

A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by
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CHAPTER 5
RYAN

INN
CROWD



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Ryan can feel the eyes of Strumpshaw on him wherever he goes.

It's not that people aren't friendly - they are - it's just that he's new. *Different*. He knows that his backstory has preceded him; he can see it in people's eyes when they glance his way: pity, and a little bit of intrigue. The vicar probably Googled him and read his story out with the announcements after mass. He went to pick up a copy of the church newsletter this morning to see if he'd been

featured, but he hadn't.

He wouldn't say he's paranoid, per se, but he does feel uneasy. He wants to fit in - he always has - and if watching Downton Abbey has taught him anything, it's that a small community can be hard to break into for an outsider.

Ryan has been trudging through the fields behind his house for over an hour now, the mud squelching into his unsuitable shoes. He breathes in the smell of grass and manure and wonders what his old friends would make of all this. His high-flying colleagues; his parents; Fran.

Ryan doesn't want to think about Fran.

He circles back and heads towards home, popping out onto Norwich Road a few metres away from his flat. As he walks up the drive, he sees a decorator dragging a ladder into the shop downstairs. Out of the corner of his eye, he looks for Samira, but she isn't there.

He lets himself into his apartment and flicks on the

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kettle, spooning his favourite blended coffee into a mug and thinking about the shop owner and her daughter. He'd made a terrible first impression the other day; what was he thinking, sticking his oar in like that? He casts his mind back to when he was running his own business, and wonders what he'd have done if someone had told him that they understood what he was going through. Told them to get lost, probably.

Ryan casts his mind back to his old life again; the one he left just a few weeks ago. He had a penthouse apartment in London; was the CEO of one of the fastest-growing tech startups in the city. He had a girlfriend. Now he has none of these things. Fran's betrayal had been the tipping point; his mind had collapsed. He'd grabbed a map, closed his eyes and let his finger land. And now, here he is.

He thinks of the toll his job had taken on him, the

way it had pushed him away from Fran. Did he force her to find someone else? Was it his fault? He gazes out of the window at the fields outside. Everything is so different now, it seems like he's living someone else's life.

He adds extra milk to his coffee and gulps it down; he doesn't want to stay here and think about what he's left behind. If he does that, he might start to regret it, and there's no going back now.

Ryan heads back outside, skirting around a plumber carrying a sink in through the shop door. He smiles: Samira must have got her own way – they're fitting everything earlier than they told her they would.

He makes his way up Norwich Road, passing The Shoulder of Mutton and St. Peter's Church, wandering aimlessly and trying to appreciate the sunshine. As he passes the end of Buckenham Road, he spots Gordon Doyle, the old man he met at church this morning, hobbling slowly up the street.

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‘Mr Doyle!’ Ryan calls out impulsively. It’s a long time since he’s seen a familiar face, and although he only first clapped eyes on this one a few hours ago, it’s a relief to feel some kind of connection.

‘Ryan.’ Gordon sighs and leans on his stick as Ryan makes his way towards him. ‘Fancy bumping into you again.’

‘Small villages, eh?’ Ryan says, and immediately feels stupid. Of course Gordon knows what it’s like living in a small village - it’s Ryan who can’t seem to behave normally. ‘The builders are fixing up the shop downstairs, so I thought I’d take a walk to escape the noise.’ He lies, unwilling to admit even to this old man how lonely he feels. He’s got his PlayStation, his books, his exercise bike – but his favourite things seem hollow now that he’s on his own.

‘Ah, Samira’s shop?’ Gordon’s eyes shine. ‘How’s

it coming along?’

‘You know Samira?’

‘She’s my next-door-neighbour.’ He smiles. ‘Her and little Aisha.’

‘I met her the other day,’ Ryan says, his heart beating quicker than usual. He feels suddenly desperate to gather information about the occupant downstairs.

‘Lovely girl.’ Gordon nods. ‘Very boisterous!’

It takes Ryan a moment to realise that Gordon is talking about Aisha, not Samira.

‘And does Aisha’s dad live with them, too?’ He asks shamelessly.

‘Oh no, no dad in the picture. Picked up and left quite some time ago, if I remember rightly.’ Gordon shakes his head. ‘Although it’s not often that my memory serves me well these days.’

‘I see.’

Gordon looks at Ryan, narrowing his eyes

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mischievously as he registers the meaning behind the question. ‘Ah, *I* see.’ He chuckles.

‘Oh, I didn’t mean-‘

‘No, no.’ Gordon waves his hand. ‘I’ll not pry. Although I’m sure it’d do Samira some good to have a new friend. She’s a very busy lady, by all accounts.’

Ryan nods, a warmth spreading to his cheeks.

‘Well, it was lovely to see you again, Mr Doyle.’

‘Likewise.’ Gordon lifts his stick in a half-wave and goes to carry on up the street, but stops. ‘You wouldn’t be going to that party on Saturday, would you?’

He nods up the road, towards The Shoulder Of Mutton.

‘Might be a good chance to... meet some new people.’

Ryan hesitates. ‘I... I hadn’t heard there’d be a party.’

Gordon smiles warmly. ‘Oh, you’ll be invited soon enough, don’t you worry about that.’

