

## RUSSIAN OUTLAW (5,000 words)

Patsy's house was surrounded. As the cluster of tumbleweeds decomposed, they left behind shiny streaks of black material everyone in town called sludge. It was as thick as peanut butter and tasted like sand. Patsy's mother questioned why she continued to live in such a godawful place. Nothing good happened there.

Patsy was sitting on the front porch swing, overlooking a flamboyance of plastic flamingos. Her three children were attempting to catch lizards as she sipped store-bought lemonade. Her wide-brimmed straw hat did its best to keep the sun from further freckling her nose.

"Don't pull off the tails," she hollered. "They don't grow back overnight."

Vinyl panels at the corners of the ranch house were bending and flapping and several rows of shingles had departed. She didn't have these problems when her husband, Benny, was around. He could put anything back together.

Patsy saw a dust plume and hoped it was the postman with her disability check. That always perked her up. Instead, it was a white van with a satellite dish on top. If she'd had her glasses on, maybe she could've read the lettering on the side. The van chugged its way south.

"Bomb run," one of the neighbor's kids shouted. Soon, a pack of children, including Patsy's lot, were on their bikes and following the dust cloud toward the aircraft boneyard, just off Mesquite Road. Thousands of retired military airplanes and helicopters were collecting sand and tumbleweeds out there.

Juniper poked her head out of the garage next door and raised her welding visor with a gloved hand.

“Why don’t they dump the shit in our front yards?” Juniper asked, for the umpteenth time. “It’d save them some trouble.”

Juniper was lucky, she still had a husband, a third-generation gas station attendant/jeweler. She had coaxed him into dragging a B-29 bomber nose section across the desert with the pickup truck so she could have the makings of a greenhouse. Patsy admired all the windows, wishing she’d thought of it, although she’d much rather have a husband than a greenhouse.

“This one didn’t look military,” Patsy said.

Juniper rummaged around the garage and reappeared with her army surplus binoculars. “It’s the damn media,” she said, adjusting the fine focus. “What are they cooking up now?”

Patsy’s first inclination was to call her kids back but they were too far gone. She shrugged. “Oh, the media. They never say anything nice about us.”

This was the last thing Patsy needed. One more ugly news story and her ex would never return. Everyone had their limits. She tried to distract herself from these dark thoughts with images of Benny hauling lumber up and down the California coast. Three years ago he sent her a postcard from Big Sur. She framed it and set it on the coffee table.

“Need anything from town?” Patsy was running low on round yellow pills and it was only a matter of time before the family turned on itself.

“Oh, the usual,” Juniper said, before lowering her welding visor. “A couple rolls of duct tape, some baling wire and a dozen eggs.”

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The children returned with socks caked in red dust. Patsy gathered everyone up, fired up the Chevy Suburban and headed into Caper, population 525. Neon signs gave the town at least some sense of motion in the southern Utah desert. Besides the boneyard, there were piles of junk, big as Mayan pyramids, on the outskirts. What blew in didn't blow out, including tumbleweeds, which occasionally buried the town during annual migrations. Townspeople turned the weeds into Christmas trees, scarecrows and snowmen, while municipal employees pushed the rest around with bulldozers. Canyons kept the town's odor contained most of the year. On those really hot days, rising brown clouds gave newspapers the timeless headline, "The Caper Vapor Strikes Again."

Behind the supermarket, Patsy found Bixbee, the town's closest thing to a pharmacist, holding court in her canvas teepee. As Bixbee was preparing the pills, Patsy stared at a new two-headed snake tattoo slithering down the woman's pale wrist. Bixbee's unusually thick hair was swaddled in an army green scarf.

"I like those red eyes," Patsy said. She always found something to admire about Bixbee.

"Thanks. It's a good snake, but not as watchful as I'd hoped."

"That's too bad." Patsy had no idea what Bixbee was talking about. She didn't know the first thing about witchcraft or whatever Bixbee was into. For years, Patsy's church had been trying to summon Bixbee to Sunday service, but she wouldn't budge and instead retreated to her RV north of town.

"Any headaches?" Bixbee asked.

“Not lately.” Patsy knew better than to reveal too much to the medical community. Weren’t their computers all connected? Bixbee had a nursing diploma on her bookshelf. Patsy wasn’t going to tell her about the sensations of worms crawling under her skin or pterodactyls flying over her bed at night. No one needed to know that, except maybe Juniper.

