

FLEECE

Charlie Rudge
is in a
Baaaaaaaaad
situation!



ELLIE IRVING

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About the Author

Also by Ellie Irving

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About the Book

WARNING!

THIS STORY CONTAINS:

- A sheep called Alan Shearer
- The greatest illusion trick known to man!
- DASTARDLY crooks
- A pesky big brother
- A 1000-piece Lord of the Rings Jigsaw puzzle with all the pieces making up Gandalf's face missing
- Shear determination
- A brave young hero. Yep, that's me. Charlie Rudge, aged 10 and $\frac{3}{4}$. . .

READ ON IF EWE DARE!



FLEECE



ELLIE IRVING



RHCP DIGITAL

For Lily Rose Irving

FLEECE

Noun

1. The woolly covering of a sheep or goat; the wool shorn from a sheep in a single piece at one time.
2. A soft warm fabric with a texture similar to sheep's wool, used as a lining material.

Verb

3. To obtain a great deal of money from someone, typically by overcharging or swindling them.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLIE RUDGE'S WHOLE life changed the day his dad won a sheep in a bet. He started off his morning with no sheep, and then his dad spent three hours in the Golden Fleece pub, and that evening there was a fully grown ewe tied to one end of the sofa in his living room, chewing her way through his mum's collection of Lisa Jewell novels.

No one could remember *exactly* what the bet was. It might have been an arm-wrestling contest. It could have been an adrenalin-fuelled game of tiddlywinks. Most likely it was a thumb war. Charlie's dad had larger-than-average thumbs. He could start World War Three with those bad boys.

Either way, Mr Hoskins from a nearby farm had decided to take on Mr Rudge, and Charlie had been woken that night by the sound of his dad crashing round the front room with Bertha the sheep under his arm.

Charlie's mum wasn't sure they could keep Bertha. (To be honest, she was miffed about the Lisa Jewell books.) But Charlie's dad said that if they were going to make a real go of this farming lark, if they were going to make the decision to leave their old lives in Southend and become farmers in Scotland, they had to have at least *one* animal on their farm.

So Bertha stayed.

The next morning, Mr Hoskins had come to the farm with his tail between his legs and tried to take the sheep back, but Charlie's dad said he'd won her fair and square, and showed Mr Hoskins the piece of paper they'd both scrawled their signature on the night before. So Bertha the

sheep was now officially the property of the Rudge family, of Argonaut Farm, Ovwick Rumble, Scotland.

The Rudge family – Mum, Dad, Uncle Martin and Charlie, aged ten and three-quarters (plus Charlie's nineteen-year-old brother, Jimmy, but he wasn't ever going to move to Scotland, and so the less said about him, the better) – had only been farmers for a few weeks. Charlie's dad had received a letter from a solicitor saying that he and Martin were to inherit Argonaut Farm from their long-lost great-aunt. She was so long-lost, they didn't even know they *had* a great-aunt. But the solicitor's letter clearly read:

Dear Mr Michael Rudge,

It befalls Walters, Sloane, Walters, Walters, Sloane, Sloane and Walters (please bear with us – our business name is currently the subject of a legal dispute) to inform you that you and your brother, Martin Rudge, are the heirs to Argonaut Farm, previously the property of Cornelia Rudge, who has recently passed away. We are reliably informed that she was your great-aunt on your father's side. And yes, she knew you'd never kept in touch, but that's because she kept herself to herself and was ninety-seven and could only see out of one eye and couldn't stand Southend. But seeing as she had no other family and very much wanted the farm to continue to be run by a Rudge, as it has been for over two hundred years, Argonaut Farm was, upon her death, passed to you.

Yours sincerely,

*Kevin Sloane-Walters and
Alicia Walters-Walters-Sloane*

So Mum gave up her job behind the make-up counter in Debenhams and Dad gave up his job as a double-glazing

salesman and Uncle Martin gave up his job as one of those people who stand on street corners with a sign saying GOLF SALE THIS WAY and Charlie gave up his paper round, and they moved up to Scotland to start a new, rural life.

