

*Kristen Joy*  
WILKS

A CHRISTIAN GOTHIC  
CHRISTMAS TALE

THE **VOLK**  
*Advent*

# The Volk Advent

Kristen Joy Wilks

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## **The Volk Advent**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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## *Dedication*

To My Sister, Rolana.

Thank you for going to all those writer's conferences with me. Drinking coffee, finding that perfect sweater, wearing tall shoes, watching shows about komodo dragons and pet jaguars, and eating kettle corn together with Phyllis. Thank you for daring me to write that first romance and for filling my life with friendship and fun.





# 1

## *The Wolves and Ms. Melora Are Restless*

Cheery Christmas songs blared through the orphanage, clashing with the background noise of hurried cleaning and howling wolves. The Christmas music I was used to. The orphanage had a total of five American Christmas CD's that Ms. Melora, our orphanage director, had played constantly since they arrived free with a magazine subscription eight years ago. Those CD's had been here as long as I had, and they sounded just as twitchy and nervous.

The cleaning, I was also familiar with. When I, Faina Smith, turned eighteen last month, I should have left the orphanage and struck out into the fierce Siberian countryside on my own. I know, Smith? But one takes whatever name they give you, when one shows up as a ten-year-old amnesiac. Anyway, despite my age, Ms. Melora was loath to hire another girl to do my work when she could get my toil for free.

The incessant howling of wolves...I'm afraid I was not as accustomed to that.

Oh, sure, we had wolves. Deep in the misty forest, along remote stretches of the dark Lena river, behind the stone pinnacles that slashed the thick forested ridges. Siberia was deep within wolf territory. Most of the time the creatures stayed where they belonged. But these wolves were different. They lived in a vast,

crumbling castle that crouched like a shadow on the edge of town. A bit of intermittent howling was normal, but something was different tonight.

What? A castle in Siberia seems unlikely? Of course it is. Who in their right mind would build a castle in the far north? But that is the question, isn't it? Was Kirill Volkov in his right mind? It's hard to say. The man did own wolves, after all. Perhaps he felt he must live up to his name. Volk meant "wolf" in Russian. Whatever had caused his extreme fascination with the origins of their family name, Kirill Volkov hadn't built the castle. It wasn't built here at all, only moved, and it was his father who'd moved it.

I took a cloth and wiped down the face of every child in the room. They were none too happy with me, but cleanliness was vital today, and so I persisted. After struggling to wipe the breakfast off eight squirmy babies, I paused in my work, drawn by the deep throaty song of the wolves.

I peeked out the frost-streaked window. It was late afternoon on January sixth, Christmas Eve. The village was lit with a fading, dusky light. A bitter wind kicked up a few small tornados in the snow, blowing them through the market. Wood smoke curled out of every chimney as each village family prepared the meatless feast that would break their Christmas Eve fast. When the first star appeared on the horizon, the birth of Christ would be celebrated with sweet smelling hay scattered on the floor, glowing white candles on the table, and twelve traditional dishes, representing the twelve apostles.

The Volkovs' castle seemed separate from all of this. It rose out of the gloom of the forest, not quite in town but not far enough away to be forgotten. It



clashed with the quiet ambiance of the small village of Замок Дракона or Zamok Drakona.

The name meant Dragon's Castle or more precisely "The Lock of the Dragon." I'm sure the village had a different name once. But when Kirill Volkov's father was inexplicably gifted a gargantuan castle from the Ukraine and had the whole thing shipped to Siberia block by block, what else could they call the place? He had a wall of river rock built around his new home, but apparently ran out of resources at that point. No further improvements were made after that.

The castle sat, long and gray and dark, at the edge of town. Three stories of rain-streaked stone topped by a black slate roof. Row after row of leaded glass windows glared out into the Siberian gloom. Only one or two of them ever showed a glimmer of light. It had remained exactly the same for the past eighty years.

