

Hello everyone

Merry Christmas! Thank you for spending time with me on this festive trip to Hope Farm. In these strange times, it's nice to know that people are turning to heart-warming and uplifting stories to cheer them up and I hope you'll find that here. There's more from Molly, Lucas and those naughty alpacas.

While my novel is entirely fiction, Hope Farm is based on a very real place called Animal Antiks which, like Hope Farm, helps children and young adults with learning difficulties, mental health issues and autism. They do great work and are very gracious in continuing to help me with my research.

I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas and can spend time with your friends and family.

Carole :) xx

If you want to keep up with what's happening – new books, the occasional Live chat and some fab giveaways – I spend far too much time on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, so you can always find me there. I have a newsletter which you can sign up to at www.carolematthews.com. I don't share your information and you can unsubscribe at any time. I'm also on Instagram when I remember.

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Carole Matthews

Christmas for Beginners



SPHERE

SPHERE

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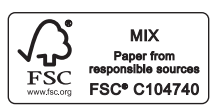

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Carole Matthews is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of over thirty novels, including the top ten bestsellers *The Cake Shop in the Garden, A Cottage by the Sea, Paper Hearts and Summer Kisses*, *The Chocolate Lovers' Christmas, Million Love Songs, Christmas Cakes & Mistletoe Nights*, *Happiness for Beginners* and *Sunny Days and Sea Breezes*, which won Romantic Comedy Novel of the Year at the 2021 RNA Awards. Carole is also the recipient of the RNA Outstanding Achievement Award. Her novels dazzle and delight readers all over the world and she is published in more than thirty countries.

For all the latest news from Carole, visit www.carolematthews.com and sign up to her newsletter. You can also follow Carole on Twitter (@carolematthews) and Instagram (matthews.carole) or join the thousands of readers who have become Carole's friend on Facebook (carolematthewsbooks).

To have been writing a happy, festive book during lockdown and the strangest of times has been something of a challenge! Thank you to everyone who has helped me through it.

Yvette and Michelle, friends beyond compare – for all that you do and for all that you are.

Sharon and Owen for bonkers laughs, as always.

Our neighbours, Lyn and Martin, for regular takeaway roasty dinners in return for gin.

My dearest Sheila for embracing Zoom and doing yoga classes online – they have been a saviour.

To Jean, Lizzie, Hazel and my Tiara Ladies for welcome and much-needed chit-chats.

To my loyal and lovely readers who cheered me up on social media and joined me for a coffee every morning.

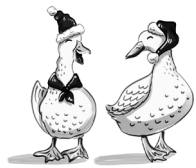
To my mum for coping so well and, at eighty-six, taking all this in her stride.

To Sophie Ellis-Bexter and family for the joyous madness of her weekly Kitchen Discos.

And to Lovely Kev for keeping me sane with our daily long walks, general silliness and for being the best person to be trapped in a house with.

Hopefully, better times are just around the corner.

Chapter One



One of the alpacas has eaten the Baby Jesus. I'm not sure which one. Frankly, they all look the picture of innocence, but I know them better.

'I'm going to be watching your poo very closely over the next few days,' I warn them. The thought troubles our troupe not one jot. Johnny Rotten, Tina Turner and Rod Stewart all stare me down. Rod gives a delicate little burp. Perhaps he was the perpetrator. He looks like the sort who wouldn't think twice about scoffing down the Messiah. I will find out.

But, more pressing, what will I now use for the new-born reputed saviour of mankind, destined to be the centrepiece of my nativity tableau? Stupidly, I paid the vast sum of sixty-five pounds on eBay for a lifelike doll which clearly looked tastier than I could ever have imagined. Now all that's left of him is a few chewed remnants of plastic that provide evidence of his untimely demise.

'Did you see the culprit, Little Dog?' I ask. But my faithful one-eyed terrier mash-up simply bares his teeth in his usual rictus grin and doesn't dish any dirt on the alpacas. He knows, though, and he knows that I know he knows.

