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# Catherine

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The Volga Flows Forever ~ Book One

# *Catherine*

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Catherine

The Volga Flows Forever - Book One

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## *Prologue – June 1744*

“Come with me, Svetlana, and I will show you something remarkable. A secret scene no one else will ever see.” Vadim takes her hand, yet seeing in her eyes mirthful disbelief he stops his gentle pulling, “I swear it is the greatest secret in all of Russia.”

Vadim has baited his trap carefully in hopes to gain a moment alone with Svetlana. So far he has not managed even a minute of solitude in the six months he has known her and so he presses his case with veiled hints of the unusual – the exotic – the rare. The girl targeted for his baited hook is sweet, fifteen and beautiful, but much too clever to allow a young man of eighteen to be alone with her. The girl has a mother who is as ungainly as the girl is well formed. She is a powerful dragon of a woman who has raised her daughter to be self-reliant and self-protective. And, just in case her teaching is not strong enough to protect her girl, she has added a powerful threat to her entreaties.

“Remember girl, you and I can’t raise a child, we are much too poor. A child would be drowned like the kittens or go to the orphanage. Don’t trust sweet talking men. They all want the same thing and it isn’t raising a child.”

Svetlana has heard and seen enough in the poor villages around St. Petersburg to know the truth of her mother’s teaching. Poverty is rampant among the majority of Russia’s people and every mouth is looked upon as a problem. Thousands of Finns and Russians live in unimaginable squalor, next to the gilded courts of the Tsars. Even she, serving girl at Peterhof, is appalled by their condition. And so, although she is much set upon by young men of the village and even young men at court she has kept herself out of trouble by avoiding being alone with any of them. It helps that she has a good sense of humor and a quick wit allowing her to ward off her pursuers with a spicy tongue without giving offense.

Now she smiles at her handsome tempter, her peachy cheeks dimpling, and retorts, “How can I go adventuring with you? Any moment now *matka* Davidovitch can discover my absence and then I will be punished.”

Vadim bursts out laughing, because she uses *matka* – meaning uterus – while speaking about Davidovitch instead of the endearing term *mamotschka*, the term the matron favors. With comical certainty she has described the essence of Irina Davidovitch, the plump mother of eight and mistress of twenty serving girls. Under her guidance, consisting of well meaning scolding and hands-on training, yet more often yelling and slapping, the young girls are shaped sufficiently to serve at Elizabeth's court. Working for the Empress is hard work. The capricious whims of Elizabeth, Peter the Great's unmarried, barren daughter, demand constant alertness. Fetching items such as pillows, footstools, towels and kerchiefs, food and drinks keeps the girls running to and fro. Everyone sighs with patent relief when the Tsarina has a horse brought to the steps of the palace and goes for a gallop in the countryside or leaves for the hunt. Davidovitch's group is only one of many units employed to keep the palace running smoothly. Elizabeth frequently gives large, elaborate balls and loves entertainment such as concerts and theatrical events, attracting hundreds of guests and visitors requiring food, shelter and care, expressed in a thousand little services. Whether compresses are required for aching heads, a pair of hands with a needle to fix a pair of breeches, water for cleansing or powder for their wigs, the poor servants constantly provide, forgetting their own needs until they sometimes faint.

Vadim is one of the young men working for the Empress, albeit under a male master. He works mostly outside the palace, fetching large quantities of water and firewood and, with a flock of others, keeping the grounds in immaculate condition. Yet whenever muscle is needed, matron Davidovitch requests the men's services inside. Vadim and Svetlana are free born but most of those serving with them were born to serfdom, attached to the lands of the crown. By great good luck they have not yet been presented as a gift to a favorite or friend of the Empress together with a village or estate. Close to the crown, their lives are just slightly better than those of the *muzhiks* in the villages. Vadim's greatest hope is to be noticed by a noble man or lady at court and to be chosen for special service and favors.