The teepee had painted a pointy shadow over the proceedings. Patsy’s eyes darted side to side.

“Some TV people are sniffing around.”

“Really?” Bixbee asked.

“Juniper and I saw one of those satellite vans. No telling what they’re up to.”

“It always pays to be vigilant, but I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“These are great,” Patsy said, pills in hand. “My kids have never been calmer.”

Bixbee nodded.

Patsy’s cell phone vibrated in her jeans. “Wrong number,” she said. “It’s the story of my life.”

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Townspice picnicked in the cleanest part of town, where the landfill was supposed to be. It was a deep, half-finished pit with steep crumbling sides and a serpentine road that led to nowhere. “Enjoy it while it lasts,” Juniper liked to say of the mysterious government project. “It’s only a matter of time before the desert reclaims it.” Without a place to dispose of the town’s

garbage, trucks would ship it to a facility in neighboring Salvation, which was times bigger than Caper.

Under Mayor Leach, who doubled as a defrocked Mormon bishop, people didn't question things. Two decades ago, the entire town got excommunicated by church headquarters in Salt Lake City for reasons Patsy didn't know. Despite setbacks, Mayor Leach kept most people employed via business schemes. Up until the crops started dying, Patsy was in charge of the fruit stand along the highway. She missed wearing an apron and packing the giant peaches carefully, like infants' heads, so as not to bruise them. She also missed interacting with the public in all its glory. "Fresh faces from faraway places," she used to say as they pulled up. There were old people and families and newlyweds, mostly heading to various national parks. Wherever they were going, she wished them well and invited them back. She'd hunker down in her Suburban when afternoon thunderstorms spooled up.

She later went to work at the factory braiding parachute cord into survival wristbands and whatnot. There was pride in that, of course. She was saving lives. But Patsy's finger joints eventually gave out. She'd been on disability ever since.

Mayor Leach told the town repeatedly that if they lived their lives appropriately, they could become gods of their own worlds. "As if we aren't already," Juniper liked to hiss at Patsy.

The parents planted themselves on the landfill's rim, surrounded by smooth scarlet sandstone and parched Utah sky, and looked down upon the scrub oak where the trash would normally sit, contained by earthen layers and synthetic membranes. Patsy pulled out a tub of fried chicken from the cooler and her children grabbed at it like Komodo dragons. After lunch, the little ones ran into the pit to play king on the mountain.

The city attorney's second adopted Mexican child was finally big enough to play with the rest. Patsy thought her dark skin looked good against her long ebony hair, all done up in pink and yellow hair thingies.

"I remember when I had my second," Patsy said over the screams. "Couldn't wait for him to see the light of day. They were wrong when they told me each one gets easier." Patsy, though, had maintained her youthful figure.

The city attorney's wife sat quietly and Patsy started to panic under a burning coat of solitude. Had she said something wrong? Was she being unkind to the less fertile?

"It's all worth it," Patsy went on. "Even if they're not your own."

The woman nodded. "Your hair has a lovely green tint to it."

"Yes, well, it's a new thing," Patsy said. "Glad you like it."

Patsy's mother took a seat at the table and looked like she always looked, dehydrated and shrunken. She liked to drive everywhere with the windows down.

"I think it's wrong the way people listen to those psychologists," her mother said, referring to the child-rearing book Patsy was resting her fingers on.

"Who says I listen?"

The old woman's face cinched up.

Patsy knew her mother was much happier, a different person altogether, when she was at home near the golf course in Salvation.

Patsy's kids were now beating each other over the head with sticks. Things continued as usual that Saturday, except Patsy's mother noticed that Mayor Leach seemed preoccupied and was talking in muffled tones with the city attorney. Patsy brushed it off and opened her book.

A scream left the landfill and headed for the stratosphere. A blond kid had punched a dark-haired kid. Arms and legs locked and unlocked. Patsy pulled the most injured child from the wreckage of her family and carried him piggyback off the battlefield.

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Back at Patsy's house, an assortment of children busted through the front door as she was bandaging another child in the kitchen. She should've asked Bixbee for more salve. *You can never have enough salve.*

Patsy heard a clank on her sliding glass door and knew, without turning around, that it was Juniper. The woman's shriveled arms and aviator sunglasses, perched low on her nose, stole the menace from the machete she was holding.

