Costa Award-winning author of *The Explorer*

KATHERINE RUNDELL

THE WOLF WILDER

'A writer with an utterly distinctive voice and a wild imagination'
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To my grandmother, Pauline Blanchard-Sims,
whose flair and courage are unrivalled

A NOTE ON WOLF WILDERS

Wolf wilders are almost impossible to spot.

A wolf wilder is not like a lion tamer nor a circus ringmaster: wolf wilders can go their whole lives without laying eyes on a sequin. They look, more or less, like ordinary people. There are clues: more than half are missing a piece of a finger, the lobe of an ear, a toe or two. They go through clean bandages the way other people go through socks. They smell very faintly of raw meat.

In the western wild parts of Russia there are gangs of wolf merchants who hunt newborn pups. They snatch them, still wet and blind, and carry them away in boxes, selling them to men and women who live elegant lives in thick-carpeted houses in St Petersburg. A wolf pup

can fetch a thousand roubles, a pure white one as much as twice that. A wolf in the house is said to bring good fortune: money and fame, boys with clean noses and girls without pimples. Peter the Great had seven wolves, all as white as the moon.

The captured wolves wear golden chains and are taught to sit still while people around them laugh and drink and blow cigar smoke into their eyes. They are fed caviar, which they find disgusting. Some grow so fat that the fur on their stomach sweeps the ground as they waddle up and down stairs, and collects fluff and ash.

But a wolf cannot be tamed in the way a dog can be tamed, and it cannot be kept indoors. Wolves, like children, are not born to lead calm lives. Always the wolf goes mad at the imprisonment, and eventually it bites off and eats a little piece of someone who was not expecting to be eaten. The question then arises: what to do with the wolf?

Aristocrats in Russia believe that the killing of a wolf brings a unique kind of bad luck. It is not the glamorous kind of bad luck, not runaway trains and lost fortunes, but something dark and insidious. If you kill a wolf, they say, your life begins to disappear. Your child will come of age on the morning that war is declared. Your toenails will grow inwards, and your teeth outwards, and your

gums will bleed in the night and stain your pillow red. So the wolf must not be shot, nor starved; instead it is packed up like a parcel by nervous butlers, and sent away to the wolf wilder.

The wilder will teach the wolves how to be bold again, how to hunt and fight, and how to distrust humans. They teach them how to howl, because a wolf who cannot howl is like a human who cannot laugh. And the wolves are released back on to the land where they were born, which is as tough and alive as the animals themselves.

ONE

Once upon a time, a hundred years ago, there was a dark and stormy girl.

The girl was Russian, and although her hair and eyes and fingernails were dark all of the time, she was stormy only when she thought it absolutely necessary. Which was fairly often.

Her name was Feodora.

She lived in a wooden house made of timber taken from the surrounding forest. The walls were layered with sheep's wool to keep out the Russian winter, and the inside was lit with hurricane lamps. Feo had painted the lamps every colour in her box of paints, so the house cast out light into the forest in reds and greens and yellows. Her mother had cut and sanded the door herself, and

the wood was eight inches thick. Feo had painted it snow blue. The wolves had added claw marks over the years, which helped dissuade unwelcome visitors.

It all began – all of it – with someone knocking on the snow-blue door.

Although 'knocking' was not the right word for this particular noise, Feo thought. It sounded as though someone was trying to dig a hole in the wood with his knuckles.

But any knocking at all was unusual. Nobody knocked: it was just her and her mother and the wolves. Wolves do not knock. If they want to come in, they come in through the window, whether it is open or not.

Feo put down the skis she was oiling and listened. It was early, and she was still wearing her nightdress. She had no dressing gown, but she pulled on the jumper her mother had knitted, which came down to the scar on her knee, and ran to the front door.

Her mother was wrapped in a bearskin housecoat, just looking up from the fire she had been lighting in the sitting room.

'I'll do it!' Feo tugged at the door with both hands. It was stiff; ice had sealed the hinges.

Her mother grabbed at her – 'Wait! Feo!'

But Feo had already pulled the door open, and before

she could jump back it slapped inwards, catching the side of her head.

'Ach!' Feo stumbled, and sat down on her own ankle. She said a word that made the stranger pushing his way past her raise his eyebrows and curl his lip.

