

*Katrina Nannestad*

The  
GIRL, the DOG  
AND THE  
WRITER  
IN  
LUCERNE

Katrina Nannestad

WITH illustrations by

Cheryl Orsini





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## *A Siberian miracle*

‘Freja! Wake up!’

Freja moaned. She rubbed her nose and burrowed further down into her sleeping bag, until all that could be seen of her was the nest of wild golden curls at the top of her head.

But Clementine wouldn’t go away. She pulled back the sleeping bag and pressed her cool, thin hand against Freja’s cheek. ‘Freja,’ she said. ‘Wake up.’

‘I’m sleeping,’ Freja muttered. ‘I’ll see you in the morning, Mummy Darling Heart.’

Clementine laughed. ‘It *is* morning, my precious girl. And you really must get up. Our friends are here! They’re back.’

Freja’s eyes sprang open. ‘*All* of them?’

Clementine smiled. ‘All of them. Right here in the clearing outside our log cabin.’

Freja leapt up, wriggled into her coat, slipped on her gumboots and ran to the door. There, she stopped. She shook her hands and jiggled her legs, trying to still the raging excitement in her body. Clementine waited patiently.

Finally, Freja dropped her hands to her sides, took a deep breath and nodded.

‘Ready?’ whispered Clementine.

‘Ready,’ whispered Freja.

Slowly, silently, Clementine slid back the bolt and opened the door. They waited until their eyes adjusted to the Siberian summer sunshine, already bright at six o’clock in the morning, then crept out onto the porch. Freja wrapped her arms around the corner post, pressed her cheek to its rough timber and sighed.

Ten reindeer wandered across the clearing on long, skinny legs. Their grey-fawn fur shone silver in the sunshine and their newly grown antlers were covered in dark chocolate velvet. The adults nibbled at ferns and tufts of grass. A fat calf drank from her mother, tiny tail standing to attention. Another larger calf scratched his head against a tree trunk at the edge of the clearing. Perhaps his antler buds were tingling.

Freja watched and waited. She turned and frowned up into her mother’s face. Clementine raised her eyebrows and a smile played around the corners of her mouth — a silent, ‘Just wait and see.’

One of the reindeer cows now found a clump of mushrooms growing at the foot of a tree. She lowered

her head to eat, then leapt back. Three brown Arctic fox pups sprang out of the ferns just inches from where her head had been. They ran a full circle around the cow, then dashed back and forth between the other reindeer, yapping and snapping at hooves.

The herd seemed untroubled by the intruders. One or two grunted and rolled their eyes, but the rest carried on grazing, suckling, soaking up the sunshine.

Disappointed in the response from the reindeer, the pups turned to one another, pointy faces full of mischief. The largest of the pups flicked his bushy tail, then leapt at the smallest pup, pinning it to the ground. The third jumped on top of them both and soon they were a tumbling ball of fur and teeth and growls. They rumbled and rolled through the grass towards the log cabin. Freja giggled into the collar of her coat. She didn't want to scare them away.

The fox pups crashed into the stone step at the front of the porch and fell apart. The smallest fled back across the clearing, where it hid between the legs of the reindeer by the mushrooms. The cow grunted softly, bent her neck and nuzzled the top of the pup's head with her soft velvety muzzle. The pup whimpered and licked the reindeer's leg.

The two larger pups sniffed around the step, chewed at a stick, then returned to their mischief-making. They nipped at reindeer legs, pounced on shimmering ferns and chased their own tails. The largest pup jumped into the air and snapped at the tail of a suckling calf.

The calf's mother warned it away with a toss of her head.

Finally, they tired of teasing and joined their sibling. The cow nuzzled their sides, grunting softly. Then she herded all three pups to a clump of ferns where they curled up into one tight, fluffy bundle and fell asleep. The cow continued to nibble at the mushrooms nearby. Every now and then she turned to gaze upon the pups, making a deep, soft grunt of contentment.

Freja clung to the porch post, her blue eyes sparkling, her toes wriggling in her boots to express the joy that was overflowing from her heart. It was a miracle. A real, live Siberian miracle.

The pups had been left orphaned and alone at the start of summer. Clementine and Freja had never found their mother or the rest of the litter. They simply stumbled across the three tiny pups one day while they were trailing the reindeer.

Freja had wanted to take them home, to feed them, to keep them safe and warm. But Clementine would not allow it.

'It wouldn't be right,' she said. 'We're here to watch and learn without making our mark on this place. We're not to interfere. It will ruin them for living in the wild.'

Freja thought that starving to death would also ruin them for living in the wild, but didn't say it out loud. She knew that Clementine was right.

They continued to see the pups every day or two. The foxes survived on the meagre leftovers of other

animals' dinners, but still grew thinner and mangier. Clementine said it was the need for mothering more than food that was making them ill. But still she would not let Freja interfere.

