

The

sacred

PIZZA BOX

List

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Prologue

Sunday 17th August 1969

The woman sat on the cold wooden bench, leaning back against the mint-green wall of the corridor. Fluorescent tubes illuminated the windowless space, their light cutting through the smoke from one of the cigarettes the sheriff had given her. The corridor extended to her left and right, with about a dozen white-painted doors spaced irregularly along both walls and three or four identical benches scattered between them. Only one door captured her interest, however – the one outside which the sheriff had asked her to wait, the one behind which her new friend lay cold and motionless. This door bore a bronze metal sign that read, in bold black lettering, ‘*Mortuary – Room 2.*’

She wore a purple and orange tie-dyed minidress that barely covered her buttocks, leaving the tops of her thighs cold and clammy against the worn, varnished bench. Her legs stuck to the surface as she shifted position, trying to make herself more comfortable. Looking down, she noticed blood and dirt smeared across the front of her dress. Her long blonde hair cascaded down her back, pressed against the wall so that it was hidden. After a while, she pulled it free, moved it to the front, and braided it into a long, loose plait. Although this seemed like a casual, habitual action – something done for vanity – it was, in fact, a nervous response to the distress of her current situation.

The woman had been there for nearly an hour, and no one had spoken to her except the overweight sheriff who had escorted her in and instructed her to sit down. He asked if she smoked, and when she quietly replied with a soft 'yes', he tossed her half a pack of Camels and a box of matches. The sheriff then told her to wait there and headed down the corridor to exit through the main double doors at the far end.

About thirty minutes ago, the sheriff returned to the corridor, accompanied by two men in sharp black suits. The woman immediately recognised them as government agents. Although her home country was England and G-men from the United States did not typically operate there, she had encountered their kind before. Unlike the lazy, despondent approach of the local sheriff, she knew these two would act differently; they would likely be slick and ruthlessly efficient. The woman understood that she should not underestimate them – she needed to exercise caution.

Eventually, the door opened, and the portly sheriff poked his head through the opening.

'Okay, honey ... let's go,' he said, his tone formal yet tired, leaving her with the impression that this particular weekend had given him far more to do than his normally mundane small-town duties – including another accidental death among the many strangers who had flocked there from outside the county.

The woman walked through the door and entered a room adorned with large white porcelain tables, a floor covered in light green ceramics, and walls clad two-thirds of the way up with pale avocado tiles. The room exuded a strong odour of chemicals, old feet, and fish, casting an eerie jade hue as the strip lights reflected off the green surfaces. The two G-men stood against the wall at the foot of the nearest table, which, as anticipated, held a body covered by a green sheet. Behind the table stood a stern, sombre-looking gentleman in a white coat that matched his hair and skin. His horn-rimmed glasses contrasted sharply with the insipid pallor of his complexion. She gazed into his eyes, which were reflected in the fluorescent glare of his glasses; they seemed grey and lifeless – the eyes of a man who had spent most of his life working with death.

Prompted by a nod from the sheriff, the man in white stepped forward and silently pulled back the sheet. The woman moved closer to examine the face of the

body lying before her. Although she knew he was dead – having tragically witnessed the end of his life only a few hours earlier – she still had to stifle a sob as she gazed down at his handsome, though greying, features.

‘Do you recognise this man?’ the sheriff asked.

The woman nodded.

‘Who is it?’

‘Shaun Ryder,’ she replied.

The sheriff glanced at the two agents and then into his pocketbook before asking, ‘Shaun William Ryder?’

‘I only know him as Shaun, but that’s him,’ she answered, her voice finally breaking.

‘Cover him up and mark it down,’ the sheriff instructed the man in white.

It was official.

Shaun Ryder was dead.