Nature, embedded in his parents' genes, has favored him by endowing him with a powerful, elegant frame, a handsome Slavic face thatched by blond hair, blue eyes and a good measure of innate intelligence; therefore, his hopes are not unreasonable. The fly in the ointment of his ambitions is sweet Svetlana, who makes him ache with longing. At first, he thought a few stolen kisses and squeezes would cure him of his desires, but the more that he sees of her and the longer she is inaccessible, the stronger he burns.

The moment she becomes elusive again, speaking of Davidovich's anger, the young man pleads, "She won't find out. The Empress has gone hunting. She'll be gone 'till evening, and you know what happens when she goes? Everything stops, the matrons drink tea, the masters drink beer and only the most pressing things get done. We won't be missed for a while and shall be undetected if we are careful. And what you will see is too marvelous to miss."

"Tell me what it is. Perhaps it is nothing but a body part of yours or some dumb feat of strength you want to impress me with," laughs Svetlana and turns to leave.

Vadim becomes angry. "All right then. Leave, you goose. It's too good for you anyway. It took me days to find a hidden place to watch and more days to find a secure way to approach the marvel. Women! Too dumb to discern a sham from the truth."

His outburst, so unusual, extravagant even, from such an even-tempered man, surprises the girl and persuades her that in truth he might possess a secret. Scrutinizing his face carefully, she extends her hand indicating that she is willing to be led.

"So, show me then the secret," she smiles and when he takes her outstretched hand into his and gently tugs, she follows.

"Pick up a bundle of clean laundry," advises the young tempter, "and I will carry a bunch of firewood, as if I were to go to replenish the kitchen and you to the bath."

They part momentarily, linking up again shortly, their hands filled with the requisites of adventure. Then they are sprinting, fleet as deer, through the wonderful park of Peterhof.

Peter the Great created for himself and all of Russia a new capital, and with it an opening into the world of Europe – the modern, civilized, cultured Europe, a part of the world he craved attachment to – so different from the heavily Asian-influenced Russia of the Muscovite. By sheer willpower and a hard fought war against Sweden, he earned his opening to the sea and the new, the modern world. He built his capital, St. Petersburg, alongside the banks of the Neva River on what had once been the Neva's extended estuary. Since estuaries by their very nature are swamps, flooding seasonally, the challenges facing the indefatigable Peter were manifold. Who counted the thousands of poor *muzhiks* that died preparing the rock beds for the foundations of grand buildings, of cays, of streets and promenades? Who counted? No one. The indestructible Peter put his own body to the test and worked with the best of them, never considering the limits of an ordinary body.

Oh, he was brilliant. He was a genius. He saw the natural advantages of terrain, of the Neva River. At Peterhof, he saw the natural force of springs producing thousands of gallons of water to be ejected through the jets of hundreds of fountains. And so he created. Using the offerings of nature and forcing the bodies of men, he molded a marsh into a grand city and at Peterhof, a bog into a triumph over Versailles. How clever he was. Looking upon his creations, people marvel.

Now the fabled palace shines gold, white and sea-green blue in the sun. To the couple's right, pools glisten as though studded with myriads of diamonds. Millions of tiny water drops, spewed forth by imaginary creatures and fountain jets, rain upon their waters in the bright sunlight. What magnificent and stunning triumphs of Peter the Great's imagination and engineering genius!

Our couple now passes through the lower park Peter designed with such steely determination. Looking upward across the Upper Gardens they see the gilded, cream and hydrangea blue of his palace shining majestically through the foliage and cannot help admiring the terraces of cascading water falling amid gilded statues of Zeus, Poseidon and assorted nymphs. All the fountains, spurting water in manifold arrays, are fed by springs. Their tremendous output of water powers the jets with great, calculated force. They were constructed by Peter, Tsar, builder, visionary, engineer and mortal human in search of eternity.

The pair run along rows of clipped boxwoods, over sweet-smelling, mowed meadows, hiding among brush when horseback riders race down raked paths, and at last stop. Out of breath, Svetlana demands, "Where are we going? The clean paths of Peterhof are left behind. We are running into a wilderness where no one resides and I think you are leading me to some secret place where you can take advantage of me."

Panting, Vadim points to an opening in the foliage. "Look, can you see the roof? It's the place I want to take you. The palace of the secret I want you to see. The palace of joy – the palace of youth."