Eventually, the first old eccentric had died, leaving the monstrosity to his equally eccentric son. Our new hermit did little to improve the place, but he did bring in some pets. Kirill Volkov hired some men from the village to build an immense cage that stretched across the castle grounds. Then he acquired his very own pack of Eurasian wolves. These critters were well cared for and large. In the wild, Eurasian wolves top the scales at about 100 pounds, although there were always exceptions. I'd heard whispers that some of Volkov's pets weighed in at the upper limit for their species, 160 to 170lbs. Eurasian wolves are definitely not recommended for the first time pet owner. But Volkov had gotten away with it so far.

Why I used phrases like "first time pet owner" and thought in pounds and inches rather than kilos and

centimeters, I had no idea. My vocabulary was a personal peculiarity. Words and phrases I'd never heard spoken aloud in Russian filled up my mind. Perhaps the smack to the head that had taken my memory was at fault. But regardless of my mental glitches, the wolves were usually much less vocal. Had old Kirill Volkov left his nephew to feed them again?

That had not gone well. Vladim Volkov hadn't fed them at all. He'd tried the first night, but wolves demand strength and according to rumor, fear had wafted off that young man like stink off a week-old fish. After the first bite, he left them to starve. Their low angry howls had surely kept him awake every night until his uncle returned.

Kirill Volkov hadn't left the castle since, as far as I knew. He would never forget to feed them. I mean how could he? They were incredibly loud. And wasn't his niece at the castle right now, decorating for her big Christmas gala? Surely even a city girl would notice that something was up with her uncle's menagerie.

The wolves continued to howl. The American Christmas music continued to blare. I yanked my attention away from the window and jogged to the older babies' room. Ms. Melora had a guest coming, and she would be around to inspect soon.

The children in the next room were toddlers. None of the little ones wore diapers. Instead they cruised back and forth in a large communal pen, wide-eyed in their threadbare nightshirts and silent. But something extraordinary happened when I bustled into the room. Those serious little faces broke into grins and a few brave souls even clapped and reached for me. This never would have happened my first year here, but I held a dark secret close to my heart. I had defied Ms.

Melora and my risk was bearing fruit.

I rocked the babies.

Don't ask me why I thought they needed to be rocked. No one else ever did it. But somehow these tight gray rooms, packed with children rocking themselves back and forth in lonely silence had seemed so wrong. I couldn't remember anything of what I had once been. But something within me shuddered at the sight.

So, yes, I wiped messy bottoms as I zipped through the toddler room. Yes, I dusted the windowsill and swept. Yes, I cleaned the mess off the floor where babies had missed as Ms. Melora and her assistants rushed them to the small bathroom to sit on the pot. Diapers were a luxury, she preferred to zip them in to the toilet and just clean up the mistakes.

But I also kissed downy heads and sang silly songs. I pulled them into my arms and danced them around the room when I was certain no one would see. Thank goodness for the cheesy Christmas tunes, or my misdeeds would have long since been discovered. The strange sounds of giggling and joyful coos were a dead giveaway.

Everyone here was forgotten. Forgotten by family and friend and perhaps by the eye of Heaven itself. But I could see them. Though I counted myself forgotten as well, I would not forget.

I had just finished dusting and was taking a spin around the room with one of my most successful cases. Setinyi was a laughing little girl with the wide brown cheeks and dark almond eyes of a native Yakut. She had come here very young. I had been her caregiver from the beginning. Usually, I danced with babies in the dead of night when Ms. Melora's many sips of

vodka had taken her deep into the land of dreams. But I felt emboldened by my success, by the eager reaching arms and brightened eyes of the children in their pen.

I danced with Setinyi in the middle of the day, when I should have been scrubbing floors. With my heart beating full and strong, I danced to the terrible crooning of Christmas tunes gone awry. I danced far too long.

The sound of clapping brought me to a standstill.

It was not the clapping of a happy toddler or the clapping of a pleased audience at a concert. It was the slow sarcastic sound of hands smacked together in mockery. I didn't even need to turn. I knew who stood behind me.