Juniper started yelling before Patsy could open the door. "Those people. Those people in the van. They're asking about tumbleweeds," she said. "Imagine that. They come all this way to look at weeds. I pointed them toward the boneyard, but they just stuck up their noses at me. The nerve. How could they resist our biggest attraction? That's bonafide American junk."

"What does this mean?"

"Hell if I know."

Patsy thought about upping her children's medication. That would keep them out of trouble. After Juniper had left, she said to her oldest, "Maybe you should hang around the yard. Your snake is shedding."

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That Sunday, while Patsy was at church with the rest of the town, her mother noticed a hazmat vehicle from Salt Lake City, another satellite van and three black government SUVs parked at the corner motel in Salvation, the only place to stay within 50 miles.

“Maybe somebody found uranium,” Patsy said later over the phone.

“Don’t sound so chipper. You know what mining did to your father. I want no part of that racket. Anyway, something’s going on, the likes of which we’ve never seen. Mark my words.”

Over the next few days, Patsy’s mother started calling and calling. More outsiders were arriving. The RV park was full and so were the campgrounds and the parking lot at the old drive-in movie theater.

“They’ve never shown this much interest in us,” Patsy said.

“It might be time for you to skedaddle. That place is a cesspool of cesspools.”

Patsy laughed. “I can’t pick up a family and roll out of town. I have a life here.”

“What life? You can’t wait forever for Benny to return.”

“Maybe I can.”

Her mother hesitated and took a drink of something, most likely Bud Light. She had a pantry full of it. “He ain’t coming back. That’s the bottom line. You gotta come to terms over that. Don’t you see, he knows there’s a whole world out there beyond Caper.”

“I was a good wife.”

“I’m sure you were. But everything runs its course.”



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Over the next few days, Patsy and Juniper watched trucks spitting pebbles at their mailboxes. Most were military and, like the media, avoided the boneyard and drove straight into town. The outsiders took over the picnic benches that surrounded the landfill, drank bottled water and ate packaged food. All that was left of the community, it seemed, was church.

One afternoon, Patsy went running for Juniper's garage. "Bixbee's teepee is gone. And so is Bixbee. What am I going to do without my pills?"

"She's a jackrabbit. She'll turn up when this thing blows over," Juniper said. "In the meantime, I'm going to sharpen my machete. You best arm yourself as well."

Patsy didn't know what to say.

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As Patsy sat at the only stoplight in Caper, she watched a tumbleweed bounce off her hood then roll toward the bowling alley. It vacillated against the front door as if it wanted in.

Halfway down the street, she saw the mayor's silver Mercedes parked outside city hall. The seat of city government was located in the attic of a hardware store. She'd only been to "the office" once, back when she was put on leave from the fruit stand and reassigned to the factory. She remembered the mayor's fat hands resting on a mahogany desk, sensing the power he held.

She drove on to the supermarket where a quarter of the town had congregated in the parking lot. She was craving Fruit Loops and avoided conversation. She was afraid the outsiders

had cleaned out the store. Wearing a flowery sundress and cowboy boots, she made her way for the front doors only to get stopped by a familiar man in a military surplus trench coat. Raymond had drifted into town, a tumbleweed himself, with not much more than a California ID card. The guys at the gas station let him sleep in the back office and later discovered that he had a talent for welding steel and shaping aluminum, which proved indispensable in the shop. He was also the town's sculptor and his abstract creations were all over town, always signed with a spray-painted "R," encircled like a registered trademark symbol. His orange survival wristband was rotating around his outstretched hand.

When she cringingly said hello, Raymond's eyes widened. She could tell that he was more agitated than usual. His head sprung forward. Patsy couldn't get her hands over her ears fast enough.

"It's all going down, man. It's all going down. They're killing us. Those sludge fucks. Sludge fucks!"

Raymond kept yelling and Patsy kept walking. *Bless him, bless him. He's a genius.*

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When Patsy arrived at home with a gallon of milk and three boxes of cereal, there was a note taped to her back door in Juniper's blocky handwriting: "Turn On the Damn Boob Tube!"

Instead, Patsy walked next door. She found Juniper in her garage, hunched over sweating as she was pumping up a dune buggy tire.

"They're coming for us. Legions of them," Juniper said. "We..."

They both crouched under the wale of an overflying helicopter.

