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Opening extract from

The Reindeer Girl

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Uncle Tomas glanced round at Lotta from the front seat of the car. "I know you really want to see your grandparents, and your great-grandmother. But the thing is, on the way from the airport to their house, we will go past the reindeer farm…"

Lotta gave a little gasp. "Right past it?" she asked, looking pleadingly between her mum and dad.

"Oh, I don't know…" Lotta's mum said, shaking her head doubtfully. "We're a bit tired from the flight. And Mormor and Morfar and Oldeforeldre will be at their house, waiting to see us."

Lotta nodded, trying not to look disappointed. This was her first trip to Norway, and although her grandparents – she called them by their Norwegian

names, Mormor and Morfar – had been over to London to visit them several times, she had never met her oldeforeldre. Her great-grandmother was too frail to travel so far, but Lotta loved speaking to her on the phone. One of the reasons that they'd come to Tromsø this year was that Oldeforeldre was going to be ninety, two days before Christmas. They were going to have a special party to celebrate.

But the reindeer… For Lotta, they were one of the most exciting parts of the trip. They were all mixed up in her mind with the deep snow, and the cold, and the amazing Christmasiness of everything. Even Tromsø airport had been full of beautiful Christmas decorations. And as soon as they had stepped outside, she had breathed in the crisp, freezing air and

suddenly felt even more excited. Which she hadn't thought was possible.

Ever since she could remember, her mum had told her stories about Oldeforeldre and the reindeer. They were Lotta's favourite bedtime stories. After her mum had read her way through a stack of picture books, Lotta would always ask for one last story – "a real story now, about Erika and the reindeer."

Erika was her great-grandmother. When she was a little girl she had lived in the forest with her family, who were Sami reindeer herders. Some of the time she had slept in a tent that her family packed up in the mornings and carried on a sledge. Erika had ridden on the sledge when she was too tired to walk or ski, as her family travelled with the reindeer on

their long journeys across the Finnmark highlands. It was a lot more interesting than living in a normal house and going to school every morning. In her mind, Lotta thought of Erika as the reindeer girl. She was desperate to meet her.

But she was desperate to meet the reindeer, too. There had been two lifesize model ones in the airport, along with a lot of funny elves that Uncle Tomas had told her were called *nisse*. He said they were a special Norwegian thing, and Mormor had lots of little ones decorating the house. They had been sweet, but Lotta just wanted to see a real reindeer. She had read about them and tried to find out more about Oldeforeldre's life as a reindeer herder. But it wasn't the same as meeting a real one.

"Actually, it was Oldeforeldre's idea that we should stop at the farm," Tomas explained. "She said that when she spoke to Lotta on the telephone, she was so excited about the reindeer and asked so many questions. She said that Lotta would understand all the stories she had to tell her much better if she met the reindeer first."



Lotta's mum laughed. "All right then. Between the two of them, I don't think we have much choice. I think Lotta might be more excited about seeing the reindeer than the family."

Lotta went pink. "That isn't true! I'm just excited about both."

"Good. We will stop at the reindeer farm then. None of our family herd reindeer in the same way that Oldeforeldre did, Lotta," Uncle Tomas added. "Your great-uncle Aslak runs the farm, but he feeds the reindeer now. They don't roam wild."

Lotta nodded. "I suppose nobody goes travelling with the reindeer now," she said, a little sadly.

"It's a hard life," Uncle Tomas said, shrugging. "But some families still do. They use snowmobiles mostly, though, not sledges. Ah, we're nearly there. Just this turning here." He turned the four-wheel drive off the main road, up a steep lane and through a set of huge gates. There was a sign on them, but Lotta couldn't understand what it said. Her mum did

talk to her in Norwegian and she knew a little bit, but she found it hard to read.

They piled out of the car, and Lotta was glad of her smart new red coat – it had been bought from a sports shop, and it was thick and padded, meant for skiing. Her mum had said that her old coat wouldn't be warm enough for the Norwegian winter. Even so, Lotta shivered a little as she pulled on her knitted mittens. Mormor had sent them to her, when they had first decided to visit for Christmas. Mormor had said there was thick snow already and she would need them. Lotta loved the white snowflake pattern knitted into the red wool.

