phone's off. Goes straight through."

Maggie quickly reached across the bar and took the phone from Jenny's trembling hand.

"Thank you," she said. "We'll look for him. Call Jenny if he turns up."

Then she hung up and raised her voice just enough to carry into the kitchen.

“We’re closing. Right now. Front door locked, back door locked, lights off. Nobody’s eating lunch here today.”

The cook stuck his head through the hatch. “Mags…”

“You heard me,” she said again, calm and clear. “Callum went missing from school. We’re closed until we find him.”

Over the years, Fergus had seen Maggie pour drinks with a fever, and keep the place open through storms, leaks, and half the village acting like fools. Business had always been her top priority. Until today. Today, she was shutting it down without hesitation.

“Right,” Maggie said, pulling on her coat. “Fergus, you take the north end. High Street, playing fields, the cut-through by the churchyard. Jenny, love, stay here…” Jenny began to object, but Maggie waved her off firmly, “No, don’t argue. Stay here in case he comes back or someone phones. I’ll do the museum end and the woods behind the school. Fergus, would you ring Owen, see if he can check the lanes?”

“I’ll call Davies, too,” Fergus said. “He’ll walk his top field.”

“Good.” They converged on the door at the same time, the rest of the staff filing past, offering to check other locations around the village. Maggie paused at the door, her hand coming up to rest against his chest.

“Find him and bring him back here,” she said, as if there was no doubt in her mind that he would be the one to do so.

“I will.”

The rugby pitch sat at the end of a rutted lane a quarter mile past the last house, and in November it always looked slightly abandoned. Fergus parked on the verge because the gate was chained, and ducked under it, crossing the empty pitch.

He didn’t call out. If Callum were here, calling would only send him farther in. He also didn’t head for the bleachers. If the lad were anything like him, he wouldn’t hide in the same place twice.

The clubhouse was locked, the windows dark, but Fergus continued around the side, past the bins and the little propane cage. There was a strip of concrete at the back where the older lads sometimes sat and drank cans they weren’t supposed to have.

It only took a moment to spot him. Callum was wedged in the corner between the wall and a disused ball cage, knees drawn to his chest. Even from a distance, Fergus could see one eye already darkening. He didn’t stop walking but forced himself to keep his pace steady.

When he reached the wall, he lowered himself beside the boy with the small grunt his knees now required. He set his back to the bricks, resting his hands on his thighs, and leaned his head back against the wall.

After a minute, Callum said, “How’d you know?”

“It’s a gift.”

“Good gift.”

“Your sister’s worried sick. The school rang.”

Callum shifted but said nothing.

He’d been coached, decades ago now, by a man who’d once told a very young Fergus Merrick that when a player was upset, the worst thing you could do was fill the space with your own voice. He’d thought it was rubbish at the time.

He’d changed his mind since.

“How bad is it?” he asked finally.

“I’ll live.”

“Was it who I think it was?”

Callum shrugged. “Yeah, the ones from the courtyard.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah.”

Fergus turned his head just enough to look him over. The eye was bad but would go down. The split on his lip had stopped bleeding, and there was a graze along his jaw where he’d hit something rough, like tarmac perhaps. It was nothing that needed A&E, unless Callum was lying or didn’t know. He turned his gaze forward. It would hold for now.

“They said I was thick for hanging round the club,” Callum told him. “Said the only reason I didn’t get kicked off the team was because you felt sorry for me. Said Maggie only kept Jenny on because she felt sorry for her.” He pulled his sleeve down over his knuckles. “Said you were leaving anyway, so no one would be around to stand up for me.”

“That’s a lot of talking for a bunch of lads who didn’t have anything worth saying.”

Callum’s mouth twitched, then he looked angry with himself for it.

“Is it true? Are you leaving?”

He had known the question was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“It’s true that there’s an offer in Leicester. It’s not true that I’ve decided to leave.”

“I bet you’re going to.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s better than here,” Callum said, sliding his foot along the ground in disgust. “Any place is better than here.”

“You start thinking like that, you’ll spend the rest of your life running from things.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Listen, Callum, I’m not going to lie to you. A big part of me wants to take it.” Callum went very still, but Fergus continued, “When I went there, I felt more like myself than I have in years. Since before my knee went. I’d forgotten what it was like to stand on a pitch with lads who might become something and just do the work. Watch them get better. Watch it click. But I haven’t said yes.”

“Why not?” Callum asked, looking over at him.

Fergus rubbed his thumb against his knee. “Because I love it here. Owen’s here. The pub is here. You’re here, even if you’re a massive pain in my arse.” He gave Callum a small playful nudge. “People who care about me are here, and I care about them. I don’t want to lose that.”