He carries on up the street, his stick tapping against the tarmac. Ryan stares after him, feeling even lonelier than he did before.

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By the time Ryan gets home, it's almost dark. He has walked for hours, and now knows the layout of Strumpshaw Fen better than he knew the tube system back home. Strumpshaw is a small place, with not so much as a corner shop within walking distance, but the countryside has cleared his mind and allowed him to process. As he walked, he thought about Fran, about the way she'd left him when his career started to unravel, and about Samira, who is building a career of her own with a young daughter in tow.

As he walks up the drive, he sees that the workmen have left and the shop is dark and empty. His mind might

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be clear, but he has never been more alone than on this quiet country road, contemplating a night at home by himself. Maybe he'll cook something; try to cheer himself up. He used to love cooking, before.

Ryan fumbles in his pockets for his keys, but as he nears the door, a figure looms out of the darkness.

'Ah!' Ryan steps back, stumbling, and raises his hands in the air.

'I'm sorry!' A man is standing in front of him, his face now illuminated by the floodlight. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you!'

Ryan clutches his chest. 'Well, you managed it,' he laughs. He must remember that he isn't in the city any more; the crime rate here is ridiculously low.

'Sorry.' The man repeats, and holds out his hand. 'I'm Bob - the landlord at The Shoulder of Mutton. You must be Ryan?'

‘Hi, yes.’ Ryan shakes Bob’s hand.

‘Sorry to hang around your house like this; I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.’ Bob frowns.

‘You’ve... you’ve been waiting for me?’

‘Of course!’ Bob holds out a leaflet, and Ryan takes it. He vaguely registers the word PARTY before Bob carries on talking. ‘I wanted to invite you to an event we’re holding at the pub this Saturday. I know you’re new here, so I thought it might be a good chance for you to meet people.’

‘I...’ Ryan isn’t used to this. In London, you don’t invite people you don’t know to parties on their doorstep. ‘I’m not sure. I’ve still got some unpacking to do...’

‘We’d love to have you there.’ Bob smiles. ‘You’re the talk of the town!’

Ryan grimaces. ‘Well, we’ll see.’ He goes to put his key in the lock. ‘Thanks for the invite, anyway.’

‘You’re welcome.’ Bob heads back down the drive,

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calling over his shoulder, 'Everyone's coming!'

Ryan heads inside, his head spinning. *You're the talk of the town!* He flops down onto the sofa, stabbing at the TV remote to turn on the news. He's a city boy; a businessman; an entrepreneur. But here, nobody knows him. He's an alien.

He won't go. It's too much, meeting everyone in the village at the same time. Maybe he'll nip in one day during the week and talk to Bob, or try and catch Gordon again. Ingratiate himself slowly, person by person, until he knows everybody and nobody looks twice at him anymore.

Ryan tunes back into the local news, smiling at a story about a cow that blocked the traffic across a busy bridge for three hours. No stories of knife crime and financial disasters up here - just livestock and traffic jams.

Everyone's coming! Ryan's concentration is lost again as he remembers the last thing Bob said before he

left. He and Gordon aren't the *only* people he knows in Strumpshaw, are they? There's Samira, too.

A noise from downstairs snaps him out of his thoughts, and he stands up and walks to the window, glancing outside. As if he's willed her presence by thought, Samira is here, struggling with the key.

Before he has a chance to think, he swings the window open.

'Hey!' He calls.

She looks up. 'Hi.' He swears she's blushing, but it's probably just the light.

'I'm sorry about the other day.' He shouts.

'No, I'm sorry!' She replies. 'I lost my head.'

He laughs. 'Been there, done that.' He mentally gives himself a slap. 'Sorry - I promise I don't *always* try to make things about me.'

Samira smiles. 'Don't worry.' She gives the door one final shove and it swings open. 'I can't stay long;

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Aisha's sleeping in the car.' She nods towards the driveway, where Aisha is fast asleep, her face squished against the window. 'I'm just having a quick look at what they've done today.'

'OK.' Ryan wants to ask whether she's going to the party, but he doesn't want to seem pushy. 'Well, have a good night!'

'You too!' She calls, and disappears inside.

#

It's Saturday afternoon, and Ryan has been pacing his living room for most of the day. There's not a cloud in the sky, and he can hear the steam rally in full swing outside the window, but he hasn't made his mind up yet.

He turns his business head on, a habit formed from years of practice, and assesses the situation objectively. If

he attends the party, what is the desired outcome? *To see Samira.* The thought pops into his head without hesitation. But he could see Samira here, any day of the week, couldn't he? *Yes, and she'd notice that you were always inside, like the strange village hermit.* His emotions answer for him again.

But what if she isn't there? The thought of small talk and prying eyes make Ryan shiver; despite his successful past, he hates the spotlight. If Samira isn't there, he doesn't want to be, either - he doesn't know what it is about her, but he can't shake her from his thoughts.

Ryan picks up the new crime novel he's been meaning to read, and puts it down again. He paces some more, passing the window and glancing outside. He tries to remember where Gordon said he lived when he ran into him this morning: St. Peter's Close? St. Peter's Street?

Something tells him that Samira will be at the party.

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But what if she isn't?

There's only one way to find out.

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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.