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Opening extract from

The Wolf Princess

Written by

Catherine Constable

Published by

Chicken House

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The WOLF PRINCESS

Chicken House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

From the Chicken House

I was all alone in Scotland: the snow was falling, the fire crackled in the grate, and I turned the first page of *The Wolf Princess*. After midnight I looked up again, a small tear in my eye, and my heart bursting with that special feeling that you only get when a book is *absolutely* fantastic! I started it again.

This story is exciting, heart-warming and totally satisfying. Curl up with Cathryn, jump on that unexpected train and steam through the snow – wolves and a magical palace await you!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

Text © Cathryn Constable 2012
First published in Great Britain in 2012
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Cover photo by Marat Ildarovich Safin
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

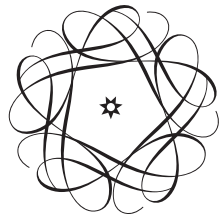
Quotations from *Old Peter's Russian Tales* by Arthur Ransome, courtesy of the Arthur Ransome Literary Estate.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-908435-34-7

HB ISBN 978-1-908435-67-5



CHAPTER ONE

The FOREST

'*Hold my hand, Sophie. We have to leave!*'

It was her father's voice. She couldn't see him, but she knew, somehow, that his hair was dishevelled and that he was wearing his tatty overcoat, the one with the hem that hung down like a ragged wing. He slipped his hand into hers, clasping it tight, and together they ran through the frozen silver forest. She knew where they were going. Always the same place – a place conjured from his stories, dreams and memories. At the edge of the trees, they stopped. Their breath scrolled out before them and the snow fell like a heavy lace curtain. Flakes as large as moths fluttered in front of her eyes.

'*Wait, Sophie,*' he said. '*She's coming. Can you see her?*'

And his words called up a young woman in a long cloak, her face hidden beneath a hood. Sophie glimpsed a

tendril of dark-blonde hair. It was covered with snowflakes that changed to diamonds as she watched.

'*Who is she?*'

She couldn't hear her father's answer, but he gripped her hand a little tighter and he sang to her . . . that lovely song whose words she had forgotten. Sophie wanted to ask her father about the woman, but now the song had become a story. He wouldn't stop telling her the story.

It was winter. It was snowing. There was a girl lost in the woods. And – Sophie felt her chest tighten with fear – *a wolf* . . .

She felt her father's hand slip out of hers.

'*Don't leave me!*'

But he was no longer there. And the sadness and the fear got mixed up with the snowflakes and covered everything.

'Sophie!'

No! This voice was from another place. She didn't want to answer.

She pressed her face into the pillow, trying to climb back into the forest. To hold herself in the strange dreamtime, where she could taste the cold, clear air like a mixture of peppermints and diamonds . . . feel the forest all around her . . . hear the snow creak beneath her feet . . .

'Are you awake?'

Sophie sighed and moved her hand across the bedspread, as if to brush snow from it.

'I am now, Delphine.'

She tried not to sound grumpy. But the day at the New Bloomsbury College for Young Ladies had started and it

would not be stopped. It was too late for dreams.

She turned on to her back and stared at the ceiling. Why did real life have to be so dull? Why did boarding school seem so . . . *beige*? She looked around at the three narrow wardrobes, three flimsy bedside cabinets and three scratched desks and chairs, and wished for . . . something else. Something beautiful, however small. Enormous branches of cherry blossom in an agate urn . . . panels of lace at the window . . . candlelight . . . In this cramped, mean, London room, there would never be any beauty or excitement. No secret notes or espionage. No adventures.

Just school.

Delphine sat up in bed and stretched. Yellow hair flowed around her face and shoulders. She looked like a Plantagenet princess who had just woken up in a church tomb after a thousand years of restful sleep.

'What's the weather doing?' Weather mattered only to Delphine, of course, so she could decide what to do with her hair. And Sophie's bed was next to the window. Delphine asked the same question every morning.