Freja had cried herself to sleep every night for two weeks.

At the start of the third week, the pups had found the herd of reindeer and wandered right into their midst. They were desperate for affection. And one of the cows, who had just given birth to a dead calf, was desperate to *give* affection. It was a match made in heaven.

The cow licked the pups as she had just licked her newborn calf. Unlike the calf, the pups wriggled, full of life, and she was delighted. She herded them towards a clump of berries and they ate. She lay down and the pups, now a little less hungry than they'd been for days, curled up at her side and fell asleep.

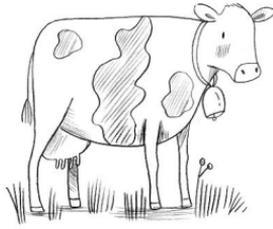
Over the coming weeks, Clementine and Freja had watched the fox pups as they became strange little adopted reindeer. The pups ate berries and fungus with the herd, but also discovered a talent for stealing eggs. Strengthened by the fresh food and their new mother's love, they moved on to hunting voles, marmots and birds. They ventured further afield to hunt, but always returned to the herd and their beloved mother when their bellies were full and their legs tired. They grew playful and cheeky, becoming the clowns of the herd. They were, it seemed, thriving amidst their new family.

By midsummer the reindeer had wandered beyond the area where Freja and Clementine were researching. And the Arctic fox pups disappeared with them.

Freja and Clementine had spent many hours since wondering if the strange family had clung together. Had the pups survived without fox parents to teach them the ways of the Siberian wilds? Had they outgrown their reindeer family? Would their reindeer mother reject them as the new mating season approached with its hope of a brand-new calf?

But now, here they were. All together. The strange but perfect family. Strong, healthy and happy.

‘Wishes come true, with bushy brown tails and velvety antlers,’ whispered Freja. Then, turning to her mother, she said, ‘We will remember this forever, won’t we, Clementine? Sad beginnings can lead to the most beautiful and surprising endings.’



## CHAPTER 1

# *Caramel cows and cream*

A long time later, on another morning, a world away, Freja was awoken by the ringing of a bell. *A church bell?* she wondered. *A school bell?*

Opening her eyes, she found herself staring up at rough timber beams. Her nose filled with the sweet, earthy smell of animals. Stretching her arms out to her sides, she grabbed two big handfuls of something dry and crunchy. Straw.

The bell rang again and Freja smiled. ‘Cowbells!’ she cried, remembering at last that she was in a barn on the side of a mountain in Switzerland.

Throwing her blanket aside, Freja crawled through the straw to the edge of the loft, stuck her head through the railings and stared down into the barn. Three sleek caramel cows stood side by side, giant bells dangling

from their necks on leather collars. They were being milked by hand, the old-fashioned way.

Two of the milkers were sturdy men clad in white linen shirts, leather knickerbockers and green felt hats. They sat on three-legged stools, leaning heavily against their cows. Grasping a teat in each hand, they'd set up a slow, steady rhythm that saw their steel buckets filling with milk. The cows stood patiently, contentedly, chewing their cud, licking their noses, blinking their long black lashes.

The third milker was a tall gangly fellow with a frayed green shirt, saggy baggy trousers and scuffed boots. He dithered and muttered and ran his hand through his mop of curly brown hair. 'Righto,' he said. 'I can do this. Piece of cake ... Or perhaps in a dairy it would be more appropriate to say "a piece of cheese" ... Or perhaps I could compromise and say "a piece of cheesecake!"' He chuckled and cracked his knuckles.

'Righto,' he said once more. He leaned his head against his cow and reached for her udder. The cow shifted sideways and his hands were left squeezing on thin air.

Freja giggled.

The man tugged at his left ear, sighed and shifted the milking stool close to the cow once more. But the moment his head touched the cow's belly she twitched and shifted away. This time, the man slipped forward and fell off the stool, hitting his head on the bucket with a *twang*.

Freja laughed out loud, then slapped her hand across her mouth. But it was too late. The man had heard and looked up at her. His face split into a wide grin and his green eyes danced with delight.

‘Freja!’ he cried, waving. ‘Good morning! Or, as they say in this part of Switzerland, *guten Morgen!*’

Freja waved back. ‘*Guten Morgen*, Tobias.’ She bit her lip to stop another giggle. ‘You look like you’re having a spot of bother.’

Tobias grimaced. ‘Herr Ummel, the farmer, is short a pair of hands today, so I said I’d help. A kind of payment for his hospitality. Milking a cow seemed like a simple job to do. But ... well ... the thing is, old chap, getting the cow to stand still so I can actually make a *start* on the milking is turning out to be far more troublesome than I expected.’

The cow turned around and licked the back of his neck.

‘Oh, goody!’ cried Tobias, heaving himself up from the barn floor. ‘You’re ready now, are you?’

