

A Whistledown Farm Adventure: Finding Hope by Nicola Baker (Simon & Schuster Children's Books)

EXTRACT

'Welcome to the lambing shed!' said Uncle John brightly, stopping in front of a large wooden building. 'I can't believe you've never been in here.'

He was right – Ava had never ventured down to the lambing shed. In fact, she'd never explored the farm much at all. She had to admit though, so far she was actually enjoying herself today. Ava suddenly felt bad that she hadn't made more of an effort before.

Ava followed her uncle into the enormous shed. It was warm, protected from the wind outside, and there was a cosy layer of straw on the floor. About thirty sheep were enclosed in a large area at the back, with a few single sheep and their newborn lambs in individual pens along the side.

'These are our *high maintenance* sheep, as your Aunt Kitty likes to call them,' said Uncle John with a smile. 'There's a mix of our pedigree sheep we take to the shows, as well as a handful of hill sheep that've had problems giving birth in the past.'

'There are more sheep than this?' asked Ava, staring at the abundance of animals around her.

'Loads more!' said Uncle John with a grin. 'The rest are happier to give birth out on the hills. They'll wander off somewhere quiet and come back a few hours later with a lamb or two in tow.'

'But don't they need help?'

Uncle John smiled at her. 'Nature is a wonderful thing, Ava. They're well prepared for life out there, and most sheep are really good mums.'

A strange grunting noise from the back of the shed caught Ava's attention.

'Ah, that's her.' Uncle John pointed towards a large white sheep in the corner.

'Is she okay?' asked Ava. The sheep grunted again and Ava watched it begin to pant.

‘She’s in the full swing of labour,’ said Uncle John. ‘Won’t be long now. Look, she’s pushing hard.’

The sheep’s head tilted upwards as its whole body contracted.

‘Can we help her?’ whispered Ava with a hint of worry.

‘No need. She’s doing fine by herself.’

Ava was transfixed as the sheep panted and pushed. Her emotions were swirling inside her – she was excited to see the new lamb, worried something would go wrong and a little grossed out by what was about to happen, all at the same time.

The sheep shifted its position and threw her head back again. With one mighty push, it stood up, and Ava could see something dark and wet lying on the straw. She craned her neck to get a better look – the dark shape wasn’t moving.

Ava felt a bubble of panic. ‘Uncle John . . .’ she whispered.

‘Give her a minute,’ he said calmly.

‘Uncle John . . .’ said Ava more urgently.

The sheep began to lick the lamb. Ava watched her remove the gooey substance around the lamb’s face. The sheep bleated gently at its lamb, continuing to lick and nudge. It bleated again and again . . . until suddenly the lamb sneezed in reply.

Ava gasped. She remained transfixed, eyes wide as the tiny newborn lifted its head and bleated at its mother.

Uncle John nudged Ava.

‘She’s a first-time mum – she just needed a moment to realize what was happening.’

Ava’s eyes prickled with tears; she couldn’t believe she’d just seen new life come into the world.

‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ said her uncle softly. ‘Gets me every time. Like I said, nature is a wonderful thing.’

Ava couldn’t tear her eyes away from the newborn lamb. The mother had begun to nudge it, encouraging it to stand. The lamb bleated softly and pushed up on its front legs before collapsing.

‘Keep watching,’ said Uncle John.

The lamb pushed up again, this time managing to stand for a brief moment before falling down. With another gentle nudge from its mother, the lamb heaved itself up again, wobbling but upright, on its tiny, unsteady legs.

Ava gasped. ‘I can’t believe it’s standing already!’

Her uncle laughed. ‘Yep. It took you a year to do that!’

Ava smiled at her uncle and felt her heart swell with happiness. The lamb began nuzzling underneath its mother, searching for a drink.

‘You know it’s drinking properly when its tail shakes happily like that,’ pointed out Uncle John. ‘This little one is going to be just fine.’

A huge grin spread across Ava’s face. ‘I could watch this for ever.’