Sophie sat up. For a moment she gazed at the photograph of her father on the windowsill. The picture had caught the dreamy, quizzical expression she thought she remembered, as if he had just seen or heard something that interested him. She pulled back the curtain.

The window looked out on to a narrow street of tall houses, and she had to crane her neck to get any view of the sky. Even when it was wild with sunshine, the street was dank and depressing. Today, beads of rain drizzled

down the dirty panes, so there was hardly any need to check the sky, which happened to be the normal London colour – washing-up-water grey.

'It's amazing how much water there is in the sky above London,' Sophie said.

'It's been like this for four days,' Delphine replied. 'Do you think the rain ever gets bored? Do you think it ever wants to do something else with itself other than fall on drab old London?'

'It rains in Paris, doesn't it?' Sophie said.

'Of course! But even the rain in Paris is beautiful.'

'I wish it would snow,' Sophie whispered. She wondered if the dream of the winter forest would come again. Could she make it come back?

'Snow? Are you mad?' Delphine shuddered. 'It ruins your shoes.'

'But that wouldn't matter,' Sophie said. 'We would wake up and everything would look so different . . . Maybe it would even *be* different. Like a fairy tale. Wouldn't it be amazing if, just for once, it was cold enough for snow?'

'Such weather is only perfect on the *piste*,' Delphine said, firmly. 'With skis attached to your feet.' She stretched again and yawned prettily, like a cat. 'Shall we wake Marianne?' She swung her long legs over the edge of her bed and wiggled her toes. The nails were painted metallic green. 'If we don't, she'll miss breakfast again.'

'What is this fascination with breakfast?' A girl with thin, dark hair emerged from under a brown quilt cover, her face bleary and puffed with sleep.

'Hey! It speaks!'

The girl blinked like a mole and felt around on her bedside cabinet for a pair of slightly bent wire glasses, then pushed them on to her face. 'Why are you walking around on tiptoe, Delphine?' she said.

'To improve circulation,' Delphine responded, then stopped and threw her head between her knees to brush her hair. 'And this is to prevent wrinkles.'

'That's ridiculous,' sniffed Marianne. 'There's absolutely no scientific evidence for that.'

'And you haven't got any wrinkles,' Sophie pointed out. 'You're thirteen.'

'It is the French way,' Delphine shrugged, as if that were answer enough. She flicked her head back up, then twisted her hair into a bun on the side of her head and pierced it with a hairpin. Being half French seemed an awful lot of work, Sophie thought. And took an awful lot of time.

'Oh, but there *is* something to wake up for today!' Marianne kicked back her quilt with an unexpected burst of energy. 'It's Thursday. We get the results of our geography test!'

Sophie groaned. It was always such an effort not to feel squashed between Marianne's high academic standards and Delphine's equally high grooming standards. Mostly Sophie couldn't be bothered to resist the pressure; she'd got used to the feeling of being squashed by now, anyway.

She checked her watch. 'We'd better get dressed.'

'Give me twenty minutes,' Delphine said, pulling on a pale-pink dressing gown and heading for the bathroom.

'*Twenty minutes?*' Marianne made a face.

'I couldn't take that long even if I did everything twice,' Sophie said.

'Which is why I look like me . . . and you look like . . .' But whatever Sophie looked like, Delphine couldn't find the word for it. She stopped suddenly and stared, as if something had just occurred to her.

'What?' Sophie said.

'You're actually quite pretty,' Delphine said. 'Good eyebrows. Perfect skin. But no one notices because you always forget to brush your hair. And don't even get me started on that school jumper you wear – it's full of holes.'

'Well, it's the only one I've got. And stop staring at me like that!'

Delphine shrugged. 'You should think about these things.'

'But why?' Sophie said. 'No one ever takes any notice of me.'

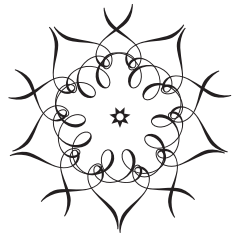
'There's no point saying anything to her, Delphine,' Marianne said, putting on her dressing gown. 'She's happy the way she is.'