Her bright, observant eyes spot the white, pitched roof. The small palace is a one-storied brick building fronted by a covered promenade with white pillars and curved arches. The palace is private, hidden by greenery until one comes close enough to see the gardens, and the rondello encircling the magnificent fountain with some thirty jets of spray. Yet, the building is so close to the Gulf of Finland that it cascades like a mischievous child, down onto the sandy beach, to the waters edge. The park and the building owe their existence to a high, artificial terrace, strengthened with huge

granite boulders, preventing the unpredictable sea from rising up, and swallowing the palace and its surroundings.

It was a treasure built by Peter the Great as his private hideaway and later embellished by the Empress Elizabeth. Peter fondly named his retreat *Mon Plaisir*, and for as long as he lived it was his pleasure. Few bedrooms insure that guests are rarely invited and the original plan for the palace was a simple design. Perhaps its remoteness and simplicity beguiled Peter so that he furnished and hid therein treasures meaningful to him. He, the Tsar, designed every room to match rooms he had admired when traveling throughout Europe. The coziness, cleanliness and functionality of the Dutch kitchen had stayed in his thoughts and he wanted one like it – wanted it so much so that he personally ordered the tile for the kitchen from the Dutch town of Delft, precious, expensive tile that clad the entire kitchen and pantry.

He had eight teapots, gifts from the Emperor of China, placed on the mantel above the fireplace, because he enjoyed seeing them daily when in residence. His taste not only encompassed the clean purity of a Dutch kitchen but also allowed him to savor the heavy ornateness expressed in imperial crimson red, black and golden designs, paintings and wall coverings, complete with Chinese statuary, pottery and jade carvings in his Chinese study.

But the couple is still too far away to see more than the red brick and the white columns. Pulling the girl deftly along a path so narrow and overhung a deer might have created it, Vadim presses on using his body to part the brush. Their slow progress calms their stressed breathing, making them aware of the closeness of their bodies. The girl stops to retrieve her white, shirred muslin caplet that has caught on a branch and dangles from above. She modestly smoothes her ruffled attire into place and, following Vadim, keeps her hand to herself.

By the time they close in on the building the girl quivers with anticipation and the patent fear of detection. Woe to the servant caught on an undirected errand. To be found in the wrong place at the wrong time spells harsh punishment. Yet anticipation outweighs her misgivings.

It is only a moment later that the young man stops suddenly and pulls her beside himself. His breaths come forced, short with excitement. With his arm extended he points to where the foliage thins. There, through a sea-green veil, appears an elegant room, a room of such magnificence that Svetlana gasps with almost painful enjoyment. To get a better view, Vadim walks out of the sheltering cover and motions her along.

“Let’s get closer and peer inside,” he suggests. “With the Tsarina at the hunt not many eyes should be around. Remember, if we are caught, we are bringing supplies for the kitchen and bath.”

All the large windows in the palace are composed of square pieces of glass, or rounded, as is the case with the arches of the galleries, set in wooden and metal frames. The window they finally peer through is such a one. They duck low, keeping their heads angled, as to expose as little as possible of their persons to the viewer inside.

The room is clad in precious carved and molded wood shining with the luster of constant care. Wonderful paintings of still lifes, harbor scenes and battles grace the walls. A checkered floor of white and black marble squares heightens the quiet dignity of the room, while a coffered ceiling overarches all with stunning elegance. White stucco moldings of scrolls, acanthus leaves and angelic putti, the latter extending from the wall beckoning to the people below, are interspersed with ornate tile frames which surround paintings, portraying tales of antiquity and are in turn surrounded by garlands, flowers, birds and arabesques.

Svetlana loves the ceiling best of all. She gazes upward, drinking in every detail. When her glance falls to the floor she is disappointed. The checkered black and white marble floor is by comparison almost boring.

There is little furniture in the Great Hall, the room they are beholding. Even Tsars furnish lightly, choosing to carry their best and useful pieces to accompany them on journeys. No one traveling in Russia ever knows what furniture, if any, will be found in another palace, another home. Of course, during travel, in groaning, rumbling behemoths with foul suspension, over rocky highways and bumpy log roads, delicate furnishings break, adding to the palaces’ emptiness.