The cow stretched her neck and let out a deep, bellowing, ‘Moouooo!’

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ said Tobias. He shifted his bucket and stool into place once more, sat and leaned against her fat caramel belly. But, again, she stepped away, this time flicking her tail across Tobias’ face as she went.

Freja threw back her head and laughed until she hiccuped.

Tobias slouched on the milking stool, his hands drooping between his knees.

‘It’s your hair,’ said Freja, when she finally caught her breath. ‘I think the curls might be tickling her tummy every time you lean forward.’ She climbed down the timber ladder from the loft and handed him a large white cloth. Tobias looked at it, shrugged, then wrapped it around his head, tying a knot beneath his chin. He looked like an old peasant woman from a fairy tale. Freja beamed and gave him the thumbs-up.

‘Last try,’ muttered Tobias, pulling bucket and stool into position once more. Slowly, cautiously, he pressed his head, then his shoulder, into the cow’s belly and waited. The cow didn’t move. She licked her nose, blinked and began to chew her cud.

‘Well done, Toby,’ said Freja in a stage whisper.

Tobias reached forward and wrapped his hands around the cow’s teats. He gave a firm but gentle tug and a stream of milk squirted onto his knee. He tugged with the other hand and milk shot down all over his boot. Unperturbed, he tugged and squeezed, and soon there was a rich, creamy puddle on the floor at his feet.

Tobias continued to milk and, after squirting the cow’s hoof, Freja’s feet and his own boots several more times, a drop or two landed in the bucket.

‘How terribly clever!’ said Freja.

‘Who, me or the cow?’ asked Tobias.

‘Both of you,’ said Freja, resting one hand on Tobias’ shoulder, the other on the cow’s side. ‘Now if you can just get a bit more milk to land in the bucket —’

‘Woof!’ Finnegan, Tobias’ giant Irish wolfhound, trotted through the barn door. His shaggy grey head was titled jauntily to one side. Herr Ummel, the farmer, bumbled after him, red-faced and frowning.

‘The hound,’ snapped Herr Ummel, glaring at Tobias. ‘He was in the pigsty, eating the slops.’

Finnegan sat beside the farmer, grinned, then dribbled. His nose was covered in white mush and a potato peel hung from his left ear. He seemed terribly pleased with himself.

‘Bad doggy!’ scolded the farmer. ‘*Böser Hund!*’

‘Boof!’ Finnegan gave the farmer’s hand a good-natured nudge and trotted over to Tobias and Freja. He stuck his nose in Tobias’ ear, licked Freja’s cheek, then started lapping up the puddle of creamy rich milk that was growing ever larger at Tobias’ feet.

‘Finnegan’s very sorry, Herr Ummel,’ said Freja. ‘And he promises he will never steal the pigs’ food again.’ She blushed, because she was always a little shy when talking to new people, but also because she had just told a big, fat lie. Finnegan was certainly not sorry and would probably sneak back to dine with the pigs as soon as he had slurped up all the cream.



When the cows were milked, Freja and Tobias sat on stools outside the barn and ate the simple breakfast Herr Ummel had provided — pumpernickel, summer cheese and a jug of fresh, warm milk. Two or three drops might even have come from Tobias' cow. Freja smiled at the thought and watched the cows as they now grazed their way up the lush green mountainside with the rest of the herd.

Finnegan lay at Freja's feet, chewing on the wooden handle of a pitchfork. Freja let him be. She figured it was better than him gobbling the pigs' slops or sneaking into the dairy where he might steal a whole wheel of cheese.

Herr Ummel had been very kind to let them sleep at his farm. They should have arrived in Lucerne last night, but somewhere along the way, Tobias had taken a wrong turn. Instead of riding the motorcycle down to the city by the large blue lake, they had wound their way up the mountainside to the remote alpine farms where the cows were taken to graze during the summer. The air had grown cooler and cooler, chilling Freja's cheeks. She'd been grateful for Finnegan's large, warm body crammed against hers in the sidecar. When night fell, and they'd realised they were hopelessly lost, they'd headed for the nearest light — a glow in Herr Ummel's kitchen window.

Tobias often took wrong turns. He was a crime writer and his thoughts were always tumbling away from reality and into the world of his novel. He planned

jewel heists and kidnappings, when he should have been looking out for forks in the road. He held imaginary conversations with cat burglars and spies, when he should have been consulting maps. And yesterday, he'd been wondering how hard one might need to donk an enemy on the head with a cowbell to render them unconscious, when he should have been looking out for the big blue sign that pointed to Lucerne.

Not that it really mattered. It had been nice to stay in the Alps with the cows and the quietness before heading down to Lucerne.

'Lucerne,' Freja sighed. The pumpernickel suddenly turned hard and heavy in her tummy. She gave the rest of the dark bread to Finnegan and slouched forward, her chin in her hands.