"Holly Jolly Christmas" echoed through the halls, competing with the whoosh of the overworked heating system.

I resisted the urge to make up a verse more appropriate to my situation. *It's a stinky silent orphanage, and Ms. Melora's on the prowl. Hide your smiles and use your wiles, if you'll avoid her scowl...* No, I needed to concentrate on some grand and fabulous plan or I was toast. Nothing presented itself. I turned and faced the orphanage director.

Ms. Melora wasn't scowling. She was smiling.

A chill oozed across my shoulders and down my back, like the cold, lumpy kefir we fed the children instead of formula. I had never seen Ms. Melora smile. I set Setinyi back in the pen with the other toddlers and smiled back.

"Hello, Ms. Melora. You caught me conducting an experiment. I was wondering if we spun the toddlers in a circle a few times before we took them to the toilet, perhaps they might have less accidents. My results are

inconclusive at this time but given another month I should have an answer for—”

“So you are why the babies cry.” Her pale blue eyes met mine and I swallowed, unable to continue my clever ruse.

“I should have known it. They never cried before.” Ms. Melora’s eyes seemed to weigh me to the ounce. “This is the last. I will have Boris put a dead bolt on your door tonight. Never rock them again, or you go out into the storm where you were found. I cannot abide the racket your foolishness has brought.”

The hall echoed with the tinny strains of “Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer.” I stared back at her. I raised my hand.

She said nothing.

After a long, terrible silence I spoke. “Ms. Melora, our rate of adoption has increased since I came. More children find homes and it is my rocking that prepares them for life on the outside, surely you don’t mean—”

“I said exactly what I mean. Now, get the floor cleaned in the older ones’ room before our guest arrives.” Ms. Melora straightened from where she leaned against the doorframe and left the room as silently as she had come.

I stood in the center of the room, numb. I glanced at Setinyi where she toddled about the communal pen. Not rock the babies? I would never survive such a heartless prison. How could these tender little ones endure? No, Ms. Melora would have to actually pay whoever took my place. She couldn’t afford to do it. I had room to bargain here. If I did every little thing exactly how she liked, perhaps she would relent? Forget to bolt my door, something?

I had to try. The little ones had no tender touch in

their lives but mine. Surely, my work held value in Ms. Melora's eyes. But was I valuable enough to offset an orphanage full of babies who knew enough to cry?

I gave Setinyi a quick kiss on the top of her head and rushed to the next room. I would never find out if I didn't get it clean. If I could show her exactly how hard I worked, Ms. Melora might forget about the deadbolt and turn a blind eye to my compassion. I just had to make sure that everything was perfect for her guest.

## 2

### *Wolf Bait For Hire*

Ms. Melora's guest was some kind of American TV professional. I could understand him perfectly. Apparently, all those years listening to song after chirpy song on the Christmas CDs had its advantages. But the clarity of his words, did not make them any more appealing.

"My show is called *Devoured*." Rhys Adaire bared his alarmingly white teeth in a cocky grin and flung his arms wide as though he had actually brought his beloved show into the room and was asking us to remark upon its many pleasing features.

I attempted to smile back, while taking a tiny step away, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"You've never even seen it have you, Faina? May I call you Faina?" He continued before I had a chance to answer. "Anyway, it's called *Devoured: pets that can eat you and the people who love them*."

"How nice." I choked out, wondering how such a wealthy country as the U.S.A. had allowed their mental facilities to grow so crowded that this man gained access to the TV industry.

"I've done episodes on lions and tigers and bears."

"Oh, my." I whispered. Somehow, the response

felt right for the terrible list of carnivores he recited with such relish.

"I've filmed episodes about boa constrictors and monitor lizards, jaguars, and attacking packs of bottle-fed hyenas. But do you know what animal *Devoured* has yet to feature?"

I could feel the color slowly draining from my face and took another discreet step back.

