

PLACE OF EXILE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

It's two weeks till these douchebags hit town, and we're on the front line," Sheriff Orwell Pratt said. He was visibly relieved to reach the end of his hour-long PowerPoint presentation.

Jude hauled herself up in her chair. Friday, mid-afternoon, midsummer, and they had to be crammed into an airless conference room listening to Pratt's assessment of the joint resource burden for this year's Telluride Film Festival. The Montezuma County Sheriff's Office wasn't really at the front line but they stepped up when their colleagues in adjoining counties needed extra manpower. This year, the festival coincided with the Four Corners Biker Rally, a national get-together that drew thousands of potential law-breakers. Today's briefing was a strategy session aimed at establishing communication protocols, cohesion, and calm as the twin-event "perfect storm" unfolded.

"They got those free screenings at Elks Park again?" some optimist asked.

Everyone wanted that gig in case there were foreign films with kinky sex.

"You bet," Pratt said. "They call that 'giving back to the community.'" Dourly, he added, "Needless to say, there's still not a single traffic signal anywhere in that goddamn town. Certain so-called celebrities throw their weight around, and here we are. You know what I'm saying."

Jude didn't, but from the snorts of laughter around her she concluded the traffic signal issue was another black mark against the Telluride council, a body that could pass an ordinance to impeach Bush and Cheney, yet balked at the idea of twenty-first-century traffic

control. Pratt had a bug up his ass about Telluride, which he variously referred to as “that enclave of overprivileged pinkos” and “a bad joke looking for a bar mitzvah, no disrespect intended.” In his opinion, the San Miguel sheriff had handed his balls in at the door to get elected in that county.

As for the staff of that emasculated colleague, Pratt liked to point out that you could hardly refer to them as a law enforcement detail. Most deputies were reserve volunteers, members of the public who wanted to swagger around wearing a badge on weekends. They spent their lives picking up dead birds as part of the avian flu precautionary campaign, real crime being scarce in Telluride. The place saw about seven violent incidents per year. The murder rate was zero, with only one significant blip on the radar.

Fifteen years earlier, the town’s pristine record had been besmirched when a wealthy socialite was shot dead during a robbery at her fancy log cabin. Eva Shoen’s family owned the U-Haul empire and was infamous for avarice, feuding, and shameful business practices. Eva possessed the class and kindness lacked by the clan she’d married into and seemed to have no enemies. The Shoens spent years blaming their patriarch and one another for having her hit, and the case remained unsolved. Finally a big reward brought in some tips and a drifter was convicted. Conspiracy theorists still believed his confession was phony and that another filthy rich family had gotten away with murder.

The residents of Telluride didn’t appreciate the spotlight that came with the Shoen case. They saw their town an oasis of sanity in a world that had lost its way, and themselves as ordinary folk even though no ordinary person could afford to live there. The median house price in that Beverly Hills in the mountains was well over two million bucks.

It wasn’t always so. Before the place began to crawl with celebrities and instant-money refugees from the dotcom boom, it was a ghost town taken over by hippies and dreamers who lived a counterculture fantasy. A few hold-outs from that wistful era still refused to sell their cottages to developers. There were rumors that they were bribed to stay put, their presence contributing to the town’s carefully preserved aura of egalitarian rusticity.

The film festival crowd loved the idea that Telluride was “the real thing.” Unfortunately for local law enforcement these visitors didn’t just invade the town itself, which would have been a manageable

proposition. No, they thought anyplace ten miles from the nearest low-fat latte was the wilderness and were in hog heaven at the prospect. On either side of the festival they set out to explore the entire Four Corners. Well-meaning flakes stumbled into the mountains in their three-hundred-dollar sandals, gaga over the wonders of nature. It was only a matter of time before they got themselves in a heap of trouble. A happy couple posing for the camera would fall down a ravine and get lost trying to walk out. Or some idiot swimming naked in a waterfall would drown himself. Or he'd do drugs and see Bigfoot. A couple of years ago a dispatcher made a tape of the wildest 911 calls from successive festivals. She sold downloads on the Internet and pulled in enough money to buy a car.

Then there were the sons and daughters of the wealthy, dabbling in filmmaking on daddy's dime and expecting the cognoscenti to be awestruck by their efforts. When their self-promotion gambits didn't pan out, they found ways to console themselves. They stole Anasazi artifacts or broke into a director's chalet so they could leave their screenplay next to his bed. Failing that, they got drunk and pushed to the head of the line so they could nab a gondola ride with Werner Herzog and his bimbo wife. When Herzog didn't talk to them, they left in a huff and assaulted a parking attendant who caught them tampering with Herzog's car. No festival was complete without some disgruntled wannabe in a holding cell, threatening, "Do you know who my father is?"