Charlie had found it hard to leave Southend. Quite literally, for they'd been stuck in traffic on the A127 for three hours.

His parents had thrown a farewell party for all his friends, and they'd played one last game of footie in his back garden; Sam in goal, like he always was, Lucy, Rashid and Jesse on the wing, Rocky cutting up the oranges for half time, and Charlie out front, the best striker his team had ever had – almost as good as his all-time favourite football player, Alan Shearer.

The Ridges had packed up all their stuff and heaved all their worldly goods into the back of a removal van. Uncle Martin had been extra careful and insisted on holding his most prized possession, a limited-edition-mint-condition-never-to-be-opened Michael Bubl   doll, in his lap the whole way there. Charlie's mum had been extra careful and insisted that all Jimmy's stuff, which had been confined to the loft these past two years, was carefully stowed in the removal van, but she'd had the sense not to let Charlie's dad know it.

Argonaut Farm was a small farm, as farms go. The farmhouse was a crumbling old stone building, with three bedrooms, a rustic and homely living room with peeling wallpaper, a kitchen with a dirty stove and a larder full of spiders, and an avocado-coloured bathroom. Two acres of land surrounded the farm, housing rusty garden chairs and a rusty table and, in the far corner, an unstable, three-legged chicken coop. Beyond the farmyard, there were two stables which would be most excellent for horses, should the Ridges choose to get some. There was also a disused potting shed at the very back of the farm, a barn, which would be most excellent for animals, and a tea room.

Charlie's mum spent the first week painting the living room and connecting the electricity. Uncle Martin spent the first week cleaning out the tea room, for he'd bagsied the role of running it. Charlie's dad spent the first week testing out the local takeaways.

Charlie had spent the first week in his new home trying to find someone to have a kick-about with, because his mum, dad and Uncle Martin were always busy. There weren't even any animals to ask. After a few days of moping round and kicking his football against the barn wall, Charlie's mum and dad had uttered the dreaded word 'school', and Charlie had pootled off to his first day at Ovwick Rumble Primary.

The school was located on the edge of the village and Charlie had to walk across three fields, climb over two stiles and hop across a narrow stream to get there. There was only one teacher, one classroom and six (now seven) children in the school, which was actually a Portakabin, because Ovwick Rumble was just about the smallest village in Scotland.

On his first day, after the teacher had introduced him as 'Charlie from Southend-on-Sea', Charlie had sat quietly at the back of the Portakabin, taking everything in, wondering what his old friends were doing. Playing footie, probably. Having a laugh, no doubt. At lunch time, he'd sat on his own on the bench in the playground, eating the cheese scone Uncle Martin had packed in his lunchbox, and he'd watched the other children tear around the yard playing a game of 'It'.

After a while, Charlie put down his scone. 'Can I play?' he called.

A scrawny, blond-haired boy took one look at him and said, 'Not if we can catch those,' and he pointed to Charlie's freckles.

Charlie sighed.

‘Go on, Saul, let him,’ said a short, dark-haired boy, but the blond boy ignored him.

Charlie huffed and reached inside his rucksack. He produced his football. ‘What about a kick-about, then?’ he said. ‘I don’t mind going in goal—’ But the others had started chasing each other around the playground again.

Then the bell had rung and everyone had trudged back inside the Portakabin for afternoon lessons, and when it came to getting into pairs to do equivalent fractions for numeracy hour, nobody had wanted to work with the new boy with the freckly face. So Charlie had sat there working out the problems all on his own and realizing that his number one problem was how utterly rubbish his new life in Ovwick Rumble was.

His mum, dad and Uncle Martin, however, were having the time of their lives being farmers. Even though they had only ever seen farms on TV programmes like *Countryfile* and *One Man and His Dog*, they’d started to get the farm into some sort of order.

They’d cleaned out the cow shed and ordered two cows on the internet.