A few handsome chairs with red upholstered padded seats, a solid, carved secretary topped by a blue and white china jar, and an ornately worked sideboard have found such odd resting places that it appears that not much thought has been given to their placement. Mostly they hug the damask covered walls as if they wished to disappear. Two seats bear the respectable loads of dour Russian matrons who view the room with the eyes of Argus.

Vadim has seen this splendor before and is less impressed than Svetlana, but the girl takes in the picture as if inhaling a heady perfume. Moments pass until she consciously observes the people. How could she not have noticed the poised, elegant figure of a girl standing regally, slightly off to the side but facing the window?

The young lady looks to be in her mid-teens. Her chestnut hair is long, un-powdered, curly around the forehead of her long, oval face, and gathered with ribbon and bow at the nape of her long neck. A high forehead, deep-blue, confident, magnetic eyes, a well-shaped nose and mouth complete a very agreeable countenance. One would call her beautiful if one ignored the determined set of the chin. For a medium tall girl her feet are rather small, shod in cloth slippers with a heel several inches high. They stand pertly together.

The bodice of her dress hugs her tightly; it is fashioned from light and dark colored satin which creates a long V-shape that ends close to her naval. Her waist is so small, cinched of course, through artfully inserted stays and lacings in her undergarment, that two hands can span her middle. The skirt, since it is a leisure dress, falls straight over the undergarments, with a muslin half-skirt draped over her derriere, ending at the ankle.

“Who is she?” sighs Svetlana, stricken by the wondrous creature. “She doesn’t look Russian, and I have never seen the likes of her clothes.”

Vadim savors the moment before the big revelation. Has he not diligently observed and tracked down the secret of the people in the hideaway; made passageways and shaped the bush they are hiding in just now until it became an observatory? At last, when he feels Svetlana will burst out and give them away, he says, “It’s Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst, a German. The Tsarina Elizabeth has had her come to wed Peter, the son of her sister Anna, the Duke of Holstein and heir of the Swedish throne.”

“If he can be king in Sweden, what is he doing in Russia?” asks Svetlana perplexed.

“Ah, the lives of kings and tsars are different from ours. So many things play a role in their fortunes, and this Peter happens to be a direct grandson to Peter the Great, our own Tsar.”

Enjoying for the first time her undivided attention, he has turned away from the window so he can see her face fully and gauge her reactions.

“How do you know so much about the relatives of our Tsarina?” she asks. “And why would you even want to know? All these fine noble people amount to just one thing, more work for us, and I have more than enough of that.” Despite this harsh declaration Vadim can see that deep down she is intrigued.

“I was bringing wood for the boiler a few days ago and the chamber servant told me all about them.” He turns back, and both once more peer through the window. Concentrating their gaze on the rest of the room, they notice that off to the side, sitting on a well cushioned floor, Peter, not

much older than the German girl, is engaged deploying hundreds of tin soldiers. He is joined in this endeavor by two robust, young men fitted in the uncomfortable, tight uniforms of the Holstein regiment.

"This Peter doesn't amount to much," Svetlana sums up her impression of the young Grand Duke Peter. Vadim is shocked how quickly and precisely the young girl has gotten to the heart of things. Yes, although he is terribly impressed by the pomp and the titles, he has to admit that seen only as a man without the trimmings, the Grand Duke is a sickly, pasty specimen, deprived of the manly juices that flow through the veins of real men. With his blue eyes, blond hair and regular features, some call him handsome. He is very tall, lanky, but his head is too small for the frame and the shoulders are too narrow.

"Look at his belly," pipes Svetlana, interrupting his musings, "he has a pointy belly and he is only seventeen." There, again, another sharp observation of hers. Peter does not look his best sitting there in tight pants with a sash around the middle. Svetlana's stifled laughter rings like a silver bell in Vadim's ear, "This German, Sophia, seems to feel the way I do about her Duke. Just watch how pertly she eyes him when he is not looking, how the corners of her mouth turn downward, how she screws up her eyes and looks heavenward – as if in pain. She seems bright and clever, and he must seem to her a stupid child playing with his soldiers." She catches her breath and watches more of the play performed by four people, unaware of their audience.