Jude couldn't believe it was that time of year again. They'd survived the sweet-corn festival, the annual Bear Dance and Pow Wow, the county fair, and the herpetologists' convention, and they would also survive a thousand bikers who were too old and successful to rape and pillage, and who poured money into local businesses. The Telluride crowd was another matter, not only lousy tippers but difficult to wrangle.

The sheriff checked his timepiece. "Devine. You're up next."

"Maybe we should take a break first, sir. It's pretty warm in here." She made a gesture to indicate that she needed to speak to him alone.

Pratt acted like he didn't notice her hand signals. "Let's just get on with it." He plunked himself down in a plastic chair.

Jude considered whispering in his ear but decided to rattle his cage instead. She strolled to the front of the room, picked up a fat red marker,

and wrote two words on the whiteboard. As the silence got heavy, she read aloud, “Terrorist Threat.”

Pratt gave her a *What the fuck?* stare.

Jude jotted a few words on a piece of paper and handed it to him. She’d been instructed to brief local law enforcement on what they could expect now that the FBI had confirmed the chatter they’d been hearing since last year. Originally, they’d expected the 2006 festival to be targeted but the subjects couldn’t get themselves organized in time. This year, however, they’d advanced their plans beyond posturing on the Stormfront blog.

Jude had tried to give Pratt a heads up ever since she arrived in Cortez a few hours ago, but he was too busy eating lunch with Colorado’s new governor, Bill Ritter. A Democrat, Ritter was reaching out to Republicans in the state’s small towns, and Pratt was eager to be seen as reaching back. His sliding support since reelection had raised the scepter of the unthinkable: voters in the Four Corners might turn into wimpo liberals and elect the other guy next time.

Pratt thought global warming was the issue that could bridge the political divide. No one in the state of Colorado rejoiced over diminishing annual snowpack and water restrictions, and the Four Corners depended on the annual injection of money from ski-season visitors. No more snow would spell disaster, so Pratt was all about reducing the carbon footprint. He had just put out a declaration that the MCSO was going “green” and all lightbulbs were to be replaced by the CFL variety. With any luck the governor would inject money into local environmental initiatives and Pratt would take the credit.

Jude watched him read her brief mea culpa. He folded the note pensively and slipped it into his top pocket like he’d just received sensitive information. With the serene sang-froid of a man in the loop, he said, “Go ahead, Detective.”

Pratt was the only person in the room who knew Jude hadn’t left the FBI, as the official version went, but was working undercover in the Four Corners to keep tabs on domestic terrorist cells in the area. As far as everyone else was concerned, she’d left the Bureau under a cloud, swapping a prestigious career in the Crimes Against Children Unit for a slow-lane gig in Nowheresville. Speculation as to “the real story” behind her arrival in the Four Corners was still intense even after almost three years. It wasn’t often that an FBI agent took the downward step of

joining a sheriff's department but for some reason her masters thought this was an ingenious cover. Pratt was in on the deal and never stopped reminding her of the additional burden he carried as a consequence.

Jude swept a quick look around her audience. Senior personnel from the surrounding counties had gathered for the planning meeting. Pratt got competitive about combined operations and liked to host gatherings like this one so he could show off the impressive new MCSO headquarters and cell block.

"Let me emphasize that what I'm about to tell you has to stay in this room," Jude said, shaking up her sleepy audience once more.

"If this leaks out," Pratt interjected. "I promise you, heads will roll."

"Thank you, sir." Jude wrote on the whiteboard, "Telluride Film Festival."

"The film festival?" Virgil Tulley gasped from the back of the room. He covered his mouth like he'd just swallowed his own vomit.

Her only deputy at the Paradox substation, he was lurking near the rear exit, self-conscious of his junior rank and poised to make a quick escape. A fan of exactly the kind of movie they insisted on showing at the festival, he'd forked out almost seven hundred bucks for an all-events pass this year. He and Agatha Benham, the secretary at the substation, were supposed to be going together. They'd invited Jude but she told them she'd rather jump out of a plane. She'd brought Tulley to the briefing as a festival "expert."

When the noise level dropped, Jude said, "The FBI has confirmed a credible threat. They're sending a team to Cortez to establish a joint terrorism task force and discuss logistics. They'll hold their first briefing on Monday, next week. Meantime there's an ongoing investigation, and it's essential that the terrorists don't know they're under surveillance."

"Who are these knuckleheads?" Pratt demanded.

Jude wrote a few more words on the board. "The Aryan Sunrise Stormtroopers, also known as the ASS, are white supremacists who endorse an ideology of violence against Jews and other minorities. Three local men are involved, all with priors, and several others from out of state are thought to be co-conspirators. There may be more."

"Any names?" Pete Koertig asked.

Jude had partnered with Koertig on several investigations and

also had dinner with him and his wife occasionally. They had bonded over the Corban Foley case, sharing each other's pain over the outcome of that memorable trial. Any cop hated watching a killer walk, and that particular killer had gotten under everyone's skin. Jude still had fantasies about slitting his throat.