"Ah, you've come!" A huge bear of a man, with a thick brown beard, was hurrying out of the farmhouse towards

them. "Little Lotta!" He hugged her, and he was so big that Lotta's feet lifted off the ground. "My mamma says you are a reindeer girl, too, and I have to show you the reindeer."

His mamma – that was Oldeforeldre, Lotta realized. "Yes, please!" she told him, rather shyly. His English was amazingly good, although a little slow and thickly accented.

He took her hand, her mitten tiny inside his huge, fur-lined glove, and led them over to a shed that was built on to the side of the house. "I have two reindeer in here," he explained. "Both a little lame, so I brought them inside to recover." He opened the wooden door gently and there was a scuffling noise from inside as two reindeer stood up in their stalls.

Lotta took a step back in surprise – somehow she hadn't expected them to be quite so big. But then she smiled delightedly. "Oh, they're beautiful," she murmured. "Can I … can I pat them?"

"Mmmm, these two are quite tame. I have been feeding them while they are in here, so they are used to me. Here." Great-uncle Aslak tipped a handful of brown pellets into Lotta's mittened hand. "Give them these."

The reindeer snorted eagerly as they smelled the food and leaned over the metal fence, snuffling.

Lotta stretched out her hands a little cautiously, but the reindeer were both surprisingly gentle as they gobbled up the pellets. "They really like them!" she told her great-uncle.



"Mmmm, they are greedy, these two," he said, smiling.

"Why doesn't this one have any antlers?" Lotta asked, frowning at the bigger of the two reindeer. He looked a bit strange without them, almost bald. But very cuddly.

Great-uncle Aslak laughed. "He is a boy, Lotta. Their antlers drop off in the winter, did you not know? The ladies, they keep theirs a little longer, until after their calves are born. So they can use them to swipe at the boys, if they are being too greedy and taking all the food. They need lots of food, the mothers, to grow their calves. They are carrying the babies all through the winter. This one here, she will have her baby in April, perhaps."

"Oh! So this is a mother reindeer?"

Lotta asked. The reindeer was nuzzling hopefully at her mittens, as though she thought Lotta might have more food hidden in there somewhere. Her antlers were enormous, Lotta thought, and her nose was soft and velvety. Now she knew the difference, Lotta could see that she was a girl. She was a little smaller, and she didn't have the thick, shaggy white fur round her neck that the deer in the next pen had. She was quite big round the middle, too, although Lotta couldn't really see a bump.

"Yes, Lotta, I should have told you about the antlers," her mum said, reaching over to stroke the reindeer, too. "Whenever you see pictures of Father Christmas with reindeer pulling his sleigh, they're all girls!"

Lotta giggled. "That's silly! Ooooh!" The mother reindeer had got impatient, and gently butted the side of Lotta's head – an obvious demand for more food.

Great-uncle Aslak tutted. "Greedy! Here, give them a little more, Lotta. They will love you forever now."

"I love them, too," Lotta said, looking into the mother reindeer's dark eyes as she delicately gulped down the pellets. "Thank you for letting us see them."

"Ah, you can come back again and I will take you out to see the rest," Great-uncle Aslak promised. "But Oldeforeldre, she wanted you to see them quickly today. A special start to your visit, she said."

Lotta nodded. "It was perfect…"



Lotta stood hesitating in the doorway of Oldeforeldre's room, with her mum and dad behind her. Not only was it the first time she had met her great-grandmother – she was pretty sure it was the first time she had met someone who was almost ninety years old. Oldeforeldre had been born in 1923, really a lifetime ago. The world had been so different then. Oldeforeldre's world especially.

Lotta had always felt like she knew Oldeforeldre Erika, the little girl from Mum's stories. But now she was almost frightened to meet someone who had lived through all that time.

She stared over at the tiny lady sitting in the armchair by the stove and smiled shyly at her.

"Lotta!" Oldeforeldre sat up straighter