While I'm still musing on it, Lucas crosses the yard and comes to stand next to me in the barn. He's sixteen now and, though he's not my son, he might as well be, as I harbour all of the same maternal feelings for him.

'You OK?' he asks.

I nod towards our troublesome trio. 'These guys will be the death of me.' They all give us doe eyes and flutter their long lashes, feigning innocence. I snort at them. 'Don't give me that.'

'Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths,' Lucas observes.

But we both know better.

I acquired these guys when their owners moved abroad. They're pack animals and came as a job lot. How could I turn them down? I'd never owned alpacas before. I thought they'd be sweet, fun. I was wrong.

Tina is definitely our diva and rules the boys with a rod of iron. She's chocolate-brown with an impressive pom-pom of hair which she likes to toss about. Rod is white with skinny legs and knobbly knees. He's usually to be found humming and gazing into space and is our most contented alpaca. But that's not saying a lot. Johnny Rotten is definitely channelling the punk rocker he's named after. He has a tan coat with hair like a Mohican in a shade that's almost orange. Despite being pampered like the rest of them, Johnny will bite you as soon as look at you. Actually, I wouldn't mind betting that he's the one who chowed down Jesus. *Hmm*.

Before we go any further, I should also tell you how Lucas came to be under my loving care. Here at Hope Farm, as well as taking in tricky animals, we look after disadvantaged kids too. We're not your usual farm. Far from it. We don't have crops or animals that we (whisper) *eat*. Instead, we offer alternative education for students who can't cope or are currently excluded from mainstream schools. I set this place up as a charity a few years ago now and we take in kids – mostly

teenagers – who have behavioural difficulties, mental health issues or are on the autistic spectrum. That's how Lucas arrived here too.

Originally, Lucas was brought to the farm by his father, Shelby Dacre, who was at the end of his tether with his wayward son who had been expelled from his private school for anti-social behaviour. Their relationship had been strained since Shelby had recently lost his wife to cancer. Lucas, understandably, was floundering without his mum and getting any form of communication out of him at all was an uphill struggle. In Lucas's eyes his father hadn't mourned his mother sufficiently. Shelby had dealt with his grief by dating much younger actresses and submerging himself in his work. Lucas, at a terrible time, had been largely left to his own devices and had grown angrier which manifested in challenging behaviour. Instead of pulling together, father and son had grown increasingly apart – to the point where Shelby no longer felt able to deal with his disruptive son. That's where I came in.

When he arrived here, I hadn't expected to bond so easily with Lucas. He's difficult, testing, terse, uncommunicative, moody – all of the usual teenage behaviour – but we connected straightaway. He talked to me when he couldn't speak to anyone else. We have kids with all kinds of problems here, but I could instantly see that beneath the angry façade, there was a lost and lonely boy just wanting to be loved. And love him I do.

Equally surprising is the fact that I love his father too. It's fair to say that love found me later in life. At thirty-several, having lived the life of a loner, this was a new experience for me. The fact that I'm a borderline recluse meant I had no idea who Shelby Dacre was when he first rocked up here. But, yes he's *the* Shelby Dacre, star of *Flinton's Farm* soap opera and national treasure. In my defence, I don't even own a telly, so have never watched a soap opera in my life.

Falling in love wasn't easy for me, as we're totally different people. But Shelby is such a confident, outgoing character that he's brought me out of my shell and I think I offer him something more real than the world that he generally inhabits. They say that opposites attract and it's certainly the case in our situation. Our lives couldn't be more different. For Shelby, it's filming, glamorous parties and adoration. For me it's recalcitrant kids, awkward animals and a day that always features manure.

We've only been together for a short while, but he has changed my world in so many ways. The best part is that Lucas has transformed from the sullen, uncommunicative teenager he was. Over the last few months, our bond has grown and we've become ever closer. It would kill him to admit it, but he's blossoming here and I feel that he's teaching me as much as I'm teaching him.