

# A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by  
Mary Hargreaves

CHAPTER 2  
SAMIRA

INN  
CROWD





## A Very Important Party

Samira Khalid is busy. Very, very busy. So busy, in fact, that she isn't actually sure what time it is. She's spent the entire morning calling suppliers, painters, furniture shops and lighting companies, and she doesn't seem to be any further along than she was when she started.

She can hear Aisha outside on the trampoline, shouting something or other. Guilt flares up in her stomach. She should be out there playing with her, but she just has so much to do. She'd give it all up in a heartbeat if it meant she could be more present, but then they'd have

no money, and all of the hard work and late nights would have been for nothing.

It's a shame that it's the summer holidays, she thinks, as she listens to the plumber's holding music for the sixth time. If Aisha were at school, this would all be a lot easier. As it is, she's got two mortgages, a struggling floristry business, a bored six-year-old and nowhere near enough hours in the day.

A babysitter would be nice, she muses, or a friend; someone who could watch Aisha in the afternoons sometimes. She'd repay the favour of course, but the only people she could even consider asking are Leah and Sam, and they haven't been talking to her much recently. Last time they spoke, over dinner at The Shoulder of Mutton before everything got so crazy, they were trying for a baby. She remembers how restless Aisha had been; how she'd whinged and refused to eat her food. She can't remember how long ago that was now.

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‘Aisha!’ She calls out to the garden, pulling her coat on and wrestling the phone under her chin. ‘Come on!’

She hears the springs of the trampoline squeak, and then Aisha is padding through the patio doors, her hair wild and knotted.

‘Oh, god.’ Samira pulls her boots on, mentally calculating how much time it will take to brush Aisha’s hair, calm her down again and get out of the door. She decides against it. ‘Just put your shoes on, please.’

Aisha does as she’s told, for once, and Samira knows it’s because she’s being tetchy. She’s giving off a don’t-mess-with-me vibe.

‘Right, come on.’ She herds Aisha out of the door and takes her hand, keeping her phone wedged on her shoulder as the hold music stops. ‘Hello?’

‘Who are you talking to?’ Aisha peers up at her as

they march along the street.

‘Hello?’ Samira pulls the phone from under her chin and checks the screen. ‘Just the plumbers’, darling. Hang on a second.’

‘But where are we *going?*’ Aisha whines, yanking on her hand.

*‘Thank you for holding,’* a tinny voice crackles down the line, *‘you are number nine in the queue.’*

‘Agh!’ Samira stabs the end call button and takes a deep breath, before plastering a smile on her face and turning to her daughter. ‘We’re going to the shop. Our shop, remember?’

Aisha wrinkles up her nose. ‘But it’s smelly in there.’

‘That’s because it isn’t finished!’ Samira snaps, and then pulls herself up. She can’t be like this. She needs to calm down. She stops for a moment and squats down next to Aisha. ‘I’m sorry for shouting. Shall we get an ice

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cream on the way home?’

Aisha appears more than willing to forgive her, and they manage the rest of the journey in relative peace, Samira only fielding three calls during the ten-minute walk.

*Sami's Stalks* (a name she had instantly regretted, but had been unwilling to change due to the cost of the sign) appears like a mirage in front of her, like it always does, and her heart swells with pride. *She* did this, for her and Aisha. To give them a better life. And because she loves it, of course. But taking the business into a shop, and not just selling online... that was a leap she'd always wanted to take, and there was never going to be a good time.

Samira's shop is the ground floor of a detached house on Norwich Road. It isn't the ideal retail spot, but it was going for much lower than market value and was too

good an opportunity to pass up. As she approaches, she notices a man lugging boxes through the side door: the one that leads to the floor above her shop. She flashes him a quick smile - she hasn't got time for small talk - and goes to put the key in the lock.

'Hello!' The man has stopped and is leaning against the door, visibly sweating. Samira clocks, almost unconsciously, that he is quite good looking. Messy, brown hair, piercing blue eyes.

'Hi.' She smiles again and opens the door to her shop, ushering Aisha in and closing it quickly behind her.

It's starting to come together now. There are wires hanging down from the ceiling, and the bright pink plaster is certainly not the look she was going for, but the counter is in and the floor is almost done. She can see how it's going to look when it's finished.

Aisha immediately makes a beeline for the box in the corner, where Samira keeps all of her toys for when

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they visit. She takes out a doll and a racing car and begins enacting an elaborate and quite violent scene with them.

Samira flicks through the paint samples on the countertop and makes another call to the decorator. They agree on a colour, but he says it'll be another two weeks before he can start.

She grips her phone hard in her hand and takes a deep breath. They're supposed to be *opening* in two weeks. She can't afford another setback. She's about to tell the decorator they'll pick someone else, when there's a knock at the door.

'I'll call you back.' She hangs up and opens the door. It's the man from before.

'Hi.' He gives her a lopsided smile. 'I'm sorry to intrude. I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm renting upstairs. Ryan?'

Ah, yes. She had heard of him. Rumours had been

flying around Strumpshaw for a while now; a young businessman who'd cracked under the pressure, given it all up to move to the country. 'Samira.' She introduces herself and pauses, feeling awkward. She doesn't have time for this, but she can't just shoo him out straight away. 'Would you like a cup of tea? It's a bit rudimentary, I'm afraid, but...'

'I'd love one.' He grins at her again and steps through the door. 'And what's your name?' He asks, spotting Aisha in the corner.

'Aisha.' Aisha replies, proudly.

'What a lovely name.'