They’d bought three spades and a rake, and they’d circled a page in a catalogue to highlight the tractor they wanted to buy.

They’d adopted a dog – a scruffy black-and-white collie that they found wandering round the stables, with no collar or tag to show whether or not she belonged to anyone – and called her Bessie, planning to train her as a sheepdog.

They were becoming farmers.

And then, two weeks later, Dad had won Bertha in that bet, and Charlie had thought, ‘At last! A five-a-side football team! If you count me, Mum, Dad and Uncle Martin, and I can get them all to stop for five minutes and play!’ However, he quickly found out that Bertha was rubbish at footie, even in goal. She’d just stand there, chewing grass, while Charlie kicked the ball at her.

But *then* the Rudge family found out that Bertha was pregnant, and that's when everything – including this story – kicked off.

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE LAST day of April, in the midst of lambing season, Charlie noticed that Bertha was quiet. She didn't touch the food he gave her, and didn't scramble out of the way like she normally did when Bessie came bounding over, and they realized – at two o'clock in the morning, when Bertha started bleating and baaing so loudly they could hear her from the farmhouse – that she was about to have a lamb.

Because the Ridges were new to farming, Mr Hoskins decided to put aside his grudge over losing Bertha in the bet, and help Charlie's dad with his very first lambing. So did old Mrs Morrison, who owned the farm next door, and nine other farmers from in and around the village of Oswick Rumble, in fact. They were eager to see what this new family from Southend who didn't have a clue about farming were up to.

With all the farmers and Charlie's mum, dad and Uncle Martin crowded into the barn, it seemed to Charlie like this was the most important birth anyone had ever witnessed. It was like the Nativity at Christmas. Except no one had bothered to bring the Ridges any gold, frankincense or myrrh.

Charlie watched, bleary-eyed but excited, as his dad pulled on a pair of long rubber gloves – the sort that make a pleasant kind of *SLLLLLLURRRRRRPP* when you put them on. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he pulled a lamb – and gloop and blood and other nasty stuff that comes out of a sheep when they give birth – from Bertha.

Everybody went, 'Ooooooh!' and 'Aaaaaaaaah!' as the lamb shot out. And one person shouted, 'Oh, for the love of

God!’ but that was mainly because he was looking at the football scores on his phone at the same time.

The lamb lay on the floor next to its mother, still covered in slime, and for a moment Charlie was sure it was dead. But then Bertha licked the lamb on its head, and it jumped into life, shakily standing on its hooves and wobbling around in a circle. Charlie let out a sigh of relief, realizing he’d been holding his breath all this time. The lamb was OK. Argonaut Farm’s first animal success! They were proper farmers after all!

‘It’s a girl!’ someone in the crowd shouted.

Charlie watched as the lamb shakily moved to the side of its mother, and started nudging at her stomach.

Charlie noticed Mr Hoskins deep in conversation with Mrs Morrison and a huddle of other farmers, all eyeing up the lamb suspiciously. He tugged on Mrs Morrison’s jacket. ‘Is everything all right?’ he asked, worried.

Mrs Morrison broke out of the huddle and nodded, looking thoughtfully at the newborn lamb. ‘A right beauty you’ve got there,’ she said to Charlie. ‘Just look at her fleece! I’ve never seen anything like it. Aye, that lamb’s one in a million, you mark my words.’

And it was while Mrs Morrison and Mr Hoskins and all the other farmers who had come to see this birth were shaking hands and slapping Charlie’s dad on his back and saying things like, ‘Och, your first lambing season, well done, Mick, welcome to the club,’ that Charlie noticed something strange about Bertha.

She wasn’t breathing.

The lamb was trotting shakily on its legs again now, walking all around Bertha’s body, nudging her, trying to get her to move.

Charlie caught Mrs Morrison’s eye. He saw the frown on her face and watched as she strode over to Bertha and checked her vital signs. Charlie’s dad quickly followed, kneeling beside her, biting his lip in worry.