'Lucerne,' she murmured once more.

Freja had mixed feelings about their arrival. Lucerne was where they were to see Clementine, her mother, for the first time in more than half a year.

Of course, Freja *wanted* to see Clementine. She had missed her desperately. She had longed to feel Clementine's hug, to hear her whisper, 'My precious girl.' And her heart had warmed at the thought of whispering back, 'I love you, Mummy Darling Heart.'

But there was fear too. Clementine had gone to Lucerne to spend time in a clinic because she was ill. Terribly ill. Her treatment had affected her eyesight and now she had grown so poorly that Freja and Tobias had been asked to come at once.

Freja was frightened by what she might find. Would she still be able to see the world-famous zoologist Clementine Peachtree, with whom she'd spent the first ten years of her life adventuring through the Arctic wilds? Would she recognise the amazing mother who'd taken her swimming with seals, perching with puffins, frolicking with foxes? Would *that* Clementine still be there? Or would her illness have turned her into someone else? A normal person? A dull person? A stranger?

Freja shuddered. She couldn't bear the thought!

And then, of course, there were the changes that had taken place in Freja herself. When Clementine became ill, she had sent Freja to live with Tobias Appleby. Freja had never met Tobias before, had never even heard of him.

But Tobias Appleby had turned out to be a charming fellow, muddlesome but kind. Together with his overgrown Irish wolfhound, Finnegan, he had made Freja feel welcome. Writer and dog had accepted Freja just the way she was, teaching her to be brave and strong. Even when they travelled to Rome to begin a brand-new adventure in a world suddenly filled with people. Even when they started all over again by moving on to Provence. Freja had adjusted to both city life and village life, despite the fact that she had spent her first ten years surrounded by animals, not people. She'd made friends with adults and, astonishingly, other children. She'd even stood up to thieves and bullies and liars. In short, she had thrived.

Freja stared down at her bright pink hiking boots. They were new, bought yesterday because her old ones were too tight. And her overalls barely reached the top of her socks. She had grown taller by a whole four centimetres since she last saw Clementine.

A tear slipped from her eye. ‘Tobias?’ she whispered. ‘Do you think Clementine will recognise me?’

Tobias stared at her. Noticing the tear drop, his shoulders slumped and his green eyes softened. ‘You silly sausage,’ he said. ‘Why on earth would you worry about such a thing?’

Freja fiddled with Finnegan’s raggedy grey ear. ‘I’ve changed so very much since I saw her last. I’m taller and stronger. I’m even quite bold at times. I used to be scared of people, to run away and hide.’ She blushed. ‘Even if Clementine *does* recognise me, she ... she ... she might not like me any more.’

Tobias’ eyebrows shot upward. ‘Not like you any more?’ he gasped. Then, springing to his feet, he shouted, ‘Not *like* you any more?!’

‘Boof!’ said Finnegan, his ears pricking up.

Tobias shook his head in disbelief. ‘What’s not to like?’ He flung his arms wide and sent the milk jug flying across the grass. ‘What’s not to *love*? Just look at you, Freja Peachtree. You’re an amazing child. You’re brave and kind and clever and creative. You can also be sneaky when the need arises. That’s a good thing, by the way — an important survival skill. Furthermore, Clementine will have absolutely no trouble recognising

her daughter because you will still fit more perfectly into her embrace than any other human being on earth! A little bit of extra height will just make it a snuggler fit.'

Freja scrunched her nose, still uncertain.

'And if Clementine asks,' continued Tobias, 'I'll be able to tell her that your eyes are still as blue as a glacial lake and your golden curls are as wild and woolly as ever. The only difference is that you now have a rather large amount of straw growing from your head as well. Gathered from the loft during the night, I suspect.'

Freja reached for her curls.

'Don't touch it!' cried Tobias. 'The combination of straw and hair is perfect. Wild and woolly. Or I should say, wild and chaffy and as crispy as twigs. A halo shining golden in the sunshine. Why, you look like a Swiss barnyard angel. A protector of cows. A patron saint of piglets. You're an absolute wonder to behold.'

Freja smiled, but her mouth immediately shrank to a pout. 'But Clementine's eyes ...' she whispered. 'She won't be able to see ...'

'But you are hers,' said Tobias, his voice now soft and low. He reached out and squeezed Freja's shoulder. 'She will know you instantly. Just as she knows her own hands and feet are there without looking. You are part of her, and she is part of you, and no amount of time or distance or failing eyesight will ever change that.'

Freja sniffed and gave a lopsided grin.

‘Truly, old chap,’ said Tobias. He leaned forward and tugged gently at one of Freja’s curls. ‘You’ll bring Clementine nothing but joy.’

And, as if to add his own support, Finnegan leapt up, wiped his tongue across Freja’s face and dribbled into her lap.

‘Boof!’