"Wolves!"

Ms. Melora was counting a thick wad of bills.

I met Rhys Adaire's shining gaze, something was very wrong here.

"We're not allowed to own them in The States, full-blood wolves, that is."

"I wonder why?"

His eyes narrowed and one of his shiny boots tapped the floor. "Bureaucracy, it is pure bureaucratic fluff that keeps American pet owners away from the natural beauty that is the wild wolf."

I took another step back and bumped into the corner.

"And that is where you come in, Faina."

Oh, yay!

"I'm scheduled to interview Mr. Volkov and film his beautiful animals during the Christmas Gala. But my show is also educational. The first half of this episode will go over the history of the Eurasian wolf and some of the reasons why animosity arose between them and man. And you know what that means, my girl."

I couldn't imagine.

He continued with barely a pause. "It means wolf attack reenactments!" He made a grand gesture as though expecting some oohs and aahs to erupt from



our mouths. After an awkward silence, he continued. "Anyway, there was one particularly noteworthy wolf attack that my producer wants to feature. A young teen was walking to get bread for the orphanage where she lived and a blizzard blew in. Not only did it take visibility down to nothing, the wolves came with it. They found the poor girl the next morning..." He paused for dramatic flair. "Devoured!"

Rhys Adaire grinned and took my hand. "Of course you will have to cut your hair, my dear. The orphanage had just shaved everyone's head due to an unfortunate outbreak of head lice." Rhys Adaire dropped my hand quickly. "Which your employer has assured me will not be a problem whatsoever. She was wanting to shave everyone's heads this week anyway, thank goodness. Just for preventative reasons." Did he blanch and scratch at his hairline a little?

I had never said "no" to Ms. Melora, but this was different. Who was this crazed American to walk in here and demand that I destroy my hair and traipse about in front of a pack of apex predators?

"No." I whispered. "I will not shave my head and be chased by wolves."

No one wants to play tag with wolves, even if they do prefer caribou and are largely misunderstood. But strangely, the whole wolf thing was not what made a blush creep up my cheeks and my shoulders straighten with anger.

My hair had not been shaved since the day Liev scorned to play with me. I had worked so hard to keep it long. I would not be shaving it off for some crazy person and his wolf attack reenactment, no matter how authentic and entertaining.

I was eighteen years old, but in half a second Rhys

Adaire made me feel as if I were twelve again. Twelve and alone and feeling like the ugliest thing in the world.

Ms. Melora had found lice in one of the cribs and shaved every child in the place bald.

Liev was the son of our local priest and his wife, Darya. He was two years older and my only friend. But that year he turned sulky and uncommunicative whenever he visited the orphanage with his mother.

He'd hauled in the usual bag of little knitted jackets his mom managed to make for the babies and gave me a curt nod when I'd said hello.

We cleaned cribs in silence for the hour of their visit.

I could feel the heat of my blush in my newly exposed ears and kept my gaze on the task at hand. When he left, there was a lumpy bundle on the floor where he'd been working. I ran after them to return it.

Just before I rounded the corner, I heard him arguing with his mom.

"It smells here and the children are strange." Liev mumbled.

"But what about your little friend, Faina? You worked so hard making your first pair of reindeer skin valenki for her."

"She needed boots and I was making valenki. But she's just a little kid, Mother. Now look, I'm learning my own trade, almost a man. Let me go with Father to visit the trappers. I'm done with this place, with the crying and the lice and Ms. Melora."

Well, I was done with the place, too. But that didn't mean I could leave. I slunk back to my bed and opened the lumpy package. A pair of hand-crafted ladies' valenki. The boots were a little big and had a

few awkward lumps. But they were gorgeous to my twelve-year-old eyes. The soft, white reindeer fur was decorated with a circlet of beaded felt. I traced the bright colors and intricate patterns with my finger. These must have taken Liev hours, and now he was done. Done with the orphanage and done with me.