"Look well, my girl," advises Vadim, "because these two before you will one day, upon Elizabeth's death, be Tsar and Tsarina. Unless, of course, they have a child and Elizabeth makes him Tsar. The noble gentlemen of the chamber are making bets that Elizabeth is just using young Sophie to produce a grandnephew and that thereafter both the Germans can go where the pepper grows."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simple! Once she has the grandnephew for the succession, the two will be dispensable."

"You mean she will send them away or have them killed?"

"No, my swallow, nothing so drastic. They will be Grand Duke and Duchess, on the sidelines, parents of the baby Tsar, without power to make decisions."

"What good is that? The beautiful German maiden will be nothing more than a cow producing a superior bull calf?" ponders the practical maid, not liking the concept of accession to the throne.

“And what if the baby is as dull and unattractive as his father is to me?” asks the practical one. “Will he be Tsar nevertheless? What if he is an idiot or a man without courage? A man without...you know what I mean?” Svetlana stares at the German girl with a penetrating look.

“Frankly, I think her more capable to act in a difficult situation than the pasty-faced one on the floor.”

The couple looks upon the three young men in their Holstein attire, combatants in a let’s-pretend war that involves tin soldiers on a parquet floor. They move the pieces with implements reminiscent of croupiers’ cues, sticks attached to a horizontal bar, capable of pushing down, or raking into position, whole lines of soldiers. Upon the floor lay rows and rows of supposedly dead men in many different uniforms. Only a complement of Holstein and Swedish soldiers remain standing in front of the young Grand Duke, who eyes them with fatherly fondness as if his children have performed a magnificent feat. The faces of his companions are bathed in contrasting expressions of sycophantic admiration and profound boredom.

“I won again. This is the strategy to employ when dealing with the French and their allies,” the Grand Duke declares, pleased with himself. “We need to remember these maneuvers if we ever get an opportunity to fight them.”

The attending Holstein *Junkers*, nobleborn young men, sent along in his service when he left for Russia, agree volubly.

Young Sophia now sees her chance to escape the boredom her future husband spreads so amply, by approaching the three young men, moving forward like a dancer balancing on her toes as she strides forward.

“You acquitted yourself gallantly, *meine Herren*, I think you should be rewarded with refreshments. Permit me to call for them. Do you fancy tea and cakes, or chocolate?”

“Tea and cakes!” roars Prince Peter. “What do you take us for lady: maidens or children? We shall have beer, sausage and bread.”

“I meant no offence, sir, I just thought it is very early in the day and your aunt, the Tsarina Elizabeth, might pay us a visit at any moment. She might not like beer so early in the day.”

Svetlana reads Sophia’s face, finding disapproval written there for the uncalled-for whims and wishes of a spoiled teenage king. But the look is fleeting and a moment later the face shows nothing but pleasant compliance.

“Either she is unsure of her position or he is the more powerful,” thinks Svetlana. “Otherwise she would speak her displeasure.”

“*Vermaledeit*, Sophia, my aunt is hunting, as every one knows, and will not be seen here until very late for dinner. So clap your hands and do as I ask.”

“As you wish,” retorts the future bride unperturbed and picks up a bell from a sideboard. The sharp, metallic sound of the bell rends the air bringing a lackey instantaneously. Orders are given to the liveried, blank-faced man. Only when he turns to go does the hidden pair see his eyes roll upward in disdain.

Refreshments come and are consumed with the vigor of youth. The three young men drink their beer with a great show of gusto, indicating that they are not yet enamored with the brew. They polish off the sausages and the black bread with great speed, while Sophia sips daintily on her hot chocolate.

Outside in the bush, watching, Svetlana and Vadim salivate until their stomachs growl. Never do they eat so sumptuous a meal as these young nobles devour as a small snack, nobles who never work.

