Dear XX,

I want to congratulate you on the upcoming New Year. I wish you good health and all the best in 2025.

It might seem strange to you to receive such a letter from a complete stranger. I am writing because I wanted to do at least something small to make life on our planet a little better, brighter. Although Russian is not my native language, I can write in Russian and decided that I could write a letter to a prisoner who is in Russia. I really hope that this letter lets you know that you are not forgotten, that there are caring people in the world who wish you all the very best.

I was born in the USA, I am 67 years old, I became a widow when I was 43, I have three daughters and four grandchildren, and since 2008 I have been living in Norway. I studied Russian at university in the 1970s. I currently work as a professor at the northernmost university in the world, in Tromsø. I have dedicated my life to the love of languages, especially Russian and Czech.

In order to entertain you a bit, I want to write about bears. In August, I traveled to Asheville (a city in the western part of North Carolina) to help my daughter XX with her newborn son XX. I arrived in the evening, and when I woke up in the morning, from the window I saw a bear lying near the trash can a few meters from the house. At first, I couldn't believe my eyes, but then it yawned and flopped back on its side. It really was a bear. When I asked my daughter about it, she said there are many bears here, but they are black bears, they are gentle and safe. She assured me that I could go on walks here with the baby. Which I did, although I was a little scared. I saw a bear there almost every day. One day I was walking down the road with the baby in his stroller, and when I turned around, I saw a huge bear slowly crossing the street, blocking my way back. Well, what could I do? I stood there for a few minutes, waited until the bear disappeared, then continued by walk while loudly singing songs to warn the bear that there was a person about. When I found out that they collect garbage there on Fridays, I first thought it might be better not to walk, but again I was assured that there was nothing to fear. And indeed, I saw that the bears had overturned the trash cans and enjoyed the tasty treats. It seems the bears there even know how to open car doors. So, being a grandmother is not entirely without risk.

Let's hope that 2025 will be a better year than 2024. With warm wishes,

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