I couldn't blame him. I'd looked at my reflection in the warped glass of the window and bit my lip until my tears dried. I would wear the boots. They were warm and well made. But I wouldn't waste another tear on Liev Alkaev. Why should I? He couldn't even bear for one hour, the place that I must spend my entire childhood.

I had endured the orphanage for six more years and had never said "no" to Ms. Malora in all that time. Oh, I had rocked the babies in secret and danced them across the floor under the stern gaze of a Siberian moon. But that was not the same thing. What would she do, now that I had said "no" to Rhys Adaire?

Ms. Melora didn't say a word. Not a single sound passed her thin, white lips. Instead, she spun on her heel and left the room while Rhys Adaire sputtered about monetary compensation and fashionably short styles in California.

Then Ms. Melora was back. A tattered bag swung in her left hand and she seized my arm with her right. She yanked me down the hall, whispering into my ear so soft that the American could not imagine the poison that her quiet words contained. "They dragged you here, a frozen little wretch, fallen from the sky. You couldn't even form the smallest of words you were so stupid. Absolutely useless. But did I throw you in the snow? No, I fed you and taught you to speak right words and put up with your ridiculous delusions.

‘Where is my puppy, Ms. Melora? Isn’t there bubble bath, Ms. Melora? It’s illegal to hit kids, Ms. Melora.’ But did I throw you out in the street?’

“I’m sorry,” I gasped. “I see how annoying that would be.”

She didn’t reply. When we reached the door, she flung it open and the incredible Siberian cold took my breath. “No one says ‘no’ to me.”

“I didn’t. I said no to Rhys Adaire, and the wolves—”

“The man paid me for your time. To say ‘no’ to him is to say ‘no’ to me.” She paused and looked down at me as I shivered in the doorway. “Unless you have changed your mind about your hair and the wolves?”

Something occurred to me. “Will you let me rock the babies, if I will shave my head and film with the wolves?”

“Of course not.” Her glance was colder than the terrible wind that sucked warmth off my skin and sent a bitter ache through my ears and teeth and bones.

“No,” I whispered.

Ms. Melora set the heels of her hands against my shoulders and shoved. I stumbled down the cold gray steps.

I, Faina Smith, had said “no” to Ms. Melora. As the door slammed behind her, I stood in the glow of my accomplishment. I had defied her. I straightened and squared my shoulders. I was wearing a thin, orphanage issue dress, a tattered sweater, and soft felt slippers. It was 40 degrees below zero and the temperature was dropping fast. A storm was rolling in.

This was a grand triumph, one that I would die for.

Ms. Melora had just given me a death sentence, in

front of the American, too. I would freeze in ten minutes, fifteen at the very most. But at least the last thing I had said to her was “no.”

It was late afternoon. The village was deserted. Everyone must be at the first Christmas Eve service down at the small chapel. My face was numb and my fingers ached with cold. The muscles in my legs and arms began to cramp, and I hunched my body, trying to conserve as much heat as possible. Violent shivers shook my frame and the wind made my ears ache deep down, as though the very depths of my mind were turning to ice.

The door opened and a pile of moldy furs hit me in the chest. I tried to grab the bundle, but my hands weren't quite working.

A little boy stood framed in the light of the doorway. “Thank you for dancing with us and playing hide and seek when she was asleep.” He tossed my valenki down the steps and ran.

I didn't blame him. If Ms. Melora caught him...I tried not to think about it as I scrambled into the furs, shuddering and awkward. The fur coat was so long it bunched around my feet. I reached for my valenki and felt my lips crack with a laugh.

Traditionally, if a girl tossed her valenki in the air and followed the direction that they pointed when they landed, she would find her true love. The boots pointed down the tiny village street toward the church. Every single person in town must be at the church. How romantic.

I slipped into the warm softness of the reindeer skin boots. Even with the furs, I could still freeze. The temperature was dropping and vast gray mounds of cloud hurtled down the river on the wind. The storm