“So don’t go.”

“I wish it were that simple. I’ve spent years telling myself I was fine with leaving that life behind. But wanting it doesn’t go away just because I wish it would. A friend told me rugby was in my blood, and he’s not wrong.” He looked out across the pitch. “Leicester felt like work I know how to do. Work I’m good at.”

“Can’t you do both?” Callum asked, looking at his trainers now, curling back into himself.

“I wish it worked like that,” Fergus replied, pushing himself off the concrete. “Come on. Your sister will kill me if I keep you out here any longer.”

Callum let him take his elbow when he stood. He didn’t shrug him off, which was its own answer, and Fergus kept his pace slow enough that Callum could manage without obviously limping. They didn’t talk on the way back to his pickup. Fergus put his hands in his coat pockets and let the boy work up to whatever he needed to say.

He had just started the engine when Callum said, “I’m tired of people leaving me.”

“Not everyone has left you, Callum.”

“Dad did,” Callum replied. “Mum. The foster before Jenny got custody. That teacher at the last school, the one who said she’d…” He stopped. “Doesn’t matter. I expect Jenny will get tired of me and leave, too.”

“Jenny’s not going anywhere.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re her brother, and as long as your sister draws breath, she’s not going to leave you.” Callum made a small choking sound, and a glance showed a tear running down his bruised cheek. Callum angrily wiped it away, embarrassed, and Fergus pretended he hadn’t noticed as he started to drive.

“I’m going to make you a promise, Callum,” Fergus said after another moment of silence. “Whatever I decide. Whichever way it goes. You’ll hear it straight from me. Not from anyone else.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I choose to.”

“Alright.”

“If I do take the job, I’m not planning on disappearing. It won’t be like it is now, but this will always be home.”

Callum’s mouth did something that wasn’t quite a smile, and Fergus, who was better at watching than he was at most other things, pretended not to see it.

The Stag came into view at the bottom of the hill, and he saw Jenny standing in the open doorway. When Callum climbed out of the pick-up, Jenny’s hand shot to her mouth, but she didn’t run to him. She stayed in the doorway like she’d taken a solemn oath to do so, no matter what. Callum slowed, half a step behind Fergus’s shoulder, and Fergus slowed with him.

She looked hard at them, and as they finally got close enough for her to see his face—the eye, the lip—her resolve broke. A little cry escaped her lips, and she took hold of the front of his hoodie with both hands. Pulling him into a fierce embrace, her eyes glistened with tears.

She held him tightly for what seemed like an eternity, and right about the time Fergus thought she’d let go, he saw Callum slowly reach out and circle his arms around her and hug her back. Tightly.

The dam burst for Jenny, and for a long moment there was only the sound of her sobbing. Finally, she pulled away and looked at his face, hands gently resting on either side.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and make sure you’re alright,” she said, taking hold of his wrist and guiding Callum through the door to the Stag.

Fergus followed them quietly.

The Stag was still empty. The till still sat open from earlier, and a tea towel lay half across the bar where someone had put it down mid-thought. He ventured briefly into the kitchen where the kettle was still warm, but no one was there.

When he turned back, Jenny had guided her brother to a chair, and Callum was lowering himself into it delicately.

“Where’s Maggie?” Fergus asked.

“She came back about twenty minutes ago, but left again,” she said, turning to go behind the bar for ice. “Someone spotted the two of you and rang her. She said she needed ten minutes to clear her head. She was fine. Just… you know. Fine in the way Maggie gets.”

“Which way did she go?” he asked, although he already had a good idea.

Jenny had returned to Callum and gently pressed the cold washcloth up against his eye. He winced but reached up a hand to help her hold it in place.

“Toward the trail to the west.” Jenny tipped her head vaguely in that direction.

There was only one spot up that hill where she would go. It sat where the path opened above the Misbourne Valley. From there, you could see the village, the roof of the Stag, and on a clear day, the weather coming in from the west.

He’d found her there too many times to count when they were kids.

“Right,” he said.

He pulled his coat back on. On the way past, he put a hand lightly on Callum’s shoulder. He didn’t look up, but he didn’t shift away.

“Keep that ice on,” Fergus said. “And take care of your sister.”

“Yes, coach.”

Jenny reached out, put a grateful hand on Fergus’s, and mouthed “thank you.” He nodded and headed toward the door.

As he began to open it, Jenny said, “You find her, you bring her back, too.”

He paused with his hand on the latch.

He gave a little smirk. “It’s what I do.”

He stepped into the street, closing the door to the Stag behind him.

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November 19, 2025



-Maggie-

Maggie had been standing at the stile long enough for the cold to creep through the seams of her coat. She suppressed a shiver as she pulled it more tightly around her.