Samira watches as Ryan wins Aisha over, knowing the names of all her toys. She brings two cups of tea over to the workmen's bench and sits down.

'This looks great.' Ryan gestures to the shop.

'It will do, eventually,' Samira takes a sip of her drink, 'I hope.'

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Ryan nods and looks at a stack of prints by the door; peonies, roses and freesia, all ready to go on the walls once they're painted. 'Pretty.'

'So what brings you here?' Samira asks, feeling strangely flustered but not knowing why.

'Oh.' Ryan looks lost for a moment, and then shakes his head. 'I needed the change, I suppose.'

'Mmm.'

He looks up suddenly, and catches her eye. 'I'm sure you've heard all about it.'

Samira's heart leaps in her chest at the eye contact.

'Well, no - I mean, not everything, just-'

'It's OK.' He laughs. 'Small villages, people talk.'

She laughs, too. 'Yeah, they do. Sorry. It's not really fair, is it? Me knowing a bit of your story before you've told me.'

'Ah, it's fine. Saves me having to say it.'

Samira's phone starts buzzing on the table, and she apologises and picks it up. It's the plumber. They aren't going to be able to fit the sinks for another ten days.

'God!' She screeches when he's hung up, slamming the phone down. 'I don't need this.'

She starts pacing the room, running her fingers through her hair and calculating how long she can keep things afloat without the shop running. She can feel Ryan watching her.

'You seem stressed.' He comments carefully. 'Are you very busy?'

'Yes, I'm busy!' Samira snaps, spinning around. 'And yes, I'm stressed. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I really hadn't noticed.'

'I'm sorry,' Ryan holds his hands up in apology, 'I didn't mean to overstep the mark. I just- I have experience with this kind of thing-'

'Well thank you, but I don't need your experience.'

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She interrupts. ‘Aisha, come on. We’re going.’

Hurt flashes across Ryan’s face, but Samira can’t let herself feel guilty. She’s known this man for five seconds; she doesn’t have the mental space to feel sorry for him.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll leave.’ He puts his half-finished tea down and moves towards the door. ‘I’m sorry,’ he throws one last glance around the room, ‘it really does look great.’

And he’s gone.

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Samira can’t concentrate. Aisha is playing alone in the garden again, and the guilt is ruining her focus. But it’s not only that; it’s Ryan, too. Whenever she thinks about him she gets a strange foggy feeling in her head, like she’s

drifting off. The other day, she found herself staring into the distance for twenty minutes thinking about his hair. His *hair!* She doesn't have time for teenage crushes, and he probably hates her now anyway; she was rude enough the last time they spoke. She's run into him a couple of times since, but he only gives her a cursory nod of the head as he goes past. She feels sad as she remembers and gives herself a shake. *Come on, Samira. Get a grip, for goodness' sake.*

She turns back to her spreadsheet, but something catches her eye through the window. It's Gordon from next door, he's shouting and gesticulating over the fence. Samira gives him a wave but he doesn't stop, so she holds up a finger and scoots out of her chair.

She doesn't notice that Aisha isn't in the garden until she sees her on the other side of the fence. Guilt and panic bloom in her chest; how could she be so negligent? Aisha could have been anywhere. And poor Mr Doyle,

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having a wild six-year-old run rampant in his garden. She apologises profusely and drags Aisha back inside, giving her a stern word about staying near the house.

Aisha runs upstairs to sulk, but Samira still can't concentrate. She's coming undone; what if something awful had happened? It feels like she's constantly trying her best and messing everything up anyway.

There's a knock at the door, and Samira sighs. What now? What else could there possibly be?

It's Bob from The Shoulder of Mutton. There's a party happening next Saturday, apparently, after the steam rally. Samira almost laughs.

'I'm afraid I'm far too busy.' She smiles apologetically. 'It sounds great, though - I hope it's a success.'

'You couldn't just come along for an hour or two?' Bob asks. 'It'll be a great turnout, and we haven't seen you

in so long!’

‘I’m afraid not. I’d have to find a babysitter, and-‘

‘Oh, you have to bring Aisha.’ He implores.

‘There’ll be loads of other bored kids there.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Samira frowns, ‘it’s just not a great time.’

Bob leaves, looking dejected, and Samira returns to the kitchen. She paces back and forth, her mind torn. Aisha hasn’t played with any other children for a long time, save for her friends at school. Is she being selfish by not going? Come to think of it, *she* hasn’t socialised much recently, either - if you don’t count Ryan and dozens of workmen. What happened to her friends? She can’t remember. She wonders if Leah and Sam might be there, and her heart lifts a little. It’s still over a week away – surely she can try to find the time?

But she’s just so *busy*. Far, far too busy.

She stares out into the garden at the empty

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trampoline.

Isn't she?



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In Strumpshaw, six characters are living their lives. Gordon is starting to feel his age. Samira is struggling to balance parenthood and a new business. Katie absolutely does not want to start work-experience at the local farm. Sam and Leah are trying to have a baby. Ryan has maybe had a breakdown and fled London for a new life. And Farmer Jones is grieving his departed wife.

Everything just seems so much harder when you're doing it alone.

But there's a big party being held at The Shoulder of Mutton to celebrate the Steam Rally and everyone is invited.

Will any of them go? Over seven weeks, each character's story is revealed. Characters weave in and out of each other's lives, becoming immersed in the stories of their fictional neighbours and discovering that the community of the local pub is very powerful indeed.

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Mary Hargreaves lives in Manchester and enjoys writing and reading things that cleverer people have written. She hates waiting, musicals and Pinot Grigio. Her first novel, *This Is Not A Love Story* was published in 2020.