Delphine wagged her finger. 'Trust me, one day you will want to make a good impression.'

'Well, I'm never going to meet anyone important,' Sophie said. 'So it won't make any difference if I have holes in my jumper or not.'

'You wait!' Delphine said. 'Someone important could turn up today!'

'That's about as likely as snowflakes in summer,' Sophie laughed.



CHAPTER TWO

The VISITOR

They were seriously late for breakfast. The smell of damp toast rose to greet them as they made their way down the back stairs, their shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. Just as they reached the bottom, they heard a heavier tread ahead of them and saw the corduroy-suited figure of their deputy headmaster. He turned as they tried to slip past him.

'Good morning, girls,' he said brightly, checking the time on his watch. 'You'd better hurry.' His gaze rested on Delphine. 'I would think about finding a less time-consuming hairstyle in the future, Delphine, if I were you.'

Sophie put her head down, stared hard at the floor and tried to make herself invisible. She knew she could get past most teachers without them really noticing she was

there. It was one of her most useful skills.

But not this morning.

Mr Tweedie cleared his throat. 'Sophie?' he said, just at the very moment when she thought she had escaped. 'A word?'

'But I'll be late for breakfast, sir,' Sophie said. 'You said so yourself.'

'It won't take long. I'm sure the others can get you something.'

Delphine and Marianne took the hint and made a dash for the refectory, Delphine mouthing 'sorry' as she went.

Sophie tried to avoid Mr Tweedie's concerned gaze. He didn't so much frown as crumple up his face when there was a problem. 'It's the jumper, Sophie,' he sighed.

Sophie tried to rearrange the offending knitwear so that the holes weren't so apparent.

'And your shoes,' he continued. 'Ballet shoes – the sort tied to your feet with ribbons – aren't on the uniform list, are they?'

She shook her head.

'I wonder, Sophie, if you've written to your guardian yet about your clothes? We did agree you were going to do that, didn't we?'

At the word 'guardian', an image of Rosemary – a middle-aged woman with blonde-grey hair cut in a boyish crop, sitting poker-straight on a stool in her small, neat kitchen – flashed in front of Sophie's eyes. She and Rosemary had nothing in common with each other, were not related in any way. But rain, a borrowed car, her widowed father's tiredness and an unexpected turn on a

dark country road had all combined one night in a fatal cocktail to make Rosemary and Sophie lifelong companions. As the only friend of the family the authorities could reach after the accident, Rosemary had taken Sophie in as a temporary measure, until a relative of the newly orphaned child could be found. But Sophie's father had not lived what Rosemary called a 'settled life'. Sophie's mother had died when Sophie was a baby, and her father had taken her to live in many different places. He'd talk about magical journeys, about the next place they would go. Friends were scarce and, it became apparent, relatives were non-existent.

'Rosemary is very busy,' Sophie said, putting a finger into one of the smaller holes in the sleeve of her jumper and hooking it over her fingernail in an attempt to hide it. She looked up at Mr Tweedie's crumpled, kind face and smiled with more confidence than she felt. 'She really does have a lot on her plate at the moment and I don't like to bother her . . .' Sophie didn't want to add, *when she is away*. Better that the school didn't know just how much time Rosemary spent out of the country. It would only cause problems.

'But it's not just the jumper or the shoes, Sophie, it's all your clothes.' Mr Tweedie sounded strained. 'Everything you wear is just so . . .' He stopped. 'You must understand that it's not that I mind, but it's better for you if you blend in. Look in lost property.' Mr Tweedie gave her one of his *I-mean-it* faces. 'Before Mrs Sharman sees you.'

In the refectory, Sophie took a thick white plate out of the

plastic box stacked next to the counter, chose the least bruised banana and a glass of watered-down orange juice, and put it all on a tray. Then she joined Delphine and Marianne at the long trestle table. They were the last, and already the kitchen staff were moving around and clearing things away.