She replied, "I'm not at liberty to identify the suspects today. We'll receive that information from the FBI."

"Harrison Hawke," a Montrose lieutenant said. "That freak with the compound in Black Dog Gulch. You can bet he's the mastermind."

Hawke was well known to Four Corners law enforcement. His organization, the Christian Republic of Aryan Patriots, hosted what he called "Aryan Defense Days." Every time one of those white power unity rallies was underway, protestors caused a traffic hazard, which pissed off the Colorado State Patrol. Troopers would then gripe to the county sheriffs and PD, who would step in to control the scene. Hawke would duly claim his freedom of speech was under assault by the forces of "Zionist Occupied Government" and his organization hadn't broken any laws.

Aryan Defense Days participants were careful to stay on the right side of the law. They were all legally licensed to own firearms and if they wanted to paint swastikas on their vehicles, that was their choice. To improve their public image they repaired the houses of old white ladies and military widows, and took time out from the shooting range to attend church on Sundays. Occasionally the local newspaper ran a feature on their good works as though they were visiting Rotarians. The words "Christian" and "Patriot" in the title of their organization seemed to induce a suspension of intelligence in reporters.

Jude needed to steer the discussion away from Hawke. She'd been nurturing a relationship of cautious trust with him for two years. Her handler thought if she couldn't recruit Hawke, she could at least seduce him into becoming an unwitting informant, "seduce" being the operative word. Hawke had been pissed when the ASS bozos broke away from the fold after trying to depose him. Already he'd let slip sensitive information, and the last thing Jude needed was to have her long-term operation blown by some overeager cops in the name of Homeland Security.

Cautiously, she said, "It's certainly possible that Hawke has relevant information, but we can't afford to sound the alert by

confronting him. The FBI will determine how this is handled.” To further dampen enthusiasm, she explained, “Last year the ASS broke away from Hawke’s organization after attempting an internal coup. I don’t think he’s talking to them right now.”

“So, what are we looking at here?” Pratt asked. “A car bomb?”

Jude had been of two minds about going into detail about the type of threat they were facing. It would only take one person in this room to leak the information and there could be a major panic. On the other hand, letting people have their reactions now instead of next week when they would need to be focused was probably a good move.

“The plot involves a biological agent known as ricin.”

Noise erupted around her. Pratt leapt to his feet, his face the color of putty. “Ricin? Deadly-poison-no-antidote ricin?”

“Twice as deadly as cobra venom,” Tulley said, abandoning the back of the room to claim a seat. “They make it out of castor beans.”

A couple of female officers craned around. Jude figured she’d be talking to the backs of their heads for the next five minutes while they swooned over the man chosen as Mr. January for the next Southwestern law officers beefcake calendar.

She tried to quell the rising panic level. “Just so everyone knows, the U.S. Army has a vaccine for ricin.” She didn’t mention its limited effectiveness and the continuing lack of inhibitors to slow the effects of the bio-agent. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Biochemical agents are notoriously difficult to weaponize. Ricin dispersal has to be by aerosol, injection, or ingestion.”

“Food contamination,” Pete Koertig interpreted.

“That’s the most likely possibility. Let’s face it, this isn’t the movies and these guys aren’t Jason Bourne. They’re not going to fire syringes at anyone, and for a credible attack they’d have to release gallons of aerosol. That’s not going to happen. They’ll run with the easiest method, poisoning hamburgers or something like that.”

“My God, that’s plain un-American.” Sheriff Pratt shook his head in disappointment that a bunch of race-hate extremists might desecrate the national dish. “Does Cortez have anything to fear?”

“Sir, they’re not coming after a whole town, not even Telluride. This is all about buying themselves publicity and hero status among their peers. I’m sure they expect a lot of Jewish people to attend the festival.”

Sheriff Pratt looked to Tulley. “Deputy, you’re the expert. Is that true?”

Tulley jumped to his feet, a response that elicited audible sighs from several areas of the room. “Sir, I’m guessing Noah Baumbach, Etgar Keret, and maybe Sacha Baron Cohen, the Borat guy.” Tulley paused. “Sean Penn and Werner Herzog usually show up, but I don’t think they’re Jewish. I heard Huang Lu, the actress is coming. Those white power types don’t like Asians either.”

“All the minorities you can eat,” Pratt noted sourly. “I don’t suppose the organizers will step up with a list of names.”

The Telluride lineup was always kept secret until opening day, a policy that burned those tasked with ensuring security for the celebrities who showed up. Jude wished she could be there to see the startled faces of the nerds who ran the festival when the FBI came calling. Their precious cultural event under siege by morons who’d never watched a movie with subtitles—oh, the horror.

