

# A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by  
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CHAPTER 3  
KATIE

INN  
CROWD





## A Very Important Party

Katie Foster has tried everything. She's screamed, shouted, sulked, ignored and even contemplated running away. She has thirty pounds in her bedside drawer from her last birthday, and she's pretty sure she could make it to Norwich with that. She just isn't sure what she'll do when she actually *gets* there, so that plan is on hold for now. For now, she's back to screaming, right in her mum's face.

‘I don't *want* to!’ She roars. ‘I'm sixteen years old, you can't make me!’

‘Exactly, Katie,’ her mum responds calmly, loading the dishwasher as if her only child isn't on the

brink of mental collapse right next to her, ‘you’re sixteen. You’re a child. And you’re going.’

Katie lets out an infuriated screech and turns to her dad, who is sitting at the table eating his breakfast. ‘Dad, *please.*’

‘It’ll be good for you, love.’ He raises his eyebrows. ‘Mr Jones needs the help, and you can’t spend the whole summer watching YouTube.’

Katie stares at her parents in horror. Is this actually happening? Yes, she had said she was going to get some work experience. She will admit that. And no, she hadn’t got around to organising anything just yet, and it is true that her GCSE study leave started over a week ago, but *still*. She’s a human being! With rights! And more importantly, friends! Who might see her walking up the dirty track to Mr Jones’ farm and think she’s totally lost the plot. It isn’t *fair*.

‘Well, I’m not going.’ She says, a plan forming.

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They can't exactly drag her there, can they?

'OK.' Her mum smiles and walks over to the WiFi router. 'No problem.'

'No!' Katie gasps, panic blooming. 'No, OK. OK, *fine*.' She holds her hands up in defeat. 'I'll go. I'll go! Just today, though. And if I hate it, which I *will*, I'm not going back.'

#

It *stinks*. Katie has just walked all the way to the farm, thankfully only passing Samira from down the road on the way, and she can smell it before she even sees it. It reeks of hay and cowpats.

As she nears the brow of the hill and the farm comes into focus, she notices her brand new, white shoes are covered in mud. Mum had told her not to dress so

‘fashionably’, but there was no way she was taking the fleece and walking boots she’d been offered. She would honestly rather die.

There’s no sign of Mr Jones, but a boy, around her age, is sweeping straw round the side, and she immediately shrinks into herself. He is *fit*. Way fitter than any of the boys she goes to school with.

‘Katie, right?’ He’s stopped sweeping and is staring at her, leaning on the brush with his elbow.

She nods.

He looks her up and down. ‘Do you have a change of clothes?’

Katie crosses her arms huffily, covering her polka-dot summer dress. ‘No, and I don’t need any either.’

He smiles and rolls his eyes, and she suddenly feels very small.

‘Come on then, I’ll show you around.’ He sets off around the back of the farmhouse, and Katie hurries after

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him.

‘What’s your-‘ Suddenly, her foot disappears from under her. She’s skidded in a giant pile of sheep poo, and now she’s lying flat on her back, feeling the muck ooze through her dress.

‘Whoops.’ The boy is leaning over her, offering his hand. She can see he’s trying not to laugh, and her face flames. ‘You sure I can’t offer you that change of clothes?’

Katie takes his hand, her heart hammering, and pulls herself to her feet. ‘No, thank you.’ She sulks, holding her head up. The sun is baking the poo into her back; she can already feel it. She has never been so embarrassed in her entire life.

‘Suit yourself.’ He smiles at her, his eyes meeting hers. He carries on along the back of the farmhouse before stopping for a moment and turning around, a grin playing on his lips. ‘My name’s Toby, by the way. If that’s what

you were asking.’

#

Farmer Jones is really miserable. Katie has been working at the farm for three days now and he’s barely said a word to her. After she spent the entire day covered in sheep poo, she wasn’t going to come back, but she’d enjoyed looking after the horses and the puppies and didn’t want to forego the WiFi. She’d also looked Toby up on Facebook when she’d got home that first evening and found out he was single, but that was totally unrelated.

‘Who’s this now?’ Farmer Jones looks up from where he’s tinkering with a run-down tractor. Katie and Toby are brushing the horses, and they stop to watch as a figure makes their way up the track.

‘It’s Bob.’ Toby says, and disappears into the stable to get another brush.

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‘Hello, Mr Jones!’ Bob calls as he nears them.

‘How are we?’

‘Very well, very well.’ Farmer Jones grumbles.

‘What can we do for you?’

‘We’re throwing a party at The Shoulder of Mutton on Saturday,’ He says, ‘I wondered if you’d all like to come along.’

‘Not for me.’ Farmer Jones shakes his head. ‘And the young’uns can’t, either. Milking night.’

‘Oh, come on!’ Bob implores. ‘You can always come afterwards, can’t you? Just for a couple of hours?’

Farmer Jones grunts. ‘Too much to do.’

Bob looks disappointed. ‘Well, I’ll leave the flyer here, just in case you change your mind.’ He hands the leaflet to Katie, who turns it over in her hands, and then makes his way back down the track.

Katie looks down at the leaflet. A party at The

Shoulder of Mutton, after the steam rally. She's never been in the evening before, only for Sunday lunch with her parents. The idea of a proper, adult night out seems tempting. She ditched her dresses for old jogging bottoms and t-shirts after that first day, and she feels scruffy. It'd be nice to get dressed up again, especially if Toby were there...

‘What’s that?’ Toby appears behind her and she jumps, her face turning crimson.