After a moment, Mrs Morrison shook her head. 'She's dead,' she said softly. 'I'm sorry.'

The barn fell silent.

Mr Hoskins let out a sigh. 'Och, she was a fine sheep, was Bertha,' he said. He shook his head, eyed the newborn lamb one last time, and then left the barn.

Charlie wiped his face with his pyjama sleeve. The farmers and spectators all drifted away. Someone fleetingly placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, but then was gone.

When it was only Charlie and his dad left, Charlie's dad cradled Bertha in his arms. 'I'm sorry, Charlie,' he sighed. 'That's the circle of life for you.' He nodded to the lamb. 'But we'll call her yours, if you like? Your very own.' He shifted the dead sheep in his arms. 'We'll get more sheep, too, you'll see, so she won't be lonely. And you, Charlie Rudge, can be in charge of the sheep on this farm, how does that sound?' He shot Charlie a tight smile and strode out of the barn.

The lamb trembled in the space where Bertha had been. Charlie walked over to her and smoothed a hand over her still-slimy back.

'The circle of life,' Charlie repeated to himself. He knew all about that, and not just the song from *The Lion King*. He knew that lambs were born in the spring. He knew that pigs and cows and chickens were bred to be eaten. He knew that every animal and every person dies at one point or another. He couldn't learn to live on a farm without at least knowing *that*.

Bertha had been a Blackface ewe, one of the oldest breeds of sheep in Scotland, as Mr Hoskins had moaned the day he'd tried to get Bertha back. Her fleece had been white and her face had been black and that was pretty much that. This lamb, like her mother, was also a Blackface ewe, but, as Mrs Morrison had pointed out, she *was* different.

She had the same black face as Bertha, with tiny little horns curling around her ears. But her fleece was truly beautiful. A large black swirl swooshed over both sides of her body, breaking up the pure white wool. Her markings looked like the middle of a jam roly-poly pudding, curling round and round.

Charlie looked down at the lamb and vowed, there and then, to look after her. Bertha had been their first animal and Charlie would look after her daughter like the one-in-a-million sheep Mrs Morrison said she was. A boy with a face full of freckles and a sheep with a black-and-white fleece. They would be the best of friends.

'Alan Shearer,' he said out loud. It was the name he'd been planning for the three hours it had been since they'd found out Bertha was pregnant. And the lamb's markings were the exact same colour as Newcastle's strip, where Alan Shearer used to play. It felt right.

Alan Shearer. Even though she was a she.

Maybe this Alan Shearer would be good at football, too.

And the lamb let out a little bleat; a 'BAAAAA', as if agreeing with him.

So Alan Shearer it was.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT DAY, the most remarkable thing happened. Uncle Martin had run through the house at the crack of dawn, yelling 'MAYDAY! MAYDAY!' like he always did on the first day of May. Which hadn't gone down particularly well, seeing as everyone was so tired from being up half the night. But that wasn't what was remarkable. What was remarkable was the fact that there were customers in the tea room. Customers!

Admittedly, this is not remarkable for most tea rooms. Staff at The Ritz wouldn't have batted an eyelid.

But for Argonaut Farm, as run by the Ridges, it was the first chance they'd had to prove themselves.

At four o'clock that spring afternoon, just as Charlie got back from school, a plump, blonde-haired woman dressed in wellies and a blue anorak dragged a scrawny, blond-haired boy into the tea room as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Uncle Martin leaped to attention and thrust a menu at her. 'Welcome to Argonaut Farm Tea Room,' he said and made a little flourish with the corner of his pinny. 'Today's specials are apricot jam, apricot spread, apricot scones, apricot croissants, apricot iced fingers . . .' He smiled apologetically. 'We got a job lot of apricots.'

The woman crinkled her nose. 'My son would like to see the lamb,' she said.

Uncle Martin's eyebrows shot up. 'She's not on the menu,' he stuttered.

The woman smiled at him. 'Not to eat, dear thing,' she said, and looked at Uncle Martin like he was the daftest