

## The Tsarina of Caviar

Vanya Voronova cursed God when she broke the nail of her middle finger: acrylic, painted cherry red and encrusted with fake diamonds. She'd just gotten them done the day before at the Svetlana Beauty Salon for her cousin's upcoming wedding at the Russian Tea House. She sat at her lace covered kitchen table, counting out piles of money, savoring the chore. The stiff shuffle of bills, their soft paper corners, the mounting weight of stacked hundreds. That presidential face—pouches of privilege under his chin and beneath his eyes, mouth pursed in a kind of general disapproval—staring up at her as she rubber banded the bills together. What was his name? The only American presidents she could recall were Bush, and of course Gorbachev's friendly rival, Reagan. She peered down at the name beneath the dirty green face. Franklin.

Friday morning, Boris would blast through the back door any minute now. Vanya shoved her broken fingernail into the front pocket of her tight jeans, along with a few Franklins. She hurried from the kitchen into the living room and jostled the small key in the lock of her glass curio cabinet, where her collection of brightly painted babushka dolls smiled. Vanya unlocked the cabinet, grabbed one of the bigger babushkas, twisted her open and dumped out the tiny dolls inside of her. She rolled the bills and stuffed them into the babushka's stomach, now pregnant with three hundred dollars instead of six generations of shrinking dolls.

A moment later, Boris' heavy footsteps, spicy cologne and burning cigarette wafted into the kitchen. "Vanya!" he yelled from the back hall. "Fix me coffee, and egg before we go!"

Vanya twisted around in her chair to face Boris, who now stood leaning against the kitchen counter, tapping his foot expectantly, waiting for Vanya's response. Lately, Vanya was in the habit of ignoring Boris' demands, which he'd then repeat two or three times before she'd acknowledged that he'd spoken. "Eggs? Coffee? Fucking crust of bread?"

"No more coffee. And I don't cook eggs," Vanya said.

"None?"

"None."

The thick heels of Boris' army boots left scuffmarks on the white linoleum floor as he moved to the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of vodka. He grabbed the bottle by its neck, tilting it back and forth. "Barely drop left," he complained, before finishing it off in one swig and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Vanya was staring at her hands splayed out in front of her on the kitchen table, shaking her head at her stunted middle finger, thinking about the twenty dollars it would cost to have it fixed. "Then leave me money to buy your vodka and eggs," she said impassively without looking up at Boris. She pushed herself away from the table, stood up, stretched her arms above her and yawned deeply. She had barely slept the night before. Three times she had woken up, her heart beating as though she had just run up a mountain, a cold film of sweat chilling her body. She had dreamt of a deep marble tub, her naked body submersed in a black bath of caviar. Like soap bubbles, the tiny eggs kept

expanding and multiplying, threatening to drown Vanya, who couldn't eat them fast enough. Death by caviar, Vanya now thought and smirked.

“Tired? Why should you be so tired?” Boris was peering into the cold light of the refrigerator. He pushed the door shut with the steel toe of his boot and turned to Vanya, cutting the air with his hand as he spoke. “You sit around here all day, watching soap opera and talking on phone to Russia.” He was a short man and the bulging muscles in his chest, arms and thighs made him appear even shorter than he actually was, compact. He worked out at the Russian Community Center every morning and occasionally took steroids when he could buy them from his cousin, Sergei. He denied it but Vanya knew when he was popping the pills by the way he performed, or rather, didn't perform, in bed. His silver blond hair was cut close to his head in a military buzz cut. Light green eyes, the color of sour grapes in the summertime, which Boris rarely blinked for fear of missing something, dominated his otherwise unremarkable pale face. A year before at the Russian Tea House, it had been Boris' unrelenting eyes that convinced Vanya to slide down to the other end of the bar and let him buy her a drink.

Boris wore a uniform of tight black Levi's jeans, black short sleeve T-shirt purposely shrunken to show off his pecks, black leather jacket and black leather army boots. Around his neck was a gold medallion of Saint Constantine that he had worn since boyhood. In his left ear was a small diamond stud. It was Vanya who had patiently held a sewing needle over the oven's purple gas flame, waiting for the tip to char to black, before jabbing it through the flesh of Boris' earlobe. Unexpectedly, the blood had squirted all over Vana's face, which had made Boris hoot with laughter and lean in to kiss Vana sloppily on her blood-stained lips.

