

A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by
Mary Hargreaves

CHAPTER 7
DANI

INN
CROWD



A Very Important Party

Dani peeps out from the storeroom, surveying the area behind the bar. People are filtering in nicely now - attendance is better than either of them had hoped, so Bob's old-fashioned door-to-door tactic must have paid off.

She slips back, out of sight, and carries on organising the stock. This is how she likes to work; she's not a front-of-house kind of person. In the two and a half years that they've been running the Shoulder of Mutton, her and Bob have equally fallen in love with Strumpshaw, but he's the

face of it all. She prefers the organising - watching from the sidelines as her hard work pays off.

Dani unwraps a new packet of coasters and heads out into the pub to drop them on the vacant tables. As she nears the door, it opens, and a warm gust of air follows Katie Foster and her parents as they come in. She notices Katie glancing around, as though she's searching for somebody.

'Hi, guys.' Dani offers the family a warm smile. 'Grab a table before it gets too busy.'

'Beer garden's already packed!' Katie's dad laughs and turns towards the bar.

Katie plays with the strap of her bag. 'You haven't seen...' She starts, but stops herself as her mum glances over.

'Seen who?' Dani asks, handing two coasters to Dolly and Agnes, two of her regulars.

'Never mind.' Katie turns away and Dani leaves her to

A Very Important Party

it; she'll figure that one out later.

Dani goes into the kitchen to grab a glass carrier, and then pushes through the crowds to the beer garden to collect the empties. As she makes her rounds, she spots Gordon Doyle sitting at the end of one of the benches, staring into space.

'Alright, Gordon?' She clears an empty lemonade bottle from beside him.

Gordon starts, clutching his stick. 'Oh, sorry, Dani. I'm away with the fairies.'

'Why don't you come inside?' She asks, casting an eye over the rowdier folk on the other tables. 'It's a bit quieter.'

Gordon looks around, as though he hadn't realised where he was. 'Oh. I think I might head off, actually.' He reaches down to a carrier bag down by his feet.

Dani feels a pang of sadness. 'Oh, no, you've only just

arrived. Come on, there's a lovely table by the window still free.'

He looks like he's going to protest, but eventually, he rises slowly to his feet and follows her indoors. 'What can I get you?' She asks, but he's staring at the table opposite, where Dolly and Agnes are sat. 'Gordon?'

'Hm? Oh, I'll have a pint of bitter, please. I'll come and get it, don't worry.'

'You stay there,' She holds up her hand. 'I'll bring it over.'

As she pops Gordon's pint down on one of her brand new coasters two minutes later, Dolly calls over. 'Gordon? Hello! Why don't you come and sit with us?'

Gordon looks at Dani, and then back at Dolly. 'I don't want to intrude...'

'Nonsense!' Agnes calls. 'You've been avoiding us long enough.'

Gordon reddens, and then rises again to his feet,

A Very Important Party

clutching his pint in one shaky hand. Dani makes a mental note to check on him later, and takes her glass carrier outside again. As she walks towards the bins, she notices Samira and her daughter - what was her name? She hasn't been to the pub in so long - coming through the car park. She lifts the bin lid and drops the bottles in, wincing as they smash together.

‘...really didn't expect to see you at my front door!’ Samira's voice drifts towards her, and she turns to see who she's talking to. It's a young man - he's quite attractive, she notices - one she hasn't seen before.

‘Sorry, was it a bit much?’ He answers. ‘I just thought... well, you own the shop downstairs, and I didn't want to come on my own...’

‘Oh, cheers.’ Dani watches as Samira swats him playfully on the arm. ‘I'm the buffer then, am I?’

‘No!’ The man looks horrified. ‘I didn't mean that, I-‘

They disappear into the pub.

‘That’s the new guy.’ Dani jumps as Bob appears beside her with a bin bag in his hand.

‘Bob!’ She clutches her chest. ‘What, the city boy?’

‘Yeah, Ryan.’ He chuckles. ‘Nice guy; I imagine he’s in for the Spanish Inquisition this evening. Oops, incoming.’

Dani doesn’t register what he says quickly enough, and gasps as something ploughs into the side of her leg.

‘Bella!’ Sam Higgins runs towards her, and she registers that the creature pawing at her thigh is a puppy. ‘I’m so sorry, she’s absolutely bonkers.’

Dani laughs. ‘Don’t worry. It’s nice to see you guys.’ She smiles at Leah, Sam’s wife, who is running up behind him. She hasn’t seen Leah in a while; she looks thinner.

‘You, too.’ They smile at her as they make their way inside, Bella’s lead now firmly attached to her collar.

‘What is going on this evening?’ Dani asks Bob, but

A Very Important Party

he just shrugs.

They head back inside; the heat of the day is waning, but Dani can't seem to get cool. As she walks towards the bar, Aisha sprints past her, sloshing J2O all over the carpet. 'Gordon!' She squeals.

Gordon looks up from his conversation with Dolly and Agnes, and his face lights up. 'Hello there, Aisha.'

'Aisha!' Samira runs after her daughter. 'Stop bothering Mr Doyle.'

'Oh, really, it's quite alright.' Gordon smiles.

'We're *friends*.' Aisha rolls her eyes at her mum like a much older child, and scoots onto the chair opposite Gordon. 'What's this?' She asks, pulling something out of the carrier bag by Gordon's feet.

'Oh.' Gordon reddens for the second time this evening. 'That's just... well, it's a train set. It was mine when I was small. I thought I'd bring it to see if you'd like

to have it.’

‘*Wow.*’ Aisha gapes at the old box.

‘That’s very kind of you, Mr Doyle.’ Samira smiles.

‘What do we say, Aisha?’

‘Can we play with it now?’