The man had a face made of right angles: a jutting nose and wrinkles in angry places, deep enough to cast shadows in the dark.

'Where is Marina Petrovna?' He marched down the hall, leaving a trail of snow.

Feo got to her knees – and then lurched back, as two more men in grey coats and black boots stamped past her, missing her fingers by inches. 'Move, girl.' They carried between them, slung by its legs, the body of a young elk. It was dead, and dripping blood.

'Wait!' said Feo. Both wore the tall furry hats of the Tsar's Imperial Army, and exaggeratedly official expressions.

Feo ran after them. She readied her elbows and knees to fight.

The two soldiers dropped the elk on the rug. The sitting room was small, and the two young men were large and moustached. Their moustaches seemed to take up most of the room.

Up close, they looked barely more than sixteen; but

the man with the door-beating fists was old, and his eyes were the oldest thing about him. Feo's stomach bunched up under her throat.

The man spoke over Feo's head to her mother. 'Marina Petrovna? I am General Rakov.'

'What do you want?' Marina's back was against the wall.

'I am commander of the Tsar's Imperial Army for the thousand miles south of St Petersburg. And I am here because your wolves did this,' he said. He kicked at the elk. Blood spread across his brightly polished shoe.

'*My* wolves?' Her mother's face was steady, but her eyes were neither calm nor happy. 'I do not own any wolves.'

'You bring them here,' said Rakov. His eyes had a coldness in them you do not expect to see in a living thing. 'That makes them your responsibility.' His tongue was stained yellow by tobacco.

'No. No, neither of those things are true,' said Feo's mother. 'Other people send the wolves when they tire of them: the aristocrats, the rich. We untame them, that's all. And wolves cannot be owned.'

'Lying will not help you, Madam.'

'I am not –'

'Those three wolves I see your child with. Those are not yours?'

'No, of course not!' began Feo. 'They're –' But her

mother shook her head, hard, and gestured to Feo to stay silent. Feo bit down on her hair instead, and tucked her fists into her armpits to be ready.

Her mother said, 'They are hers only in the sense that I am hers, and she is mine. They are Feo's companions, not her pets. But that bite isn't the work of Black or White or Grey.'

'Yes. The jaw marks,' said Feo. 'They're from a much smaller wolf.'

'You are mistaken,' said Rakov, 'in imagining I wish to hear excuses.' His voice was growing less official: louder, ragged-edged.

Feo tried to steady her breathing. The two young men, she saw, were staring at her mother: one of them had let his jaw sag open. Marina's shoulders and back and hips were wide; she had muscles that were more commonly seen on men, or rather, Feo thought, on wolves. But her face, a visitor had once said, was built on the blueprint used for snow leopards, and for saints. 'The look,' he had said, 'is "goddess, modified".' Feo had pretended, at the time, not to be proud.

Rakov seemed immune to her mother's beauty. 'I have been sent to collect compensation for the Tsar, and I shall do that, immediately. Do not play games with me. You owe the Tsar a hundred roubles.'

'I don't have a hundred roubles.'

Rakov slammed his fist against the wall. He was surprisingly strong for so old and shrivelled a man, and the wooden walls shuddered. 'Woman! I have no interest in protest or excuses. I have been sent to wrest obedience and order from this godforsaken place.' He glanced down at his red-speckled shoe. 'The Tsar rewards success.' Without warning he kicked the elk so hard that its legs flailed, and Feo let out a hiss of horror.

'You!' The General crossed to her, leaning down until his face, veined and papery, was inches from hers. 'If I had a child with a stare as insolent as yours, she would be beaten. Sit there and keep out of my sight.' He pushed her backwards, and the cross hanging from his neck caught in Feo's hair. He tugged it away viciously and passed through the door back into the hall. The soldiers followed him. Marina signalled to Feo to stay – the same hand gesture they used for wolves – and ran after them.

Feo stood in the doorway, waiting for the buzzing in her ears to die away; then she heard a cry and something breaking, and ran, skidding down the hall in her socks.

Her mother was not there, but the soldiers had crowded into Feo's bedroom, filling her room with their smell. Feo flinched away from it: smoke, she thought, and a year's worth of sweat and unwashed facial hair.