Today, beneath his T-shirt, Boris wore an orthopedic corset with suspenders that snapped up his sides. More than once he had pulled his back out and the painkillers, which Boris crunched between his two front teeth before swallowing without water, waned after a few hours or interfered with his pleasurable, steady vodka buzz. His doctor had convinced him to wear the corset for his bad back. In a couple of hours, after driving to the San Pablo Bay forty miles north of San Francisco, he'd be hulling white sturgeon fish weighing hundreds of pounds into the back of his pick-up. If he and Vanya got lucky, the fish would be pregnant with thousands of eggs, pounds of glistening California caviar. Beluga had gotten so expensive to import that even the Russians were buying the local stuff at fifty dollars an ounce, half of what they'd pay for Beluga.

Boris and his younger brother, Pavlo drove together in the black Ford pick-up as Vanya followed behind, weaving Boris' silver metallic BMW convertible in and out of traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge. She lifted her hand from the steering wheel and pushed the red button on the dashboard. The car's top folded down and the sky opened up, bright and brilliant, as if Vanya were driving into another hemisphere. This was the California blue, the sunshine that she had always imagined, trudging through the frozen, dead streets of Saint Petersburg on her way home from the overcrowded medical clinic where she had made less than 3,000 roubles each month, filing X-rays, answering phones and mostly turning people away.

A year ago, Vanya had come to San Francisco from St. Petersburg in search of the famous white sturgeon that breed in the Bay-Delta. Her father had been a successful sturgeon angler and connected her with his old friend Aleksandr Prokouriakof, a Russian

poacher who had immigrated to San Francisco. As agreed, Vanya dutifully sent a percentage of the caviar money home to her father, who no longer spent weeks away on the Caspian Sea fishing sturgeons and harvesting caviar. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, all sturgeon fishing laws and restrictions were wiped out, putting Vanya's father out of business. Now, the Russian mafia controlled the caviar market. Beluga and Russian sturgeons were nearly extinct, listed as "endangered species" from habitat degradation and commercial fishing. These days, Vanya's father drove government employees and high-class prostitutes around St. Petersburg in a secondhand taxicab.

As she crossed the Golden Gate, Vanya gazed out at the wide expanse of the San Francisco Bay and Marin Headlands, their jagged lines softened by distance. She turned up the radio and rummaged in her purse to find her dark, oversized sunglasses. Ahead of her, Boris and Pavlo's arms hung out opposite windows of the pick-up truck, their wrists encumbered by identical silver chain bracelets, cigarettes dangling between thick fingers. Something hard and hateful rose up in Vanya, a kind of disgust. Here she was in California with Boris, who, despite having come to San Francisco from Moscow with his family five years ago, acted more Russian in his aggressive, closed way than the Russian men she had known back home. She imagined speeding past Boris' truck, without so much as a wave goodbye, following the frothy white coastline all the way down to Los Angeles. She'd make a fortune selling caviar to celebrities and live in perpetual sunshine, shedding all those years of steel cold grayness, the way a snake leaves behind its old skin. Maybe she'd even find her "soul mate," a concept she'd learned only since coming to

California. In Russia, no one was that optimistic about love, or anything else for that matter.

After the bridge, Vanya followed Boris along highway 121 for thirty miles until they reached the exit for Tubbs Island. After another two miles, they turned down Parakeet Road; driving slowly, waiting to recognize the narrow unmarked dirt lane shrouded with thick brattle berry bushes. Boris pulled over to the side and parked his truck in a small dirt turn-around. Vanya swooped in next to him, tasting the dry grit of yellow dust on her tongue. She pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and flipped down the overhead mirror. The wind had destroyed her long, carefully curled hair, the dark red color of Hungarian paprika. She pulled her brush through the snarls and reapplied her lipstick. Her face was attractive in the usual way, though it was her body that stood out. Small breasted and tiny wasted with wide hips and a big, round apple-shaped ass. Boris always said that an ass like that should be fucked from behind. Grossly out of proportion, the top and bottom halves of Vanya appeared to belong to separate bodies: one extremely petite and the other just as voluptuous. The contrast drove men mad.

Vanya smacked her ruby lips together and smiled at herself in the mirror. Satisfied with her appearance, she stepped out of the car and walked to the passenger side of the pick-up. She leaned her hip against the metal door, now hot from the sun, the warmth seeping through her jeans. "Ready?" Boris asked, holding a silver flask in his right hand. He pointed his finger at Vanya. "Remember, don't talk prices. I handle money. You just stand with mouth shut and smile."