After the servants clear the plates, cups and trays, the young Germans take up their cue sticks again and set up their rows of soldiers. Young Sophia is having no more of the silly games. Raising herself to her full height and smiling most pleasingly, she asks to be excused to study her Russian, “For I am to take the conversion vows to the Russian Orthodox Church very soon.”

“Why must you leave, Sophie?” asks Peter querulously. “Aunty ferried us over here so we should get to know each other better in a pleasant, secluded place.”

“That is so,” replies the girl, laughing, “but you are so intent on your war that I dare not interfere, never mind get to know you better.”

“Well, do not stand so uppity off to the side. Come over here, take a cue and be part of the war.”

“No, I do not think so, sir. I have not your acuity and knowledge when it comes to war. My taste runs more to reading and writing. Your game is too manly an occupation for a female,” flatters Sophia, while trying valiantly to hide her boredom with childish tin soldiers. She is helped out of her predicament by the more imposing of the Ladies-in-Waiting.

“Her ladyship is quite correct. She has spent more time in the presence of young gentlemen than is becoming and must now be allowed her leave.”

Peter and his Hanoverians snort and chuckle their masculine disdain of proper deportment. But they dare not challenge the formidable lady, the Countess Rumiantsev, appointed by the Tsarina to the household of

Sophia. The countess, a usually voluble, active lady, has been unusually withdrawn today, having gambled away a small fortune the night before, but has now roused herself to fulfill her appointed role.

Both ladies rise with cumbersome dignity and escort young Sophia gleefully waving adieu, into the park.

The departure of the ladies reminds the pair of onlookers that their time has perilously elapsed and they decide to end their adventure. Retreating furtively, they round the palace, because the way out front is cut off by the ladies. In so doing they behold the magnificent Chinese Study with its wood-block floor, the white *faux* fireplace, its Ming china pieces set onto gilded holders and the glory of the Chinese paintings. That is the room Svetlana declares best until she sees Tsar Peter's kitchen. She stops and will go no further. How sweet, clean, pure and homey this kitchen is. Svetlana could have looked inside forever, but Vadim has taken hold of her hand once more and forcefully pulls her along.

They are almost clear of the building when a stentorian command to stop arrests them in their tracks. Caught like rabbits in a snare they avoid the eyes of the caller, the imposing Countess Rumiantsev. Deciding to stroll in the balmy spring air, the Russian dragons, Sophia in tow, have come upon the hapless pair.

"Who are you and what are you doing here so furtively?" inquires the suspicious Countess.

"We belong to the Tsarina's household and were sent to fetch water and towels for the little palace, but no one answered our knock on the kitchen door," lies Vadim, eyes glued to the fine pebbles on the walkway.

Svetlana, unable to withstand the uncertainty of her situation, glances sideways into the German princess' face to ascertain the severity of their predicament. The face of the young German is mild, almost serene, evoking hope for a good outcome.

"And why should I believe such a story?" demands the Imperial Lady. "Why?"

"I am telling the truth," says the boy with heavy emphasis on truth. Svetlana has covertly scrutinized the faces of the three ladies and notices the shadow of a smile upon the features of the pretty princess.

"Please, Countess, let them be. They seem to be a clean and proper pair, not harming anyone."

"Yes, Alexandra," chimes in Elizabeth Nicolayevna, the other Lady-in-Waiting, "let them be and let us continue our promenade. It will be noon soon and I like my meals on time." Lady Rumiantsev relents. After fixing

the young couple with a most uncomfortable glare, she continues on her walk. In leaving, the young princess turns her elegant head and neck for a moment and smiles benevolently upon the young couple.

When breath returns to Svetlana she glares at Vadim and hisses, "Are you happy now? You almost had us birched. Alexandra Petrovna is *Baba Yaga*, a witch, as mean as in the stories my mother told me."

"Oh, come now," hoots Vadim, "you were as safe with me as in your bed. The Princess would not have allowed us to be birched."

"How would you know, serf?" comes her sassy retort, "you were saved by the kindness of the German princess." Vadim laughs and catches her hand in his, and then they run once more along the empty lane toward the main palace.