Great Missenden lay below her under the gray November sky. From up here, the village looked almost tiny. The church spire… the narrow lanes…

She could always come here to breathe, and, if necessary, let herself fall apart, knowing no one was there to see it or care. It was where she could go to get away from the noise and the gnawing fears that she couldn't seem to shake.

There was a time she wouldn't have shut the Stag down for anyone. She had always put the pub first. This time, though, she hadn't hesitated or weighed the personal costs. She did the only thing she could have done, and she would do it again tomorrow if need be.

That was what had rattled her. The realization that something mattered more than the pub. Callum mattered. Jenny mattered. They mattered more than the lunch rush, more than the regulars grumbling about the locked doors, more than whatever Gareth Davies would say later about starving to death because The Roaring Stag had dared to close for three hours.

She saw it so clearly now. The Stag wasn't a mere business. It hadn't been for a long time. It was there to be a home for those she considered family, and without that family, it had no purpose.

The thought should have been comforting.

Instead, it made her feel as if she'd been gripping something too tightly for long enough that she no longer knew what her hands were supposed to do if she loosened them.

Behind her, boots sounded on the path. The footsteps were heavy, and she recognized the tread immediately.

Fergus came to a halt next to her at the stile, close enough to touch, and stood quietly next to her, staring out over the village.

Finally, he spoke. "He's with Jenny."

"Good."

"He's bruised. Split lip. Eye'll be colorful by tomorrow."

"Does he need A&E?"

"I don't think so. Jenny's put ice on it. Nothing broken as far as we can see."

"What happened?" she asked, looking over at him. Mud streaked one elbow of his jacket, and there were grass stains on his pants. He looked weary, though his voice sharpened a bit with anger as he spoke.

"The same lads from the courtyard," he said. "The ones who put him up to it."

Maggie took a sharp breath, muttering, "Bloody hell."

"They found him at school. Said things." Fergus told her, eyes fixed on the village. "About him. Jenny. The team. Told him I was leaving him. They jumped him because he told us what happened in the courtyard."

Maggie looked back toward the view. From here, the rugby pitch wasn't visible, but she could picture it too easily. The low building. The muddy pitch. The places teens could hide when they didn't want to be found.

Tears came unbidden, and as one ran down her cheek, the frigid breeze made it almost sting as it brushed her face. She kept her gaze away, fixed on the rooftops below because looking at Fergus would make it worse.

“He thought I’d already said yes,” Fergus said.

Maggie swallowed. “Because of Rowan?”

“Partly. But mostly because they told him that everyone who mattered was going to leave eventually, and he believed them.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I set the record straight.”

Maggie forced herself to look at him. He was still watching the village, but his expression had changed. It was unsettled, and she could see him still locked in whatever conversation he’d had with Callum.

“So, you told him you hadn’t decided… and what did he say?”

“He wanted to know why I couldn’t do both.” Fergus let out a humorless laugh and continued, “I wish I had a good answer for him. I wish I had one for myself.”

“I’ve been thinking about that nonstop,” Maggie told him, turning to face him fully. “You taking the job doesn’t have to be the same as leaving us.”

His expression shifted as he met her eyes. “Feels like it does.”

“No.” Her voice stayed gentle as she laced her fingers through his. “It feels that way to the fifteen-year-old who has come to believe that everyone eventually leaves. It shouldn’t be for a forty-two-year-old man who should know better.”

He looked away. “I don’t want Callum thinking…”

“Callum needs stability.” She nodded toward the village. “He doesn’t need you standing behind the Stag bar forever.” Fergus was quiet, and she pressed on. “He needs to know you’ll answer the phone if he calls. That if you say you’ll come home Friday, you’ll come home Friday. If you do those things, you haven’t left.”

He seemed to absorb that for a moment. “Okay. But what about you?” He gave her fingers a squeeze and added, “If we’re going to make this work, we’ll both have to make some changes.”

“Yes, we will, but I’m starting to think I can manage not being here every single second, solving every single problem,” she admitted. “The Stag is fine. I’m the one having nervous breakdowns over every little thing, and Jenny has been handling things I would have sworn she wasn’t ready to handle.”

“She’s ready.”

“Yes, she is,” Maggie told him, and there was something freeing in admitting it out loud. For the first time, the idea of letting go didn’t seem

quite so terrifying. “Today I closed the pub and walked away... and the building didn’t collapse in protest.”

“The day is young.”

A laugh escaped her. It was small but real, and she leaned her head against his shoulder as she looked back over the village.

“I’ll never be able to completely walk away,” she told him.