Behind her black sunglasses, Vanya narrowed her eyes at Boris. *Zhopa*. Asshole. “I’m the one who started you in this business.” She reached her arm inside the truck and pulled the silver flask from Boris’ hand. Before Vanya came along, Boris was frying perogies and slicing tongue behind the counter of his father’s Russian deli on Geary Street. When they met at the Russian Tea House, he had just returned from a stint at San Quentin prison for re-selling stolen plasma TVs and car stereos.

Seven weeks later, Boris told Vanya he wanted to marry her. He didn’t offer a ring, but he had said it, which was just as good in his book. They were side by side, lying on Vanya’s bed, covered in the quilt she had brought from Russia, which her grandmother had stitched together for her when she was a girl, made from pieces from old dresses. Back home, nothing went to waste.

Vanya stared at the brown water stains on the ceiling, considering how to respond. “You won’t ever have to go back to Russia,” Boris promised after another minute of silence. Vanya had come to San Francisco with a tourist visa that would expire after three months, though even now, a year later, the I.N.S. still hadn’t caught up with her. “You know, many women come here and offer me thousands for green card. For you, free of charge.” He laughed and rolled over and kissed Vanya between the eyes. They made love and Vanya did all the things Boris always asked her to do without him having to ask.

Now, Boris nudged Pavlo, who was sitting in the driver’s seat concentrating on rolling a joint in his lap. “Little brother, you hear that? Vanya wants all the money.” Pavlo, who was three years younger and half as smart as Boris, snickered. He lifted the joint to his mouth and licked the side before expertly rolling it closed. While Vanya and

Boris went to take care of business, Pavlo was supposed to watch out for any wardens approaching the refuge. He'd pass the time by getting high in the truck, listening to the radio, checking his cell phone for messages and watching himself deliver American movie lines in the mirror. Secretly, Pavlo wanted to be a famous Hollywood actor. *Go ahead, make my day*. He sparked the end of the joint, inhaled and winked at Vanya through the sweet smoke. "She's funny this girl of yours, Boris."

"Yeah, true fucking comedian," Boris said. He opened the door and jumped out, spitting on the ground and turning up the collar of his black leather jacket. Vanya spotted the handle of a gun tucked into the side waist of his jeans. "Boris, give me gun to carry in my purse."

Boris reached around and pulled the gun from his pants, wagging it at Vanya as he spoke. "And if I need it? Should I say, 'Excuse me sir, but hold one moment while I ask her for gun?'"

"Boris, what do you need with gun?" Vanya's younger brother had been shot to death two years ago during a riot in Palace Square. Three times in the head so that the casket was closed at the funeral. Even the gilded life-sized statues of angels lining the colonnade outside St. Isaac's cathedral—their palms open and turned upward as if waiting to carry her brother off into the heavens—hadn't been any comfort to her.

"You carry a lot of money, you carry gun," Boris said, tucking the gun back into his pants. The more money he made, the more paranoid he became, but not enough to trade in his gun for an honest job. Though Boris always said crime was the most honest business there was. "Caviar is more expensive than cocaine. It's not blue jeans we're buying and selling."

“Boris, don’t you mean it’s not stolen TVs and car stereos we’re selling?” Vanya laughed at her own joke.

“Bitch,” Boris muttered, sneering at Vanya before stomping off ahead into the overgrown trail. Vanya followed behind, pushing aside dry leaves and tree branches. For now, she let Boris believe that he was in charge of their caviar operation. At first, she had needed a man like Boris—headstrong, fearless, overly confident, more muscle than mind—to help her establish local buyers. As the old Russian saying goes: The man may be the head, but the woman is the neck.

The heels of her black leather stiletto boots sunk into the soft ground as she walked, some kind of critter rustled fast in the bush beside her. She sped up and a few steps later, the trail opened to the grassy shores of the San Pablo Bay refuge. The bay flat and grey, sparkling like a piece of sheet metal in the sun. A black hawk swooped up into the sky, gliding gracefully in circles without flapping its wings. In the distance, the mountain range, dusty lavender against the hard blue sky, appeared artificial and one-dimensional. Vanya thought of a Hollywood movie set.