'What did Tweedie want?' Marianne had propped a physics book up against the salt cellar. Sophie remembered there was a test today. She'd completely forgotten.

'Jumper alert.'

'He does go on,' Delphine said. 'You should just agree with everything he says. That usually stops him.'

'He's got to do his job,' Marianne said, her eyes still scanning the page. 'Did you know that the angle of incidence is equal to the angle of reflection?'

Delphine rolled her eyes.

'And did *you* know it's the first of March?' Sophie said quickly, trying to distract Marianne. 'That means the list should go up this morning.'

'What list?' Delphine took a small piece of butter and placed it on the edge of her plate. From this she put an even tinier piece on her knife and spread it on a minuscule fraction of toast. She then bit into the buttered toast, before repeating the procedure. Sophie calculated that at her current speed, it could take her up to ten minutes to finish one slice. (Marianne, no doubt, would be able to calculate it to the second.)

'Where we're going in the last week of term,' Sophie said, peeling the banana.

Delphine shrugged. 'You know we won't get to go

anywhere interesting or exciting. They save those for the sixth form.'

'We'll probably get Cooking in Hardy Country,' Sophie sighed.

'Or Franco-Belgian Battlefields,' added Marianne, raising her gaze from the textbook. 'If we're really, really lucky.'

'Well, that's all right if you've only ever been to Cornwall,' Delphine said.

'But I love Cornwall!' Marianne protested.

'It's just not very *chic*, is it?' Delphine went on. 'Not like the Île de Ré, where you can wear tailored shorts and nice little canvas shoes.'

'I want to get on the St Petersburg trip,' said Sophie.

There. She'd said it. And she'd promised herself that she wouldn't. She knew from experience with Rosemary that asking for anything was the surest way of not getting it. She bit her lip. There'd be no chance now. If only she'd kept her mouth shut for just a while longer.

'Dream on!' Marianne laughed, stuffing the textbook into her bag. 'You know there's no hope of that.' Deep down Sophie knew she was right. Only those taking Russian for A level had any chance of going.

'Anyway, why would anyone in their right mind want to go to St Petersburg before the summer?' Delphine shivered. 'It will be far too cold in March.'

'But snow in Russia! That's the whole point!' Sophie hugged her arms to her chest. 'Anyway, I'm used to the cold. Rosemary's flat is freezing. She thinks central heating is immoral.'

'It *is* very bad for the planet,' Marianne said, primly. 'But how do you keep warm without any proper clothes?'

'Rosemary gave me an old mink jacket to wear in bed.'

'So, central heating is immoral, but killing innocent animals for their fur is fine?' Marianne said.

'Well, they're very old furs. The animals would be dead by now anyway. And it feels like wearing something from a different world . . .'

'*That's* not the point!'

'But don't you ever lie in bed at night and think about being someone else?' Sophie continued.

Delphine raised one perfect eyebrow. 'Someone other than me?'

'When I wear that coat,' Sophie rattled on, 'I'm not plain old Sophie Smith . . . I feel like I'm some beautiful countess, running away from an empty life of parties and balls to find my destiny . . . with the Cossacks . . . and I am travelling across Russia wrapped in furs on a sleeper train . . . and under my pillow . . .' – she knew she sounded crazy, but she couldn't stop – '. . . are a box of sugar mice and foil-wrapped chocolate cats with red sequins for eyes . . . and . . . a . . . p-pistol.' She reached the end of the sentence because she hadn't known how to stop before saying 'pistol'. By the expression on Marianne's face, she might as well have said 'penguin'.

'A pistol?' Delphine's face creased in incomprehension. 'What do you . . .?'

She decided to brave her friends' incredulity. She would just say it. 'I need the pistol to shoot the bears and the wolves.'

'Do you really think a bullet from a pistol would stop a bear?' Marianne snorted. 'They are seriously vicious creatures when they're angry. Think Matron in one of her moods . . . and then some!'

