

A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by
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CHAPTER 6
FARMER JONES

INN
CROWD



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Farmer Jones isn't sure what to make of this work experience girl. He caught sight of her walking up the track this morning wearing a white dress with a pair of sunglasses on her head. He doesn't know what she expected when she came here - a fashion shoot, maybe? - but by the look of the stain splatted across her back this afternoon, she found out the hard way that farm life isn't all about stroking ponies and drinking hot cider by the fire.

He lugs a milk churn out from the barn and loads it

onto one of the palettes, and then wipes his hands on his pants. All done and off to be pasteurised; there's no feeling greater than the sense of accomplishment after a hard day's work.

A giggle sounds from the stables, and Farmer Jones rolls his eyes. Toby had better be showing Katie the ropes properly, not just peacocking around. He banishes the thought from his head immediately; Toby is a hard worker who loves this place almost as much as he does. But he *is* a teenage boy...

Katie's young, he supposes, as he lets himself back into the house. He remembers when Daphne was Katie's age, when he met her in the centre of Norwich. He was sixteen, too, back then - already out of school and practically running the farm on his own. Daphne was beautiful, but wild, and she happily swapped her summer dresses for dungarees once they started dating and she became a permanent fixture on the farm.

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He picks up the photo from the windowsill and sits down at the table. It's not so long ago that this picture was taken; you can still tell it's them. He aged far less gracefully than Daphne did, until the end.

'Jones?' Toby pokes his head around the door and Farmer Jones startles, slipping the photo frame under a newspaper.

'What?'

'I was going to show Katie the fallow field, teach her a bit about crop rotation.' Toby glances down at his shoes for a second, and then meets Farmer Jones' gaze.

'It's a dairy farm, son, she'll hardly learn much about crops around here.'

'No, but we do grow some... I thought maybe she'd get to see what other places might be doing. You know, if she moves on somewhere else after this.'

Farmer Jones picks up his whittling knife and

carves a small nick into the corner of the table. The boy had better watch his work ethic; there's no room for errors around here. 'Alright. Then you can teach her how to sweep a yard.'

'Sure.' Toby smiles, and practically skips out of the room.

Farmer Jones rolls his eyes again, even though there's no one here to see him. There's a storm brewing; he can feel it.

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The hot weather is setting in, and the paint on the window frames is cracked and peeling from years of neglect. Farmer Jones is outside, slopping stripper onto the old wood with his back to the baking sun.

His head's in a muddle. Bob's just been over to invite them all to the steam rally party at the Mutton next

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Saturday night. He and Toby go to the pub once or twice a week, but for some reason, the thought of a party - something organised - has brought a strange mix of emotions to the surface.

Despite the summer breeze, he can almost feel the heat of the log-burning stove, can almost smell the charred wood as its warmth seeps into his bones after a long, wet day. He can almost see the steam on the windowpanes, feel the bubbles of that first pint of lager pop on his tongue. He can almost feel Daphne's hand in his across the table, soft and familiar.

'Aren't we lucky?' She's murmuring to him, her eyes focused on the fire. 'What a lovely life we have.'

'It'd be even more lovely if that heifer stopped running away.' He's replying, watching her mouth twitch up at the corners at his predictability.

'You're a grump, Mr Jones.' The flames are

dancing in her eyes, and he can't believe how beautiful she is, how he could have been this lucky.

He snaps back to the present as a droplet of paint stripper rolls down his wrist. Through the window he can see Katie fussing over the puppies by the Aga. She's swapped the dress for tracksuit bottoms and an old jumper, and her hair is piled on top of her head. She'd come to him, after Bob left, to ask about moving milking night. He hadn't understood, at first; Daphne always said he was too *literal*, that he took everything at face value and didn't read between the lines. But it didn't take him too long to realise what Katie was getting at.

They can't move milking night - it's been a Saturday job since his grandfather ran the farm sixty years ago. Katie has to learn that hard work and sacrifice are par for the course; part of being an adult.

Farmer Jones pushes the lid back onto the paint stripper, watching as another droplet hurries down the side

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of the can and plops onto the ground.

He can feel her, right next to him. *Come on, Eli,* she'd say, *where's that big heart of yours?*

She always made him softer. But she isn't here anymore.