Boris stood next to her, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. He scanned the refuge, looking for game wardens hiding in the shrubs or posing as fisherman. The punishment for buying illegally poached sturgeon from public waters—any that hadn’t been raised and farmed according to strict and expensive government rules—was twenty thousand dollars and three years of jail time. “Aleksandr Prokouriakof!” Boris shouted, waving to an old man sitting on an upside down milk crate at the water’s edge, surrounded by fishing poles and nets, a bright red cooler and transistor radio. The man waved and began to walk slowly towards Boris and Vanya. His

right shoulder slouched considerably, on account of a lifetime spent hauling and carrying sturgeons.

“The Tsarina and Tsar of caviar,” Aleksandr laughed, embracing and kissing Boris. He turned to Vanya, who kissed him on both cheeks, tasting the saltiness of fish and sweat. “And your father, how is he?” Vanya thought of her father returning to their cramped tenth-floor apartment in St. Petersburg after weeks on the Caspian. Exhausted, muscles hardened, beard overgrown. Eyes a deeper shade of blue, as if they had absorbed sea and sky. “As he always says to me, ‘Vanya, stop worrying. I’m still alive, aren’t I?’ ” Aleksandr nodded and said, “Well, show me a man who can ask for more.”

Boris cleared his throat and looked around impatiently. He leaned in towards Aleksandr, dropping his voice to a coarse whisper. “So, was it good day?” It had been over two months since Aleksandr had captured a sturgeon worth anything, a mature female about to move upstream to lay her eggs.

Aleksandr smiled and slowly reached into the front pocket of his canvas overalls and pulled out a round tin of tobacco. He opened the top, pinched the tobacco between thumb and index finger and tucked a wad under his bottom lip. “We were here when the sun come up. Finally netted three big ones, one hundred pound each easy. They fought us tooth and nail! Jumped five feet out of water. It took my son and two grandsons to haul bitches out of here. You know, game wardens are snooping all around, so we had to move fast. They’re in Viktor’s garage ten miles from here. He’s waiting for you.” Aleksandr spit brown onto the ground, barely missing the toe of Vanya’s boot.

Boris took his hands out of his pockets and patted Aleksandr on the arm. His face was smiling but his eyes were flat and angling, all business. “Aleksandr, you make my day. So, let’s talk money then, shall we?”

Black beady eyes, cylindrical bodies, white rubbery flesh, long hook noses, seven-inch wiry whiskers, over six feet long and one hundred pounds. Living fossils, having evolved more than 250 million years ago, even before the dinosaurs. The three sturgeons were lined up on a black tarp stretched out on Viktor’s cement garage floor. Viktor knelt down and carefully made a half-inch incision in each sturgeon’s belly, through which a drinking straw was inserted. Boris brought his medallion of Saint Constantine up to his lips and kissed it for luck before leaning over each fish and gingerly sucking the straw, waiting to taste caviar on his tongue. Vanya and Pavlo stood anxiously behind him, peering over his shoulder. And although Vanya had cursed God earlier that morning, now she prayed to him, begging for prosperity. Only a small percentage of sturgeons bearing eggs produce caviar. Aleksandr had poached almost a dozen in the last three months, though only two had been viable.

It wasn’t until the last and smallest sturgeon that Boris hooted and stuck out his tongue, coated with shiny black eggs, and Viktor brought out the vodka and poured shots all around. He raised his glass. “To the pregnant beast.” “To Viktor and Aleksandr,” Pavlo said. Boris, following the Russian tradition of devoting the third toast to love, set his green eyes on Vanya. “To my sweet Vanya.” Vanya smiled without showing her teeth and clinked her glass against his. “To heaps of money,” she declared, tilting her head back, the vodka burning and then numbing her throat.

They held their empty glasses out to Viktor for more vodka, watching the fish intently as though she could spring up and escape at any minute. “Look at this ugly bitch!” Boris yelled, opening his arms wide, his cheeks flushed from the vodka. “A face only father could love!” He bent down and kissed the fish on the tip of her nose. Then, as if the new parents of a baby straight from the womb, Boris and Pavlo measured the sturgeon with precision and hugged each other for their good fortune. They’d buy the other two fish at a reduced price and sell the meat for twenty-five dollars a pound to the Russian Tea House.