“I know, and I wouldn’t ask you to.”

“And I don’t think I’ll ever want to.”

“I know that, too.”

“But maybe the point of building something real and lasting is that, eventually, it can stand without you having to be there for every minute, holding every beam in place.”

He shifted to face her, and she lifted her head. As he took hold of both of her hands, for the first time, she saw true vulnerability in his eyes.

“Maggie, if I take this job, I’d be gone most of the time. Especially during the season. Long days. Weekends. Travel. I can’t be there when something goes wrong. I’d be leaving you to deal with it all by yourself.”

“I won’t have to deal with it by myself. I have Jenny, the staff… Owen...”

“...and his fern.”

She laughed. “Yes, his dying fern. But I wouldn’t be alone.” She drew a breath and continued, “Fergus, I don’t want to be someone you visit between the important parts of your life. I don’t want to miss those. And I don’t want Leicester to become the thing I resent because right now, I don’t. I saw your face when you talked about those boys. I heard you. It matters to you like the Stag matters to me. I love this village even when it’s impossible. I love Jenny and Callum. I love Hannah’s ridiculous wedding that may yet kill me. And most of all, I love...”

She paused.

“...I love you, Fergus,” she finished.

It was a relief to finally say it. To call it what it was and not hide from it.

She kept going before she could lose her nerve. “We can’t solve this by cutting pieces off ourselves and pretending we’re making noble sacrifices.” Her voice wavered, but she pressed on. “I don’t want you to give up Leicester to prove that I matter, and I don’t want to give up the Stag to prove that you matter. I’m tired, Fergus. I’m so tired of acting like loving someone means destroying your dreams.”

“Maggie...”

“I’m not finished. I’m not sure how this works. I don’t know if it’s Sundays here and weekdays there, or some awful amount of driving, or if Jenny takes over more, or if Owen keeps being irritatingly useful, or if we try it for six months and then admit we were idiots.”

“How do you keep all those possibilities in one head?”

She shrugged and smiled wryly. “I’m a business owner. I panic in spreadsheets.”

He laughed, and Maggie stepped closer.

Fergus turned his head and looked out over the village, over the rooftops and the narrow streets and the wet fields beyond them. She watched him take it in. Not as a man trying to say goodbye, or trying to convince himself to stay, but as a man trying, at last, to imagine.

“I don’t know if Leicester would allow it,” he said.

“You ask.” His eyes came back to hers. “You’ll never know if you don’t. And you ask because you’re good at this, and if they want you as much as they say, then they can help you make it work.”

“Mags…”

“No,” she said, pointing at him. “Don’t make that face.”

“What face?”

“The one where you look like you don’t have the right to bother anyone with what you need.” His brow lifted. “You have a face for that.”

“I do not.”

“You do. Fergus, talk to them. The season doesn’t run for the whole year. Maybe we have options we haven’t even considered yet.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “And if they say no?”

“At least then we’ll know, and we can decide what to do.”

“We?”

“Yes, we.” Her confidence wavered for a second, and she rushed to add, “If you’ll have me as part of the problem-solving committee.”

She saw what looked like relief wash over him before he covered it with the faintest shake of his head.

“You’d be a nightmare on a committee.”

“I chair beautifully.”

“You mean bully.”

“Bully is such an ugly word. I prefer motivate.”

He looked at her for a moment, eyes softening in a way she had never seen before.

“I love you, too,” he said, and Maggie inhaled sharply, eyes widening at the sound of those words. “I should’ve said it before. I wanted to, but I thought if I said it, I’d be adding pressure when you didn’t need it.”

The wind moved between them. The village sat below, but instead of the familiar view steadying her, her legs turned to jelly. He was there, though, one hand coming to rest on her waist, his forehead resting against hers.

“I’m still terrified,” she admitted.

“I know.”

“You should be, too. I’m very difficult.”

“That you are.”

“Rude.”

He just laughed, pulling her closer, and his mouth found hers. The kiss was gentle and slow. It didn’t try to solve the job, the distance, or the pub schedule waiting at the bottom of the hill.

But it was a promise to try.

When they drew apart, he placed one last kiss on her forehead. Then he looked down at the ground, a smirk pulling at his lips.

“At least you remembered your shoes this time,” he said.

Maggie laughed, startled and breathless. “You’re never letting that go, are you?”

“Never.”

She looked past him toward the stile path that still cut up the ridge. Twenty-four years and the wood was still there, the same carvings, the same view of the valley. They’d both gotten out. They’d both come back. Somehow that felt like the point.

“Men are so sentimental.”

“Aye.”

She leaned into him for one more second, breathing in cold air and wool and him. Then she looked down toward the village.