Everyone at the table laughs, and Dani leaves as Samira and Ryan sit down in the spare seats. She really must stop earwiggling, but there seems to be so much going on this evening.

She heads to the bathrooms to check there’s enough toilet paper, passing Leah and Sam at the end of the bar.

‘...haven’t spoken to her in so long. I don’t know what I’d say.’ She catches Leah murmuring.

‘She’s your best friend, Leah. Just go and say hi. I promise things will seem normal again in no time...’

Dani forces herself to keep walking, and knocks on the men’s bathroom door before pushing it open.

‘Oh, sorry!’ She starts backing out as she notices a

A Very Important Party

young boy by the sinks.

‘It’s alright, I’m leaving.’ He smiles, and splashes his face with some water. It’s Toby, she realises - he sometimes comes in during the week with Farmer Jones.

‘It’s good to see you, Toby.’ She smiles back at him as he dries his face. ‘Jones not with you?’

‘I doubt he’ll show.’ He looks past her, into the bar.

‘Are you looking for someone?’ She asks.

‘No!’ He shakes his head emphatically. ‘No, no. Just... no, I’m not.’

Dani stands back to let him pass, her head reeling.

Why is everyone acting so strangely?

The evening progresses in a blur of empty glasses and increasingly loud laughter. Dani’s feet hurt, but she feels good; spirits are high and the party seems to be going well. She’s doing another round for empties as the sky darkens, and she stops to clear a table in the corner opposite

Gordon. He seems to have attracted a large group.

‘I’ve just missed you, Leah.’ She catches Samira saying.

‘Me too. I’m sorry. It was just so hard, seeing you with Aisha.’ Leah is huddled in close to Samira, her hand buried in Bella’s fur.

‘And I should have been there for you. It just feels like this shop has taken over everything...’

Dani lets their voices fade out as she bends down to pick up a fork. When she resurfaces, it’s Gordon she hears. ‘...I really am very pleased to see you both. I don’t know why I didn’t come and see you sooner; it just felt strange, after Ray and Sid.’

‘Of course it did.’ Dolly is answering. ‘But we were friends too, weren’t we? We’ve missed you, Gordon...’

Dani has been pretending to wipe the same spot for over a minute now; she’s going to have to move away and stop pretending she’s in a soap opera. She gathers her

A Very Important Party

things and walks back towards the kitchen, passing Ryan and Sam, who seem to be getting to know one another.

‘...and if you ever fancy just going for a pint, let me know. Here, I’ll give you my number...’ Sam is saying.

Dani puts the plates on the pot wash and sees that the bin is full again. She sighs, smiling; it really doesn’t ever stop. Grabbing the bag, she goes to head towards the bins, but pauses when she hears Katie’s voice.

‘I didn’t think you’d turn up.’ She sounds apprehensive.

‘I only... well- I mean- it’s been really nice, having you at the farm.’

There’s a beat of silence, and Dani pokes her head around the door. Toby and Katie are standing close to one another in the darkness, both staring at the ground.

‘Ugh.’ Katie shakes her head and looks up. ‘Look, Toby, I’m just going to say it. I like you, OK? I like you,

and I only came here because I like you, and I probably only came back to the *farm* because I like you, but then I think I started to actually like the farm itself, and-'

She stops abruptly as Toby leans down to kiss her.

Dani claps her hand over her mouth to stop herself from gasping. This *is* like a soap opera! She goes to pull her head back inside - it feels like snooping - but pauses as she hears another voice she recognises.

'Toby? Is that you?' Farmer Jones appears around the corner, squinting into the darkness.

Katie and Toby spring apart. 'Yes!' Toby calls. 'I'm here with Katie.'

Katie nudges him in his side, hard, and he winces.

Farmer Jones chuckles. 'I see. I'll see you both inside, then.'

Dani dumps the bin bag by the door and goes back through to the bar; she can't go outside now. She serves Farmer Jones a pint of lager, and then goes to do the

A Very Important Party

rounds again.

Aisha has laid the train set out across two tables, and the adults are balancing their drinks on the little free space available. Gordon is leaning across, talking to Ryan.

‘I could do with someone having a go at my garden, if you’re looking for work. Just a bit of lawn mowing...’

Dani swipes an empty gin glass and puts it in her carrier.

‘Farmer Jones!’ Sam calls from the other end of the table, as Jones appears behind her.

‘Oh, it’s lovely to see you again.’ Leah says, standing up to pull yet another chair around the table. ‘Sit down, sit down.’

Farmer Jones is immediately engulfed in the group, and the voices chatter over each other happily. Dani can no longer make out what individual people are saying.

She goes to move to the other end of the pub - there

are some less interesting tables over there requiring her attention - but suddenly Katie and Toby are standing in front of her.

‘We just wanted to say- well, thank you for organising this.’ Katie’s eyes are shining.

‘Cheers to that!’ Gordon calls from behind her, and she spins around. ‘The perfect end to a perfect day.’

‘The perfect end to a perfect day!’ They all cheer, and Dani feels her eyes well up.

#

Two hours later, the pub is quieter, and Dani pours her and Bob a drink. They perch on the edge of a table and survey the scene in front of them.

Little Aisha is explaining something train-track-related to Gordon, who is nodding along interestedly. Her mother, Samira, holds hands with Ryan under the table as

A Very Important Party

they chat to Leah and Sam. Farmer Jones is talking animatedly to Katie and Toby about milking night, and they roll their eyes happily, their shoulders pressed together.

‘What do we think, then?’ Bob asks, taking a sip of his pint.

Dani beams; her soap opera has reached its happy ending. She rests her head on Bob’s shoulder. Here they are, in their pub, their home, with their people. ‘The perfect end to a perfect day.’ She says.

A Very Important Party

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.

This story has been funded and produced by INN CROWD especially for The Shoulder of Mutton, Strumpshaw.



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.