Vanya sat in an old lawn chair in the middle of the garage, smoking a cigarette, her gaze fixed on the bulge of the sturgeon’s belly—swollen with at least 400,000 tiny caviar eggs clumped together on her ovaries. She had been poached just in time, before swimming upstream to lay her eggs, which would then be impossible to collect as they descended into the river and clung to rocks, waiting to be fertilized by a male’s sperm. Vanya quickly did the math: a fish this size would yield close to 50 kilos of caviar, plus the money they’d earn from her meaty flesh, and then it would take only a couple of days to make more than fifteen thousand dollars, selling the illegal black eggs to a few Russian restaurant and storeowners in San Francisco and shipping the rest to her cousin, Fjodor Dolgoplova in Los Angeles, where the real demand was. Vanya had even heard of celebrities and movie producers’ wives slathering caviar on their sagging faces. Some enterprising genius had convinced them that the silky black eggs would firm their skin and erase their wrinkles. It was this kind of decadence that made the Americans so despicable and at the same time, appealing, to Vana.

Boris took a bottle of Baltika beer from the small refrigerator in the corner of the garage that had been installed for storing caviar. He cracked the top with his back molar and took a long swig, before placing his hand on the sturgeon's belly. "She's getting warm already. Pavlo, come, help me move her into trunk of car. The other two we put in back of truck." Pavlo, who was leaning against Boris' truck parked on the other side of the garage, thrust his chin forward in the affirmative. He was shorter than Boris by at least a foot, but just as strong. There was so little fat on his frame that the veins in his arms and legs popped and each muscle was traceable beneath his taught skin. When he walked, he kept his arms fixed closely at his sides, as he had been conditioned to do during his stint in the Russian military.

Once they got back to Boris' place, they'd be awake all night, behind the metal garage door under the glare of fluorescent light bulbs. Drinking vodka and sobering up on cocaine, which Vanya would snort periodically from the tip of her long pinky nail, and replaying the same music tapes of Romislokus and Grazhdanskaya Oborno that she'd brought from home. First, Boris would perform a kind of C-section, slicing the sturgeon's stomach open with a freshly sharpened butcher knife. Vanya would then methodically scrape away the tiny eggs from the sturgeon's ovaries with a sterilized silver kitchen teaspoon before cleaning them and transferring them into airtight jars, which Pavlo would weigh, label and case. And then the fish had to be skinned, its meat divided and packaged.

It took all three men to haul the sturgeons into the cars. The fish were wrapped individually in black plastic tarps fastened with rope, so that their concealed bulk eerily resembled that of a corpse.

An hour later, Vanya stood in front of her curio cabinet, rustling the miniature, chintzy key inside its lock. She knew Boris could pick the lock in half a second, or smash his fist right through the glass if he wanted to, but the lock's allusion of safety calmed her nerves when she imagined Boris discovering the missing money and tearing her house apart to find it. She had been skimming from their stash for months, and many of the babushkas were stuffed with money.

Her collection of dolls—twenty-three in total that she had inherited from her grandmother who had inherited them from her grandmother—was one of the few possessions she had carried from St. Petersburg to San Francisco. Some of the dolls, their painted faces peeling and faded, were signed and dated on the bottom, going back as far as 1898. Vanya had carefully wrapped each babushka in old newspapers and tucked them into a carry-on suitcase. Five times throughout the eighteen-hour flight she climbed over her neighbor's legs, clicked open the overhead compartment and laid her hands on the suitcase to be sure no one had stolen her dolls.

Now, Vanya quickly packed the babushkas in a leather duffel bag before leaving the house and heading for Pavlos', where he and Boris were waiting for her to start on the sturgeons. She took the quickest route down Geary Street towards the ocean. Fog billowing through the sky like smoke, as if there was a Leningrad wildfire burning in the distance. When she pulled up in front of the house, Boris was firmly planted in the driveway, cross-armed with legs spread, sneering at an unfamiliar man in a grey uniform standing a few feet in front of him.

Vanya paused before cutting the engine. She wanted to keep driving, but knew that would only make her suspicious. She slowly stepped out of the car and walked up the driveway. Pavlo was lying on the driveway on the opposite side of the truck, his face pressed into an oil spot, arms yanked behind his back, wrists handcuffed. Another uniformed man stood above him, his black boot pressed between Pavlo's shoulder blades.

Vanya's heart raced as she approached Boris. She regarded the man standing in front of him with disgust. Tall and lean, fair skin sunburned and freckled with a boyish, unlined face that could only belong to a grown-up American man. She looked at Boris. "What's happening?" Before he could answer, the man spoke up, turning to Vanya. Even his blue eyeballs were spotted with rust-colored freckles. "These men here are part of the wildlife black market. They've been buying and selling illegally poached sturgeon for some time." Vanya gasped and widened her eyes, feigning shock. "That's impossible. Where did you get such information?"