“We should get back.”

“We should.”

Neither of them moved. Below them, the Stag was waiting with Jenny and Callum inside. Owen was probably halfway to inserting himself into the situation whether anyone had asked or not, and Gareth Davies was almost certainly telling someone he nearly starved during the Great Pub Closure of 2025.

For the first time, though, Maggie didn’t feel as if every choice meant someone had to lose.

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November 30, 2025



-Maggie-

The fairy lights were already on, which meant either Jenny had beaten her to it or Maggie had forgotten to switch them off last night. Both seemed equally plausible.

She stood at the edge of the courtyard looking for anything she might have missed. A bulb out, a table leg wobbling, a crack that had somehow gone unnoticed in the weeks of planning and patching.

Green garlands of pine and holly berries draped along the beams, and Maggie could smell the sprigs of rosemary that had been woven in.

It wasn’t perfect.

The flagstones still dipped where old drains ran beneath them. One of the wooden benches along the far wall had a scratch she had never managed to sand out. The blankets folded over chair backs were mismatched—some tartan, some cable-knit, one a suspicious shade of mustard she was fairly certain had migrated from her own sofa.

But it was theirs.

Every crooked inch of it.

She heard footsteps on the stone behind her, and a mug appeared at her elbow, steam curling into the cold air.

"You've been standing there for four minutes," Fergus said. "I counted."

"I'm looking for problems."

"Find any?"

Maggie took a sip. Strong, no sugar, the faintest trace of honey because he had started doing that weeks ago and she hadn't told him to stop.

"Nothing serious yet, which worries me. I might have missed something."

His hand found the small of her back, and he rested it there reassuringly. He did this more often now, and she loved it. It made her feel safe and calmed her faster than any cup of tea or pour of whiskey.

He moved past her toward the nearest heater, the one that had been clicking ominously since Tuesday, and crouched to adjust something at its base.

Things hadn't been fully sorted out yet. Leicester discussions were ongoing, although Rowan had expressed a willingness to figure something out that worked for everyone. Last week she had spoken with Jenny about assuming a larger role at the Stag. Maggie had thought Jenny might burst into tears as she hugged her.

Owen and Mr. Davies had been positively smug about the whole thing, which she could have done without.

The door from the kitchen banged open, and Jenny emerged, phone in one hand, binder wedged under her arm, and her dark ponytail already escaping its elastic as always.

"Florist is running twelve minutes late," she announced, not to Maggie specifically but to whoever in the courtyard might be listening. "I told her to come round the side gate. Cake's in the cold room… buttonholes are in the fridge. Oh, and I moved the guestbook table two inches left because the light in that corner is weird."

Maggie blinked. "Right."

Jenny continued, "Also, I switched the seating for Ben's gran because she needs to be near a heater on account of her hip, and I put Mr. Davies at the end so he can get up for a smoke without climbing over anyone." Jenny glanced up from her phone and hesitated. "Anything else?"

Maggie thought for a minute, unsure of whether she was hopeful there was something Jenny missed or not. She drew a blank.

"No," she admitted. "I think you've got it all covered."

Jenny smiled and nodded, then disappeared back inside.

Fergus straightened from the heater and glanced at her, gesturing toward the door. "That was almost terrifying."

"I know. I loved it."

"You would," he grunted, and Maggie just smiled into her tea.

The roof held, the heaters were running, and for once, she wasn't the only thing keeping it all upright.

By half past three, the courtyard had filled with guests. Gareth Davies had wrapped a blanket around his shoulders like a Highland chieftain and seemed entirely unbothered by the tartan clashing with his ancient tweed jacket.

Maggie's mother sat in the second row, her good wool coat buttoned to the collar, her posture the kind of straight that suggested either determination or discomfort. Possibly both. She had arrived forty minutes early and inspected the courtyard with the silent thoroughness of a building surveyor. Maggie watched her gaze travel the length of the new timber, the clean flashing where the beam had given way, the heaters that actually held their heat. The usual tight line around her mother's mouth was missing—she hadn't said anything, and Maggie had taken it as a win.

On the other side of the aisle, Ben's mother clutched her husband's arm with a wide-eyed expression. Maggie suspected she had not envisioned her son getting married in a pub courtyard and was trying very hard to be gracious about it.

When the music started, the guests shifted and turned to face the back. Hannah appeared in the doorway with Elliot beside her. Her cheeks were already pink from the cold, and her bouquet—white roses, eucalyptus, and a few stubborn sprigs of winter jasmine—trembled slightly in her hands. Even with the nerves, she was still luminous. Not in the polished, airbrushed way of bridal magazines, but incandescent with happiness.

And then there was Elliot.