One of the soldiers had an underbite he could have picked his own nose with.

'Nothing worth anything,' said one soldier. His eyes moved across her reindeer-skin bedspread, the hurricane lamp, and came to rest on her skis leaning against the fireplace. Feo ran to stand protectively in front of them.

'These are mine!' she said. 'They're nothing to do with the Tsar. I made them.' It had taken her a whole month for each ski, whittling them every evening and smoothing them with grease. Feo gripped one in both fists like a spear. She hoped the prickling in her eyes was not visible. 'Get away from me.'

Rakov smiled, not sweetly. He took hold of Feo's lamp, held it up to the morning light. Feo grabbed at it.

'Wait!' said Marina. She stood in the doorway. There was a bruise on her cheek that had not been there before. 'Can't you see this is my daughter's room?'

The young men laughed. Rakov did not join in: he only stared at them until they turned red and fell silent. He crossed to Feo's mother, studied the mark on her cheek. He leaned forward until the tip of his nose was touching her skin, and sniffed. Marina stood motionless, her lips bitten shut. Then Rakov grunted and threw the lamp at the ceiling.

'*Chyort!*' cried Feo, and ducked. Broken glass rained down on her shoulders. She lunged forward at the General, swinging blindly with her ski. 'Get out!' she said. 'Get out!'

The General laughed, caught the ski and wrenched it from her. 'Sit down and behave, before you make me angry.'

'Get *out*,' said Feo.

'Sit! Or you will end up in the same position as that elk.'

Marina seemed to jerk into life. '*What?* What insanity in your head makes you think you can threaten my child?'

'You *both* disgust me.' Rakov shook his head. 'It is an abomination to live with those animals. Wolves are vermin with teeth.'

'That is …' Feo's mother's face spoke a hundred different swear words before she said, 'inaccurate.'

'And your daughter is vermin when she is with those wolves. I've heard stories about you both – you're unfit to be a mother.'

Marina let out a sound that it hurt Feo to hear, part-way between a gasp and a hiss.

He went on, 'There are schools – in Vladivostok – where she could learn the values of a better mother – Mother Russia. Perhaps I will have her sent there.'

'Feo,' said Marina, 'go and wait in the kitchen. *Immediately*, please.' Feo darted out, rounded the door and stopped there, hesitating, peering through the crack in the hinge. Her mother's face, as she turned to Rakov, was shining with anger and with other, more complicated, things.

'Feo is *my child*. For God's sake, do you not know what that means?' Marina shook her head incredulously. 'She is worth an entire army of men like you. My love for her is a thing you should underestimate only if you have a particularly powerful death wish. The love of a parent for a child – it *burns*.'

'How inconvenient for you.' Rakov ran a hand along his chin. 'What is your point? And make it quick.' He wiped his boot on the bed. 'You're becoming tedious.'

'My point is that you will keep your hands off my daughter if you value their current position at the ends of your arms.'

Rakov snorted. 'That is somewhat unfeminine.'

'Not at all. It seems profoundly feminine to me.'

Rakov stared at Marina's fingers, the tips of two of which were missing, and then at her face. His expression was frightening: there was something uncontained about it. Marina stared back at him. Rakov blinked first.

He grunted, and strode out of the door. Feo twisted

backwards out of his way, then ran after him into the kitchen.

'You are not making this easy for yourself,' he said. His face was dispassionate as he gripped the side of the dining table and overturned it. Feo's favourite mug crashed on the floor.

'Mama!' said Feo. She took a handful of her mother's coat as Marina swept into the room and held it tight.

Rakov did not even glance in her direction. 'Take the paintings,' he said. They had three, each with boldly coloured cubes arranged in shapes that hinted at men and women. Marina loved them. Feo humoured her.

'Wait, don't!' said Feo. 'That's Mama's Malevich. It was a present! Wait! Here. There's this!' Feo fished her gold chain from around her neck and held it out to the youngest soldier. 'It's gold. It was Mama's mother's before it was mine, so it's old. Gold's worth more when it's old.' The soldier bit the chain, sniffed it, nodded and handed it to Rakov.

Feo ran to open the front door. She stood by it, the snow blowing in and coating her socks. Her whole body was shaking. 'Now you have to go.'