“The Russians are behind it,” Juniper said. “I know it.”

“You always blame the Russians.”

But this time it was too much for Patsy to take. She backed away and retraced her steps through smatterings of sludge.

When Patsy did get around to turning on the TV, the national media had overwhelmed the statewide media like a cold front overtaking a warm front. She saw scenes of Caper and tumbleweeds blowing down half-empty streets. It made no sense.

And where was Bixbee?

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Patsy found a flyer taped to her front door, asking her to submit to a voluntary medical exam. If anything, she was good about following rules. The next thing she knew, she was at the school gym behind a curtain. Face masks and clipboards brought a degree of seriousness she hadn't experienced since her divorce hearing. She told them about her family's cancer history and her occasional skin rashes. But, no, she certainly didn't have memory problems.

“You're not going to be sticking us with needles, are you?” Patsy asked the doctor with a crew cut. “If there's one thing we have in common, it's sensitive skin.”

Everything she said led to more inquiries. Oddly, they wanted to know if she'd ever incinerated tumbleweeds in her yard. Silly question. *Who didn't?*

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Patsy's cat disappeared for a full day and when she came back, clumps of fur were missing from her abdomen. It was like that now. The researchers didn't ask anymore. They took what they wanted. They did leave, though, a stack of MREs on her front porch. Juniper loved the Mexican-style chicken stew and traded Patsy for hers.

At an evening meeting among adult church members, Patsy felt the ground shifting underneath her plastic seat; fluorescent light seeped into her skull. The tension was too much. She wanted to run.

"Our mayor looks weathered and beaten. Remember when he got lost in the slot canyons?" Juniper asked. "He's got no sense of direction." She said the last part almost loud enough for the mayor to hear.

That seemed to set off the crowd. Patsy heard the words "conspiracy" and "biological and chemical weapons" and "human guinea pigs." Patsy was getting seriously worried now. She'd never heard the mayor openly criticized like this. He rose amidst the tension and gripped the podium with those fat hands.

"There's something I must tell you. It's best that you hear it from me." He took a drink from a root beer can. "The government wants us out. The town, they said, is no longer safe. We did everything we could do, but we need to clear out and abandon our homes. I know this is a lot to take in. Any questions?"

Patsy couldn't think of anything to ask. She was never good at that.

Heads turned. A grumble took over. Hands went up. Then came shouting. Milton, the hardware store owner, started waving his arms. The crowd quieted.

“And you’re telling us now? How long did you know about this? I’ve got inventory. I can’t just pack up everything overnight,” Milton said.

“I’m sorry,” said the mayor.

“What about our jobs?” asked Rodney, the foreman at the factory. “I thought business was good.”

“It was good until this happened.”

“What about our junk?” Juniper asked. “Why do they need to mess with that?”

“They’re just being thorough,” the mayor said.

Patsy could hardly breathe. The folding chair felt unusually hard. Her legs had gone to sleep and she couldn’t walk to the car let alone run.

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The town was packing up—some in the middle of the night—and leaving Patsy behind. A short-order cook was heading back to Vegas, an elderly couple to St. George to be with family. Everyone had something else to fall back on, something to pursue, something to rekindle. Patsy’s only real choice was moving in with her mother, which was like going to prison. Benny would never want to visit her there.

Bulldozers started demolishing abandoned homes. Patsy felt violated and left for dead. She had only Juniper to talk to, besides her children, of course. It was becoming harder to keep

them calm. Bixbee was long gone and Patsy was running out of pills. She thought about dying her hair black; black as sludge.

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Patsy was walking down Main Street as whirlwinds from military trucks raked her beige skirt. When she rounded the corner and came upon city hall, a crowd of holdouts had gathered by four state police cars. Thanks to her bad timing, she was there to bear witness as the mayor and city attorney were being led off in handcuffs. As they were swallowed by the squad cars, TV cameras swung around and panned the resolute faces. Patsy felt as if she were watching a movie at Salvation's old drive-in.

The crowd was too consumed to see Raymond emerge from an alley in his trench coat. Someone in the crowd pointed. The cameras turned again. He put his face so close to the lenses that they had to pull back. The cops had their hands on their guns. Patsy trembled, thinking she'd seen this all before on the big screen. Raymond arched forward and yelled, "I warned you about these mother fuckers. Are you listing now?" Raymond tapped the side of a camera. "Anyone in there? Christ, what does it take? Sludge fucks!"