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This time, the droplets aren't paint stripper. One big, fat tear has been coaxed out of Farmer Jones' eyes for the first time in over a year, and has landed right in front of him on the dining table. He swipes the back of his hand across his face roughly, and carries on whittling.

He's being unproductive; things have slipped over the past few days. With Katie helping out, there's more time for odd jobs, but even those are falling to the wayside.

It's that man - Sam. He just watched him reverse out of the yard, his eyes scrunched up and his face twisted with trying to hold back the tears. He doesn't know why he invited him back; something about the way he looked when he first came here with his wife, his face open and lost, made him reach out. It's not like him to seek human connection; Daphne was all he'd ever needed.

Farmer Jones brushes another tear from the end of his nose. He didn't cry in front of Sam, of course, but he knew it'd come eventually. Perhaps he's been holding it in - he cried once, after Daphne; let himself have a huge, wailing, thumping breakdown in the bedroom the night of her funeral. The next day, he got up and went to load the milk onto the palettes, like normal.

To the outside world, he must seem to be getting on with life after Daphne quite nicely. Only he knows about the sleepless nights, the constant cloud of loneliness that follows him upstairs to bed once Toby's clocked off

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for the day.

It's her he's crying for now - he knows it is - for the life they had, not the one they didn't. The children never existed, *couldn't* exist in a world where he and Daphne were a couple. So no, he isn't crying for what could have been. He's crying because when he looks at Sam, he sees himself. He wishes he could shake him, show him what he has, tell him to clutch it and never let go.

He wishes he could hug him, remind him that he isn't responsible for holding it all together.

With a jerk, Farmer Jones stands up from the table, his whittling knife falling to the floor with a clatter. One of the remaining puppies lets out a high-pitched bark and pads over to investigate. He walks around her, towards the back window.

He can see the tiny dots of Katie and Toby in the fallow field. They took ham sandwiches and orange juice,

and he notices with a warm twist of his stomach that Katie has left a small plate for him, covered in kitchen roll, and a note: *Make sure you eat your lunch! X*

He unbolts the back door and trudges up the hill, quickly, before he changes his mind. Katie sits up as he approaches, her eyes wide, and he realises what he must seem like to her: old and miserable.

‘You two got plans tonight?’ He asks, brushing sweat from his forehead.

They shake their heads.

‘Good. We’re milking.’ He turns around immediately, walking back down the track and letting himself in through the back door. The puppy pads over to him, and he lifts her up, settling down by the window and running his fingers through her fur.

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From the farmhouse, you wouldn't know the steam rally was happening today. But Farmer Jones can feel it; that lift in the air.

Daphne loved the steam rally; it was her favourite event of the year. They were both born in Strumpshaw, and the Steam Museum had been a part of their lives since before either of them could remember. They'd never missed a single rally.

Until last year.

Farmer Jones stands out in the yard and surveys his work. The horses are freshly mucked out, the cows quiet in their shed. The sun is dipping in the sky, and the tiny pieces of hay around his feet glow orange as dusk begins to set in.

Katie left an hour ago, hurrying nervously down the track. She'd kept quiet about the party this evening; hasn't mentioned it since he told her they were moving

milking night. Farmer Jones asked Toby, yesterday, whether he might be making an appearance, but he was noncommittal. He wonders whether something has happened between them, some teenage crossed-wires or a conflict of ego and self-consciousness.

He's done his bit now, surely. Daphne would be proud of his flexibility, the compassion he's shown. But the truth, he realises, as he turns to stare across the hills, is that he didn't really do it for Daphne at all. Helping Sam was an instinct; moving milking night was a knee-jerk reaction. He chuckles to himself. It seems you can't spend forty years with someone and not have them rub off on you.

He wonders whether she sent these people to him; a year of just him and Toby, nothing happening, and then, suddenly, two fresh faces in need of compassion. If he believed such things were possible, he'd bet that's exactly what she'd do.

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Farmer Jones turns around to head back inside, content with his lot. Sam and Leah will support each other, he's sure of it. Katie and Toby will go to the party, have fun, maybe get together, get married; maybe break up, never see each other again. Whatever is meant to be will be, and he won't be standing in their way. Balance has been restored.

It's as he goes to open the farmhouse door that he hears her again.

But Eli, love, what about you?

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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.