Her brother's jaw was locked so tight Maggie could see the muscle working from six rows back. He was doing the thing he had done since childhood: pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth, blinking too fast,

and clearly trying to keep it together. Grace, seated at the end of the front row, was already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

Maggie remembered Hannah at eight, standing on a pub stool behind the bar, announcing to a room of amused regulars that she was going to be a vet, a princess, and the manager of the Stag, in that order. Then, at fourteen, sulking in the corner booth over a boy whose name none of them could recall now. Finally, at twenty, bringing Ben to the Stag for the first time—nervous, hopeful, and holding his hand under the table like Maggie wouldn't notice, but she had. She noticed everything even as the years flew by.

Hannah reached the front of the courtyard, and Elliot reluctantly released her arm and retreated. Ben took Hannah's hand, beaming as he stared at his beautiful bride.

When Hannah spoke her vows, she stumbled over some of the words, and then covered her mouth, laughing, eyes shining. Ben grinned at her with open adoration.

That was when Freddie chose his moment.

The rooster's crow ripped through the courtyard with the timing of a heckler at a comedy show—loud, outrageous, and utterly indifferent to the emotional weight of the occasion. It came from the chicken run beyond the courtyard wall, splitting the reverent silence clean in half.

Laughter erupted.

Ben dropped his head, shoulders shaking. Hannah pressed both hands over her face and turned a little pink. Gareth muttered something that sounded like, "Worse timing than my wife," and even Maggie's mother's mouth twitched, which was a seismic event by her standards.

Maggie caught Fergus's eye across the way. He was leaning against the courtyard wall near the back, arms crossed, and gave her a knowing grin. She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing and failed.

The officiant recovered, and the vows continued.

Then came a clunk.

The heater nearest the back emitted a sound like a dying toad clearing its throat. Owen, who was seated a couple rows in front of it, sat up ramrod straight. Maggie saw him reach toward it, but before he could, Callum, who had been standing against the wall with the rest of the staff, gave the heater's base a firm, precise tap with the heel of his boot.

The clunking stopped.

Owen startled and turned to look at Callum, who gave him a short nod, face neutral, and Maggie could not have been prouder.

When the ceremony drew to its close and the officiant said the words, Ben kissed Hannah gently and reverently, as though she were something precious and fragile. The courtyard erupted in applause as they made their way down the aisle together.

Tears were running down Elliot's cheeks, which he made no effort to hide, and Grace pressed a hand to his shoulder. Maggie's vision was blurring as well, and she fixed her gaze on the garland above the stone archway until the danger passed.

The guests retreated to the pub for cocktails while tables were dragged out into the dinner configuration. The courtyard transformed from ceremony space to celebration, from reverence to warmth, and the chaos of a family coming together.

The afternoon surrendered to evening, but to the people in the courtyard, the world had shrunk to this moment. The Stag was full of laughter and celebration, and it made a world of difference.

Maggie found herself at the edge of it, near the old stone wall where the original coaching-inn sign had once hung. She held a glass of something sparkling someone had pressed into her hand and just allowed herself to observe.

"It's cold."

Her mother appeared beside her as though materializing from the November air itself. She stood with her shoulders drawn in, coat still buttoned, a glass of white wine held delicately in one hand.

"It is," Maggie agreed. "The heaters do help, though."

"Mmm."

They stood silently for a moment, taking it in, and Maggie braced herself for the inevitable, for her mother to say something to ruin the moment.

"Your uncle would have liked this."

She looked over at her mother, eyes widening with surprise. Her mother continued looking up at the roof rather than at Maggie, as though commenting on the weather or the wine. Perhaps it wasn't enough to fix everything between them, but it was a start.

"Thank you," Maggie said, more steadily than she expected.

Her mother took a small sip of wine, nodded, and moved away toward Elliot, who was waving her over to meet someone from Ben's family.

Maggie watched after her for a long moment until she felt a familiar presence at her side.

Fergus didn't ask if she was all right. He just put his arm around her gently. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, and they watched the celebration together.

"I spoke to Rowan again."

"And?"

"He said January would be the worst of it," he told her. "Busy. Messy. A lot to learn… but after that, there's room to breathe until next season. Some scouting can be done closer to here, and some of the outreach, too."

She didn't look up at him, just stayed there with her head on his shoulder, while the arm he had wrapped around her waist anchored her.

"So, it'll be hard for a little while," she said softly.

"Aye."

"Might be some arguments about petrol."

"Absolutely."

"And calendars."

"Several."

She looked up at him then. "But possible?"

His gaze held hers. "More than possible."

Maggie felt a wave of calm and peace pushing aside the fears and doubts.