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Patsy awoke early to find two soldiers in her front yard attempting to untie the tire swing. There was something about their relaxed swagger, and total disregard for private property,

that created a burning sensation within her as if they were raising a flag over a defeated enemy. She felt every bit as betrayed as the day her husband told her, with an unflinching mustache, “My destiny ain’t here.” Then he headed southwest and followed the Extraterrestrial Highway right out of her life.

“Children, you stay inside.” She glanced at her half-empty pill bottle, then donned her nightgown and charged out the front door.

“Hey there, hey there,” Patsy said. “That’s ours.”

The soldiers turned and Patsy was horrified that one of them was female. How could a woman disrupt another woman’s family life? The soldier’s wraparound sunglasses rose on her nose but she remained silent.

“We need to remove this,” the man said. “It’s contaminated. You’ve got residue sitting in the bottom of it.”

“Residue? That’s what this is about?”

“It’s toxic, ma’am,” he added.

Patsy knew he was a sergeant from the three angled stripes, but his authority and swollen biceps didn’t deter her. This whole thing was going too far. She held a gaze at them powerful enough to set the plastic flamingos on fire. Patsy grabbed the rope and with a vigor not felt nor expressed since she was a teenager, pulled her quivering legs up and threaded the empty hole.

“Ma’am, you can’t do this. It’s for your own safety,” the woman said in her husky army voice.

Patsy laughed.

“You’ve got about three seconds and I’m calling the police,” the sergeant said.

“Call them. Call everybody. Bring in the navy. I don’t care.”

The woman soldier put her hands on Patsy’s shoulders and Patsy felt her back spasm. “No, no.” Patsy gave the ground a swift push. The soldiers jumped back to escape her flying appendages, lost balance and fell on top of each other.

“Jesus Christ,” the sergeant yelled. “Jesus Christ.”

Patsy was trying to twist up the rope, as her uncle used to do, and unleash her fury. As the Earth swung around, Patsy felt a sense of calm. Her shoulders relaxed. Blue sky smeared with cottonwood branches. As the euphoria was setting in, her flamingos raced by and mixed with flashes of sunlight. Such beauty. Her fingertips burned and she caught a glimpse of her husband’s face. It was his idea to buy the house, a solid investment and a good place to raise children, the way he put it. But it was her idea to remain here, waiting for him to return. His blue eyes and those elf-like ears dissolved in her mind. What had she gotten herself into?

Something sparkled above her like a fishing lure. Then came a sawing sound. Patsy felt the ground rise and smack her on the ass. Her head snapped back. Juniper was standing above her with a machete. Untrapped water had soaked through Patsy’s pajama bottoms.

“What? Why’d you cut me down?” Patsy sputtered.

“Sorry, kitten. I didn’t want them escalating things on you.” Juniper waved her machete at the unarmed soldiers. “You’ll bring this tire back, won’t you?”

The sergeant nodded.

Even Patsy knew that was a lie.

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Patsy awoke the next morning to pops and clanks as Juniper and her husband were loading up the open trailer hitched to their RV. Their movements had an unusual orderly pace to it. In all her years in Caper, she'd never seen their RV move.

"Everything that ain't tainted, that's what's going," Juniper said.

"Going where?"

"Phoenix. We'll give civilization a shot. What the hell. You better come with us."

Patsy rubbed her eyes. Finally, she had a question. "Are the schools any good?"

Responsible parents always asked that.

"How should I know? You're lucky you didn't end up in jail."

Patsy had to admit she was right. "It's too quiet around here."

"That means it's time to git. We're supposed to be out of here within forty-eight hours."

"That's not much time."

"We've got some space on the trailer. Load up your bigger things and follow us down."

"I don't know what to do with the flamingos."

"Maybe it's time to let them go," Juniper said. "By the way, I heard Bixbee turned up.

She's lying low in ole Mexico."

Patsy pictured her teepee on a beach with palm trees. She always wished the best for people.

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Patsy kicked her boot on the side of the Suburban after the kids and other cargo had been loaded, trying to get rid of the last remaining remnants of Caper soil. She crated the cat in the front passenger seat. Today was frightening. Everything she knew had been uprooted, churned about and lay drying in the sun. That silly sludge. Who would've thought?