She said, “I’m sure the FBI will secure their full cooperation. If not, they’ll be arrested.”

When the cheers and hoots died down, Tulley waved his hand. “There’s a film.” His speech danced up into the decibels Jude recognized as his anxious range. “*My Enemy’s Enemy*. If it’s on the program, the terrorists might want to target that screening.”

“Why? Does it make fun of Hitler?” Jude asked.

“No, it’s about Klaus Barbie.” At the generally blank stares, Tulley explained, “He was a real Nazi who ended up working for the CIA. They protected him.”

“Until he outlived his use-by date,” Jude noted.

Barbie was routinely held up by counterintelligence boffins as an example of the moral dilemmas their community faced. Yes, he was a sadist sentenced to death for war crimes, but the “Butcher of Lyon,” as he was colorfully known, wasn’t the only Gestapo officer recruited by the West after World War II. Worried about the emerging threat of communism, the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps had helped numerous high-ranking Nazis escape via their infamous rat line. These grateful former enemies became CIA assets in Latin America. Evidently this unsavory fact was what the Barbie film was about.

“Why would these skinhead creeps care if one of their heroes is starring in a movie?” Pratt asked with a puzzled frown.

Good question. “What do you know about this film?” Jude asked Tulley. “Was it made by a Jewish director or something?”

“No. Kevin Macdonald. That’s the guy who did *The Last King of Scotland*.”

“Then what makes you think it could be a target?”

Jude would have expected opposition to an exposé movie about Barbie and the CIA to come from more illustrious quarters than the neo-Nazi movement. The Bush family would keep their distance for obvious reasons, but there were others who wouldn’t welcome a spotlight on their roles. Lt. Governor David Dewhurst of Texas sprang to mind, but Jude had a hard time believing Dewhurst would be stupid enough to involve himself with amateurs like the ASS just to stop a movie being aired. The lieutenant governor had political ambitions and a carefully constructed public image to maintain. Besides, much bigger fish than he were responsible for the sleazy bloodbath that was Latin America under the military dictatorships of Operation Condor. The same official silence that protected them also provided cover for Dewhurst.

“I think it’s a target because every Jew at the festival will go see it,” Tulley said with a trace of embarrassment. He glanced at Jude as if he knew she was expecting a more Machiavellian rationale.

She almost laughed. Sometimes her job and her training made her overlook the obvious in favor of darker explanations. But very few felons were Mensa candidates. Most often their crimes and motivations were banal. The seven deadly sins pretty much covered all the bases. In this case her deputy had flagged those most often connected to hate crimes: wrath and envy.

“Good thinking, Tulley,” she said. “I’ll inform the FBI and they can check with the organizers to see if that film is on the program. Meantime, people, our job is to coordinate and assemble everything we know about this event. Venues. Access. Catering. Accommodations. You name it.”

She glanced around the faces, reading a mix of excitement and stunned dismay. Apparently it was just sinking in that she wasn’t kidding and the Four Corners really was at the epicenter of a domestic terrorism plot.

An officer new to the area suggested, “Maybe we could set up checkpoints. Pretend it’s for drug prevention or something.”

“Telluride PD tried that a few years ago,” Sheriff Pratt said.

“Camouflaged officers along the road. Signs saying Narcotics Checkpoint and so forth. There was a lawsuit.”

“Which we won,” a San Miguel undersheriff pointed out. “We conducted the operation during the bluegrass festival. You should have seen what those bozos threw out their car windows. It was the littering that gave us probable cause to stop the vehicles.”

Pratt shuffled his feet and looked at his wristwatch. “Problem was, you guys couldn’t make anything stick. What it all boils down to is we can’t make random checks. Although that might be different in this scenario. Devine, I take it the new Homeland Security regulations will apply.”

“We’ll know on Monday,” Jude said. “In an antiterrorism operation, federal agents have extremely broad powers but state and local law enforcement still have to work within constraints. The FBI will explain everything. In the meantime, we have an intelligence-gathering operation to conduct. When the feds step in, we want to own a piece of the pie.”

This sentiment, she knew, would strike a chord. If a plot to kill a bunch of celebrities was foiled, no one would want the FBI grabbing all the glory. She signaled Pratt, who rose and wrapped up the presentation, pointing out which undersheriffs would be in charge of leading teams from the various counties.

As soon as everyone filed out of the room, he dragged Jude aside. “How come I have to hear about this in a briefing?”

“Because I was only just told myself, and we have to move quickly.”

“Are you sure Harrison Hawke’s not in on this?”

“No, but don’t worry, I’ll find out.”

Jude had been avoiding her increasingly ardent suitor for most of the summer, trying to cool things down. She’d broken her ankle in May, so she had a good excuse. But her ankle was back to normal now, and she could not longer avoid visiting Hawke’s little corner of the Aryan nation.