"Good," she said, looking up at him with a grin as the party continued around them. She leaned into him a little more, watching Hannah spin under the fairy lights, and felt the last of the old weight ease. Whatever came next, neither of them would be standing alone.

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Epilogue



The courtyard doors had been propped open since eleven, wedged with the same chipped brick that had served as a doorstop for years.

Maggie stood in the doorway with a tea towel over one shoulder, watching with no small amount of satisfaction as the guests in the renovated courtyard enjoyed their drinks.

Behind her, someone dropped a tray of glasses. Maggie was startled but didn't turn as a brief, horrified silence followed the crash.

Wait for it, she told herself, and listened.

"Only two?" Jenny's voice called from the bar. A server muttered something Maggie didn't catch. "Personal best. Sweep it up before Mags hears."

Maggie chuckled. "I heard!"

Jenny appeared in the doorway. "Please pretend you didn't."

Maggie lifted both hands in surrender, and Jenny paused for a moment, as if assessing whether this was a trap. Then she vanished back inside, and Maggie followed, eyes finding the calendar on the kitchen wall beside the walk-in. It was paper, because Fergus said his phone made him feel 'managed.' Plus, Maggie liked being able to cross things out. Leicester dates were in his crooked block capitals. Home dates were in her rounder hand. Wednesday to Saturday this week: LEICESTER. Sunday: HOME.

Then a full week back in the village before he vanished again for a training block.

It was actually working. Not smoothly or prettily, of course. They'd argued in all the ways they had predicted… and a few they didn't.

In February, they'd had a truly stupid row about whether *back by five* meant *in the village by five* or *physically through the Stag door by five*, which ended with Maggie eating toast at midnight while Fergus very carefully erased the phrase *there was traffic* from his vocabulary.

The adjustment had been hard. The pub had felt too quiet some nights, and Maggie found herself doing jobs he would have done, because it was easier than admitting she missed him. She had reorganized the cellar at midnight and even attempted—and failed—to fix a shelf, inflicting enough damage that Owen had taken one look at it the next morning and asked, *What did the shelf do to deserve this?*

She topped up her tea and went back through to the bar. Mr. Davies was on his usual stool, cornering a tourist with an opinion about walking boots.

"You want them a size up," Davies was saying. "Wool socks. Two pairs."

"He's spouting nonsense," Maggie said pleasantly, sliding the tourist a refill across the bar. "One pair. He's had trench foot since 1974, and his judgment is rubbish."

Mr. Davies looked delighted. "You'll ruin my reputation, Mags."

"That ship has sailed, Gareth."

The tourist laughed, visibly relieved.

Out in the courtyard, a child had claimed the bench by the herb planters and was feeding a chip to a bewildered spaniel. Someone's cousin was getting married there in July. Someone else's book club had rented it for Thursday. Jenny had taken both bookings without asking, then calmly told Maggie once the deposits cleared. The courtyard was earning its keep now.

The place was full. Not just busy, but full in the way that breathed without her standing in the middle holding it upright.

Fergus finally came through the side door at ten past five, dusty around the boots, hair flattened where his cap had been, overnight bag over one shoulder. He dropped it behind the bar in the exact spot she had once asked him not to leave it. Before she could even give him a look, he smiled and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead… which instantly made her forget she was annoyed to begin with.

"Good drive?" she asked.

“Tolerable.” His eyes moved past her, scanning the bar. “Callum in?”

Maggie stilled. “Out back stacking empties. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Fergus.”

“Not now.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes as he headed for the back door.

Jenny caught her eye at the other end of the bar and immediately abandoned a half-poured glass of white as they both moved to follow him.

“What?” Jenny said, catching up in the corridor. “What is it? What’s he done?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you walking like that?”

“I don’t know. Shh.”

They reached the back loading area hiding on the other side of the door. It was the one hidden from guests with crates, bins, and the bit of guttering that still awaited attention. Callum stood on an upturned milk crate, stacking empties into plastic trays. He was a bit taller now, but still all elbows and knees, his face still caught between boy and man.

Fergus leaned against the fence, arms folded.

“Callum.”

Callum didn’t look up. “What?”

“Come off there a minute.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No.”

“Because if this is about the…”

“You’re not in trouble.”

Callum came down, eyeing him suspiciously.

Fergus rubbed at his beard. “Remember two weekends ago? When Hayes was here watching training?”

Callum’s jaw tightened. “Because you asked him to.”

“I told him I was coming down and he came with me. Not the same thing.”

“Yes, it is.”

Fergus shrugged, and Maggie felt Jenny’s fingers digging into her elbow.

“Leicester runs a development session in July. Five days. Residential. It’s for lads outside the academy they think are worth another look.”