It was peaceful as they drove down No End Road, watching the sun sink below the mountains to the west. She went by the mayor's adobe mansion. His mailbox had been smeared with sludge while hand-molded black spires sat on top, like those hoodoos she'd seen as a child in Bryce Canyon. On the side of the mailbox, Raymond had left his signature symbol.

In one of the few times Patsy listened to radio news in her life, she heard yet another story about Caper.

"It's an overnight ghost town," the reporter started. "The army has secured a perimeter and trapped tens of thousands of tumbleweeds. As we reported last week, the tumbleweeds were part of an experiment to suck up toxic waste near town. The roots were supposed to gather the waste before the weeds matured and started to roam. But ToxicTech Solutions, the company that was in charge of the project, failed to keep the weeds under control. And the city didn't notify residents. Once the toxic plants rolled into town, they contaminated the soil. It left townspeople sick. That was the beginning of the end for Caper. Several ToxicTech executives were arrested on charges of criminal negligence. And two city officials were arrested on charges of embezzlement, conspiracy and on unrelated charges for allegedly smuggling children from Mexico as part of an illegal adoption program."

The reporter said something about a congressional committee forming in Washington, D.C., then segued to an interview with a Nobel Prize-winning scientist. "Based on what I've

seen, the degradation to the mental faculties is so great, I'm surprised the kids can tie their shoes."

Patsy shrugged it off. *Lies!*

Then the reporter came back with a lighthearted tone. "While many see the tumbleweed as an iconic symbol of the West, it's actually an invader. The Russian thistle, which wreaked havoc on this town, may have arrived in the 1800s after hijacking shipments of flaxseed. This wind-propelled Siberian pest has been multiplying ever since. Down here, it's become a Russian outlaw."

Jesus, Patsy thought. *So the Russians were behind it after all. Juniper was right.*

The radio anchor came on next. "Thanks for the report, Chip. That was quite a caper, no pun intended. So how did this town come to be, out there in the Utah desert?"

"It has its own sordid history. A rancher back in the 1960s started experimenting with different kinds of non-native crops, most notably growing caper bushes in greenhouses. He had some scientific training and freely used chemicals that are illegal in many places. That operation continued up until recently and employed a third of the town. ToxicTech was brought in to assist in a cleanup effort, but you know how that turned out."

"Why didn't people just leave?" the anchor asked.

"That's a little complicated as well. ToxicTech built homes for the residents in exchange for high-interest-rate mortgages. City fathers looked the other way. Townspeople also had their hands tied from a religious perspective. The local church, with its own brand of theology, had a lot of influence."

"Fascinating," the anchor said. "We look forward to your next report."

As Patsy and crew reached the apex of No End Road, she saw a tumbleweed flip onto the state highway and stop in her lane as if it were taunting her. She floored the Suburban and the weed twitched as her grill tore through it. Part of it exploded on the windshield. Laughter filled the cavernous vehicle.

“Will we ever go back?” the little one asked.

“I don’t think so, honey,” Patsy said. “You’ll like it in Phoenix.”

Juniper had scrawled an address on a piece of cardboard. She put it next to the lawyer’s business card in the glovebox for safekeeping.

Patsy pulled up to a gas station/rock shop before the sun escaped. Sandstone glowed crimson as the temperature tumbled.

“Anybody need to use the bathroom?” Patsy asked.

When Patsy opened her car door, an empty pill bottle fell out.

A woman, most likely Navajo, was behind the counter, and a gaunt white man wearing cowboy boots was putting boxes on the shelf.

“You probably saw me on TV,” Patsy said, flicking her thin hair. “I’m from Caper.”

The woman shrugged. “Yeah, maybe.”

“That Caper Vapor was no joke,” the man said. “About time they shut it down.”

Patsy felt, once again, under attack. Her town had been excommunicated and condemned, wasn’t that enough? With shaking hands, she set a case of bottled water on the counter.

“I’ll take three Indian headdresses for my children, if they ever get out of the restroom.”

The Navajo woman looked puzzled and glanced at the Suburban. “What children? You’re the only one who’s come in the store this evening.”

Patsy smirked and reached for the water. “Too bad you didn’t see them.”

She left the headdresses behind and jangled her keys as she walked toward the Suburban. Her cat’s meowing welcomed her back. She glanced in the rearview mirror at the empty seats, then started heading south toward her own salvation.

THE END