Boris took a step closer to the man. "Fuck you," he snarled. "I spit on you." He spat on the toe of the game warden's boot and stared squarely into his eyes, daring a reaction. Vanya held her breath. For a moment, she thought Boris had scared the warden, who'd quickly apologize for the inconvenience, grab his partner, climb into his unmarked sedan and leave them alone. Though an instant later, the warden's hand moved quickly to his side. Suddenly, a gun aimed at Boris' chest, to the place where his gold medallion of Saint Constantine lay. Vanya took a few steps back and shook her head. *Not in front of me. Not like this.*

"Get against the fucking car," the warden barked. Boris froze, lowering his eyes to the barrel of the gun. Then he lifted his gaze to the warden, smiled wildly and began to

laugh, as though genuinely amused at what was happening. He raised his arms out in front of him. “They’re empty. Worth nothing. You’ll see. We caught them just for fun.”

On the other side of the truck, Pavlo began screaming and wiggling on the ground like a fish out of water. “Worth nothing, you stupid fucks!” The warden who had been keeping an eye on Pavlo—a short bald man with pockmarked cheeks—dug his boot into deeper his back. Though this only provoked Pavlo, whose insults continued to build in volume and vulgarity. “Shut the fuck up, Pavlo. Stop screaming like little bitch,” Boris shouted across the truck. The warden standing in front of Boris snickered. “Now, do you want me to throw you on the ground like your friend over there? Get against the car.” Boris shrugged his shoulders and turned around to face the truck. He seemed to do this in slow motion, or rather, everything around him froze. The single rivet of sweat dripping down the middle of his face, his hands nervously flexing open and closed at his sides. The American flag he had proudly strung up on the fourth of July snapping in the wind. The glaring red sound of police cars in the distance. It all stopped and Vanya was incapable of seeing anything but Boris, whose bulky body seemed to glow and pulse. He turned his head toward Vanya and mouthed, *Ya lublu tebya*. Normally, Boris only told her he loved her when he was drunk or about to make a lot of money. She opened her mouth to shout back, but nothing came. Something hot and tight contracted beneath her breastbone, though she couldn’t call it love.

Suddenly, Boris’ body spun around, his right arm leading the motion, raised up in front of him. A gun in his hand. A shot, and then another, though Vanya couldn’t tell which direction they’d come from. The metallic, smoky smell of fired bullets and an

unbearable sound like a wounded dog. Someone calling Vanya's name again and again.

*Boris? Was it Boris?*

She turned and ran back to her car, the skinny heels of her stilettos smacking against the pavement. Although she had left the key in the ignition, she couldn't grasp it firmly enough to turn it. Her fingers kept slipping from the key into her lap. She noticed that there was a splattering of blood on the front of her jeans, the sight of which instantly focused her mind, so that she was able to turn the key and peel away down the street, her hair flying wildly behind her. As she sped away, another shot and then another, ricocheting inside her head, knocking against Boris' last words to her. *Ya lublu tebya.*

Almost two hundred miles south of San Francisco, following the curve of the coastline down the Pacific Highway, Vanya pulled over to the side of the road. She got out of the car and walked to the edge of the cliff. The wind on her face and she closed her eyes, suddenly transported to the Palace Bridge back home, feeling the swell of the Neva River. Though when she breathed in, her nostrils tingled from the salty ocean air. She opened her eyes. The Pacific exhilarating and daunting in its magnitude, glittering like money. A feeling of warm satisfaction rose inside of her. She thought of the pregnant sturgeon and the caviar. *All that caviar.* By now, Boris and Pavlo were already in jail. She would think of them behind bars, not dead. Though hadn't Boris always promised he'd kill himself first before going back to prison?

Before getting back into the car, Vanya rapped her fist three times for luck against the trunk. If she drove fast enough, she could make it to her cousin Fjodor Dolgopolova's in Los Angeles in time to salvage the caviar. That was the plan. Fjodor was expecting

her. He was the one who had tipped off the game wardens. Vanya waited until the road was completely clear before pulling onto the highway. As she sped up, the sturgeon rolled around and bumped against the hood of the trunk. The sun beat down on her bare shoulders and arms, soon a deeper shade of honey brown, almost hot to the touch.