Marina closed her eyes for one brief moment, then opened them and smiled at Feo. The two soldiers spat

on the floor in a bored kind of way and headed out into the snow.

'This is the only warning you will be given,' said Rakov. He ignored the open door and the snow-covered wind. 'The Tsar's orders. The Tsar will not have his animals slaughtered by wolves *you* have taught to hunt. From now on, if the people of the city send you wolves, you shoot them.'

'No!' said Feo. 'We can't! Anyway, we don't have a gun! Tell him, Mama!'

Rakov ignored her. 'You will send back a message to the superstitious idiots who send their ridiculous pets to you that you have released them into the wild, and then you will shoot the animals.'

'I will not,' said Marina. Her face looked empty of blood. It made Feo's stomach ache; it made her wish that she had a gun to point at the man in the doorway.

Rakov's coat wrinkled as he shrugged. 'You know the penalty for those who act against the orders of the Tsar? You remember what happened to the rioters in St Petersburg? This is the only warning you will receive.' He crossed to the front door, and as he passed he pointed a gloved finger at Feo's heart. 'You too, girl.' He jabbed once, hard, against her collarbone. Feo jumped backwards.

'If we see that child with a wolf, we'll shoot the wolf and take the child.'

He slammed the door behind him.

Later that day, Feo and her mother sat by the fire. The shards of broken glass and china had been swept clear and the elk had been packed in ice and stored in the woodshed – Feo had wanted to bury it properly, with a cross and a funeral, but her mother had said no: they might need to eat it if the winter kept marching on. Feo rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

'What do we do now, Mama?' she asked. 'Now they've said we have to kill the wolves? We won't, will we? I won't let you.'

'No, *lapushka*!' Marina's arm, with its embroidery of scars and muscle, enwrapped Feo. 'Of course not. But we'll be a little more silent, and a little more watchful.' She rattled the chestnuts roasting in the grate, and flipped one into Feo's hands. 'It's what the wolves do. We can do it too. Can't we?'

Of course they could, Feo thought that evening as she pulled on skis. Humans, on the whole, Feo could take or leave; there was only one person she loved

properly, with the sort of fierce pride that gets people into trouble, or prison, or history books. Her mother, she thought, could do anything.

It took Feo ten minutes to ski to the ruins of the stone chapel. At the entrance hall were three dilapidated statues of saints: they had no heads, and two of them had grown a scaly skin of green lichen. Even without heads, the saints managed to look unimpressed by this state of affairs. Only two and a half of the chapel walls were still standing, and the roof had long ago crumbled on to the mosaic floor below. There were pews, half eaten away by woodworm, and a marble miniature of the Virgin, which Feo had cleaned with the chewed end of a twig. If the light was right in the chapel, and if you looked closely, you could see that the walls had once been painted with gold figures. It was, Feo thought, the most beautiful place on earth.

In the chapel lived a pack of three wolves.

One wolf was white, one black and one a greyish mix, with black ears and the face of a politician. They could not be called tame – they certainly would not come if you called – but nor were they wholly wild. And Feo, the neighbours said, was half feral herself, and they looked in horror at her wolf-smelling red cloak. It made sense,

then, that Feo and the wolves would be best friends: they met each other halfway.

As she skied in through the door, the wolves were chewing on the carcasses of two ravens, covering the statue of Mary with flecks of blood. Feo did not go close – it is wisest not to interrupt wolves when they are eating, even if they are your closest friends – but waited, her feet tucked up on one of the pews, until they had finished. They were unhurried, licking their muzzles and forepaws, and then charged at her as a gang, knocking her off the pew and covering her chin and hands with wolf spit. She and Black had a game of chase in and out of the pews, Feo swinging for balance around the headless saints. She felt some of the grey weight of the day lift off her stomach.

Feo could not remember a time when she had not known and loved the wolves. It was impossible not to love them: they were so lean and beautiful and uncompromising. She had grown up picking pine needles out of their fur and old meat from their teeth. She could howl, her mother used to say, before she could talk. Wolves made sense to her; wolves, Feo thought, were one of the few things worth dying for. It seemed unlikely, though, that anyone would ask her to: after all, wolves were, in general, on the other side of the equation.