Delphine went back to applying butter to her toast as if she were giving it a manicure. 'I need a pool and blazing sunshine.' She looked thoughtful. 'Of course, a yacht is always a bonus.'

'Too much outdoors!' Marianne laughed, heaving her overstuffed rucksack on to her shoulder and draining her glass of water. 'Just give me a library and a fire.'

'But shall we go and check the noticeboard anyway? Do we have time?' Sophie said. Maybe it wouldn't be St Petersburg, but she wanted to know where she would be spending Easter. Rosemary would probably make some excuse about not being at home, as usual. When Sophie was young, Rosemary had made the best of it by hiring a series of au pairs and doing the best to ignore the disturbance to her ordered, career-focused life. Boarding school, the minute Sophie turned eleven, came as a blessed relief to both of them, but holidays were not on Rosemary's radar.

'Yes, but we can't be late for physics. I'll test you on the Anthropic Principle on the way, if you like,' Marianne offered.

Delphine and Sophie made a face at each other as they made their way out of the refectory, taking the prohibited shortcut through the library. Neither of them had a clue what Marianne was talking about. That didn't bode well for the physics test.

Marianne sighed at their blank expressions. 'The Anthropic Principle was posited by Robert Dicke, a cosmological scientist, in 1961 to deal with the presence of incredible coincidence in the universe.'

'It's not a coincidence that you're boring me silly,' Delphine muttered. 'I don't remember anything about this in the lesson.'

'She's going to get extra marks again,' Sophie sighed. 'Marianne must be the only girl in the school to get more than 100 per cent in a physics test.'

'But it's so interesting!' Marianne burst out. 'How else can you explain why we are here?'

'Because we're taking a short cut through the library?' Sophie offered.

'No. Here. With a capital H. Everything has been working towards this moment, don't you see? The precise level of weak nuclear force that allows stars to shine, that allows matter to coalesce and form planets, oxygen, water . . . Only a slight variation and our whole world would fall apart.'

Sophie and Delphine kept walking.

'Don't you see?' Marianne was in full flow. 'We are here, wherever we are, because we can *only* be here. There is no other place for us.'

Sophie tried to imagine that the whole of the universe had been working towards this one moment – she, Sophie Smith, walking towards the noticeboard – but, as with most of Marianne's Big Ideas, she gave up.

Delphine breathed, 'Fascinating,' and nodded her head

as if she were taking it all in, but Sophie could see she was already scanning the far end of the corridor where a group of girls was standing around the noticeboard, laughing and talking excitedly.

Sophie hung back and crossed her fingers. *I know it can't be St Petersburg*, she said to herself. *But just this once, could the office have made a mistake and accidentally put my name down on the wrong list? I won't eat any more of Marianne's treacle crunch creams or use Delphine's toothpaste or that lavender shampoo her mother sends from Paris, and I'll look for a jumper in lost property right now and I'll be good for the rest of my life . . .*

They got closer to the gaggle of girls. Delphine pushed to the front.

'Oh, typical!' Millie Dresser, a drab girl in the year above, looked fed up. 'I've got the battlefields.' She stomped off in a huff.

Sophie couldn't bear to look. She was just going to stare in the opposite direction and wait until Delphine told her. While she didn't know, there was still a chance . . . The voices rose; screams of 'Lucky you!' or 'That will teach you to be rude in geography!' rolled around her. The tension was unbearable.

'Well?' She nudged Delphine's back. 'Where are we going?'

Delphine got as far as saying, 'Cooking in Hardy—' when the bell rang for the start of lessons.

Sophie's heart sank. A familiar feeling of disappointment. She was so stupid to have thought anything beautiful or even different would happen in her life.

'Bad luck,' Marianne said, looking sympathetic.

Sophie turned away – and was confronted by Mr Tweedie, no longer looking remotely understanding.

'I meant it, Sophie,' he said, his voice strict. 'Change your jumper!'