Callum blinked. “So?”

“They asked for you.”

Callum’s mouth opened and then promptly closed. He scrunched his face for a second before he could find his voice again. “What did you tell them?”

“That your left foot’s still weaker than your right, and you talk back too much.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Callum shot back sarcastically.

“I’m telling you so you know. I didn’t push for you.”

Callum couldn’t seem to work out whether he liked that or not, and he still looked at Fergus, puzzled.

“Nobody at that level wastes a place just because someone asked nicely. Rowan watched you and then he asked to see footage from the season. Later he rang me up about you.”

“Why me? I’m not the best out there. Far from it.”

“He chose you,” Fergus explained patiently, “because you’re coachable, you read the game, and when you’re moved off the ball, you adjust, and you adjust well. His words. Not mine.” Callum just stared. “It’s a chance. That’s all. No guarantee they call you back after you try out. But you earned a look. You understand, Callum? You bloody well earned it. It wasn’t something I said or did. It’s a chance. If you don’t want to embarrass me, take it.”

Jenny made a sound like a hiccup and let out a little cry.

“Jen…?” Callum’s head snapped in their direction.

Jenny was crying now, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “Callum Price, you go up there and give them your absolute best, without snarking off or getting in trouble, or I will personally drive to Leicester and end you.”

“You hate the M1, Jenny.”

“I’ll drive her myself,” Maggie chimed in threateningly.

“Oh, my God.” Callum looked up at the sky, muttering in a mortified tone.

“I will do it if only to go up there and end you,” Jenny insisted, wiping her eyes. She was trying to look scary, but the tears weren’t helping.

Maggie couldn’t stop a laugh from coming out.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Jenny said, and then burst into fresh tears and hugged her.

Fergus caught Maggie’s eye over Jenny’s shoulder. He looked smug. So smug that the family resemblance with the always-smug Owen was very

obvious.

A little later, after Callum had gone inside with Jenny, who was still issuing threats about clean boots and manners and not being *a little sod in front of professional people*, Maggie and Fergus found a table in the courtyard.

The air temperature dropped in the early summer evening, and a light breeze made the courtyard the most pleasant place to be. The Stag hummed around them: glasses clinking, Mr. Davies sitting outside with a pint, explaining English sausages to another captive tourist, and Owen was nearby admiring his hanging basket, one of which contained a suspicious-looking fern. Then, somewhere behind the kitchen garden, Freddie crowed like he believed he was the official courtyard soundtrack.

Maggie sank into the chair. She glanced over as Callum walked through the gate from the kitchen. He moved differently now, no longer feeling the need to constantly check over his shoulder.

Fergus lowered himself opposite her with a small sound, and she looked back at him playfully.

"Long drive, old man?"

"Aye."

She reached across the table, and he took her hand without looking.

"I knew you were up to something," she said.

"That obvious?"

"Terribly."

"I've been sitting on it for two weeks."

"Really?"

"Didn't want to say anything until it was real."

"I take it back. You hid it better than I gave you credit for."

He smiled, and they sat in a comfortable silence for a moment.

"You didn't get it wrong, you know," she told him. His thumb slid back and forth over her knuckles, and she let herself relax, squeezing his hand. When he looked up, his eyes softened.

"I suppose not."

"It's been hard," she said. "I didn't think it would be this hard."

"I did," he replied. "Well, not so much for me, but for you, yeah."

"Well, that's very unattractive of you."

"Sorry."

“You should be, Fergus Merrick!” she shot back sternly, but couldn’t hold it, and finally dissolved into laughter. “But yeah, you’re right. It’s been hard for me.”

She leaned her forehead down against their joined hands for a moment. When she looked up, he was watching her the way he often did, like he still wasn’t sure she was real, or that she believed he was worth all of the stress of trying to make it work.

“I didn’t promise you a tidy life,” he said.

“I know.”

“And you’re all right with it?”

Somewhere inside, another glass broke, and Jenny yelled something Maggie couldn’t quite catch. The pub was in good hands. It wasn’t crashing down, and neither of them needed to hold it up.

Maggie squeezed his hand again and smiled at him.

“I’m more than all right with it.”

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Tracey Magruder is a contemporary romance author, from Central Florida. Tracey's passion for storytelling began long before she put pen to paper. As a former professional music instructor, she understands the rhythm and emotion of compelling narratives. She finds joy in helping others discover their voice, whether through teaching song or in weaving the quiet, captivating magic of a romance novel. Tracey believes that every love story is a song waiting to be written and that magic can be found in the most unexpected places. When she's not reading or dreaming up future books, Tracey loves spending time with her husband and son.

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