‘A party at The Mutton. On Saturday.’ She looks at him and he catches her eye, smiling.

‘That sounds good.’

‘Are you going?’ She follows him as goes to untangle the horse’s mane.

‘No can do. Not unless Jones decides to move milking night, which he’s never done before. Haven’t had a Saturday night for myself since last summer.’

‘Oh.’ The hope in Katie’s chest dims and gives

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way to anger. She doesn't know why she's angry, but it feels like nothing is under her control. 'Do you want a drink?' She blurts.

Toby looks confused at the sudden topic change. 'Sure. Water, please.'

Katie leaves the stables and enters the dark farmhouse kitchen. She can hear the puppies mewling next to the Aga. 'Mr Jones?'

A grunt comes from the table, and she walks over to find the farmer whittling a piece of wood. 'Could we move milking night to Friday this week?'

He looks up for a moment. 'No.' He goes back to his whittling.

'Why not?'

Farmer Jones sighs and puts his knife down. 'This is the way a farm works.'

Katie wants to cry. 'Couldn't we do it early? Start

mid-afternoon and be done in time for the party?’

‘No.’ He picks his knife up again.

‘Don’t you *like* the pub?’ Katie says, a little too loudly.

Farmer Jones’ gaze flits over to a photo on the windowsill, and quickly back again. Katie looks over; it’s a picture of him, not too long ago, next to a woman. He looks happy. She isn’t sure she’s seen his teeth before. ‘Toby and I go to The Shoulder of Mutton a couple of times a week. You’re welcome to join us then.’

The conversation is finished. Katie goes back outside, feeling a heavy ball of emotion sitting on her chest. She is so desperate to go to the party. She can’t go to the pub with Toby and Farmer Jones on a Wednesday or something, it just wouldn’t be the same.

A car rumbles up the track, and Katie watches as a couple step out and make their way to the farmhouse, knocking on the door. Farmer Jones lets them in, and Katie

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goes back over to the stables.

‘Where’s my water?’ Toby is brushing the horse’s tail now, and he looks at her mischievously.

Oops.

‘I dropped it.’ She lies, knowing it sounds ridiculous.

‘You were trying to convince Jones to move milking night, weren’t you?’

‘No!’ She flushes. If he finds out, he’ll think she was trying to go to the party to be with *him*, and that would be mortifying.

‘OK.’ He smiles. ‘Shall we break for lunch?’

#

It’s Friday, and the car Katie saw the couple in the other day is back. The woman isn’t here; last time, she came out early and sat in the car crying, and now the man comes back alone every day. He and Farmer Jones spend a lot of

time in the kitchen, and Katie can never make out what they're saying through the door.

She doesn't mind too much anyway, because Farmer Jones being out of the picture means there's been more time to spend with Toby. They have lunch together every day, and she's learning a lot about him. He wants to run his own farm one day; wants to take over one of the old farms to the north of Strumpshaw. He tells her lots of things, and she does too, but even though they're in the same school year, all of her parent problems seem childish compared to his big dreams.

'So what do you want to do?' He asks. They're lying on the fallow field at the back of the farm, the one the animals aren't using this year. She's brought them thick ham sandwiches with butter from the kitchen, and cold glasses of orange juice.

'I want to be a vet, I think.' She takes a sip of her drink and stares at the hills and blue sky stretching out in

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front of them. 'That's why my parents sorted this for me.' She blushes at the word 'parents'. It's embarrassing that they have to organise everything for her. She's not going to let that happen anymore.

'I'll call you if I ever have a problem with one of my cows.' Toby nudges her, and her heart swells. In that very instant, she decides she's going to become a farm vet.

'What do you think all that's about?' She asks, nodding towards Farmer Jones, who has just emerged from the farmhouse with the man who keeps visiting.

Toby shrugs. 'He was after a puppy, I think. They're going like hotcakes now they're old enough.'

The puppies have been Katie's favourite thing about the farm. Except perhaps Toby, of course. She feels sad at the thought of them leaving.

Farmer Jones goes back into the house. Katie and

Toby carry on chatting, swatting flies away from the remnants of their orange juice. They're discussing their favourite shops in Norwich when Farmer Jones re-emerges from the back door and begins making his way up the track towards them.

‘Uh oh. Have we lunched for too long?’ Katie casts a nervous look at Toby.

‘Nah. He’s not really bothered about things like that.’ Toby responds, propping himself up on his elbows.

Farmer Jones reaches them and stops, swiping sweat from his forehead. ‘You two got plans tonight?’ He asks.

Katie shakes her head.

‘Good. We’re milking.’ He grumbles, and abruptly turns around and walks back down the hill.

Katie turns to Toby. ‘Does that mean...’

‘He’s letting you go to the party.’ Toby grins. ‘You must have done something right.’

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Katie's mind whirs. What does he mean, he's letting *her* go to the party? She stands up and starts walking back down the hill. Toby catches her up. 'So, do you think you'll be going?' She asks, casually.

'Don't know.' He sounds unsure. 'We'll see.'

#

Katie is wearing a different kind of polka dot dress tonight, and sandals instead of trainers. She's tired from last night's milking, but her heart is hammering. What if he doesn't turn up? What if he doesn't come, and she's stuck with her parents all night? She heads downstairs and into the kitchen, where her mum is putting on her jacket.

'Ready, sweetheart?' She asks.

Katie nods, her fingers crossed tight behind her back.

'Ready.'



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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.