'Mr Tweedie!' Sophie and the deputy head jumped as the figure of Mrs Sharman, the headmistress, strode towards them, the embodiment of female determination, excellence and academic achievement. Her highlighted hair was blow-dried into enormous flicky curls that the morning's rain had done nothing to deflate. Accompanying her was a tall, thin woman wearing a silk headscarf and improbably large sunglasses.

Mrs Sharman launched a brief professional smile, like a rocket, at Mr Tweedie. 'Could you spare me one of your girls? Delphine, perhaps?'

'Girls? Girls?' the deputy head replied in confusion, as if, in a school full of females, he had never heard of such a thing as a 'girl'.

Mrs Sharman, extending her smile, nodded graciously at this hapless example of the more feeble sex. 'To give our prospective parent here a tour of the school, of course!' she cried, waving her hand loosely in the direction of the visitor. 'Mrs . . . Mrs . . .' The woman said nothing, and merely examined her nails, which Sophie noticed with fascination were painted navy blue. Mrs Sharman pursed her lips in irritation.

Sophie said, 'Delphine's gone to physics.'

The headmistress's head swivelled to take in the child who had spoken without being spoken to.

Sophie swallowed. 'I could go and get her for you.'

Mrs Sharman gasped. Her eyes widened. 'Sophie!' She managed to make the name sound like a curse. 'Your *jumper*!'

Mr Tweedie cleared his throat. 'We were just discussing the jumper . . .'

Mrs Sharman pulled Sophie's arm towards her as if it were a scientific specimen. 'There are *actual holes*!'

'I'll change,' Sophie mumbled.

'You most certainly will!' the headmistress snapped. It was clear that she was not just referring to the jumper. She dropped Sophie's arm and clamped the professional smile back in place. 'Bring me Delphine! I will see you later, Sophie Smith.'

'Sophie Smith?' The visitor turned sharply, peering over her sunglasses at Sophie. Her eyes, Sophie saw, were enormous and very pale blue, surrounded by feathery lashes. The voice was rich and low.

Sophie felt her cheeks burning as the woman looked her up and down, taking in everything, including the holes in her jumper. Oh, why hadn't she looked in lost property before breakfast? But just as she turned to go, the visitor's hand shot out and clutched her elbow. Sophie looked up. The pale blue eyes were fixed on her. Unless she wrenched her arm out of the woman's grasp she was stuck.

'I am happy with *this* young lady . . .'

'Oh, you don't want *her*.' The headmistress frowned. 'She is not the pupil for you.' When the woman didn't let go of Sophie's elbow, as expected, Mrs Sharman explained. 'We have a very few places at New Bloomsbury

College for Young Ladies who are on *reduced fees*.' She mouthed the last two words as if this might somehow spare Sophie's feelings. 'Due to *family circumstances* . . .' She raised her eyebrows, implying this would explain Sophie's orphan status, her unbrushed hair and the holes in her jumper. 'We take our charitable status very seriously! However, I must stress that the majority of girls at New Bloomsbury College come from impeccable families.'

The woman seemed to consider what Mrs Sharman had said. Then she smiled slowly. She included Mr Tweedie in this gift, and Sophie noticed with astonishment that he blushed. The visitor bent towards him like a heavy tulip and, lightly touching his arm, said, 'We see *your* classroom?'

Mr Tweedie stammered something, and the headmistress hissed, 'It might be better if you started with the science block. But Sophie is not available. She has a class.'

'Sophie Smith is girl for me!' the woman laughed. 'We will make good team!' Still gripping Sophie's elbow, she manoeuvred her towards the door to the playground. 'He has stopped raining! Now I see ground where you *play*!'

Sophie glanced over her shoulder. Mr Tweedie's face was looking crumpled again, and Mrs Sharman's smile had vanished, her mouth a perfect 'O'.

Then she felt herself pushed through the door, the visitor's hand firmly in the middle of her back.