

The

sacred

PIZZA BOX
List

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Prologue

Sunday 17th August 1969

The woman sat on the cold wooden bench, leaning her back against the grimy, cream coloured wall of the corridor. Fading fluorescent tubes lit the windowless space, their dying glare struggling to cut through the smoke from the cigarettes the sheriff had given her. The corridor stretched away to her left and right. Six or seven half glazed doors, their shadowed glass dull in the low light, were spaced irregularly along both walls, with three or four identical benches scattered between them. Some doors stood open; others were closed, and the faint clack clack of ageing, abused typewriters drifted out from behind them. But only one door held her attention – the one outside which the sheriff had told her to wait, the one he'd disappeared through about fifteen minutes earlier.

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 seating. As she shifted, her legs stuck to the surface, making any attempt at comfort feel futile. Her long blonde hair cascaded down her back, pressed between her and the wall, hidden from view. After a while, she pulled it free, brought it over her shoulder, and braided it into a long, loose plait. It looked like a casual, habitual gesture – something done for vanity – but it was really a nervous response to the distress of her situation, to everything that had happened only

hours before. As she finished her hair, she looked down at the blood and dirt smeared across the front of her dress – a stark reminder of the morning's trauma.

Being caught here, lost in paperwork and process, miles away from the man she wanted to be with, was unbearable. They had only been separated a short time, yet she already missed him desperately. In truth, she didn't even know if she would ever see him again, and her arduous business with the sheriff was only delaying her finding out.

How she needed him there right now.

When she first arrived, the woman had been escorted to a room tiled two thirds of the way up in pale avocado, rising coldly from a poorly contrasted floor of light green ceramic. The room exuded a strong odour of chemicals, the sour tang of feet and fish, and it glowed with a sickly jade hue as the strip lights bounced off every green surface. A stern, sombre looking gentleman in a white coat – a shade that matched his hair and his skin – asked her questions and talked her kindly through the procedure. His horn rimmed glasses stood out sharply against the insipid pallor of his complexion. She couldn't stop herself from staring into his eyes, reflected in the fluorescent shine on his lenses; they seemed grey and lifeless, the eyes of someone who had spent far too long around death. She answered as best she could, but she felt numb, distant, barely able to hear the man's voice or process what he was asking.

When they'd finished, the overweight sheriff had escorted her out and instructed her to sit and wait in the corridor. She'd been there nearly an hour, barely speaking to anyone. At one point he emerged from his office, asked if she smoked, and when she answered softly that she did, he tossed her half a pack of Camels and a box of matches. Then he headed down the corridor and pushed through the main double doors at the far end.

She'd sat alone, blankly staring at the wall and restlessly working her way through the pack of cigarettes until, after roughly half an hour, the sheriff finally returned with two men in tow. They followed him silently back into his office, the door closing behind them with a muted click. The woman recognised them instantly as government agents – their posture, the haircuts, the matching sharp black suits were unmistakable.

Although G men from the United States did not typically operate in her home country, she had encountered their kind before. Unlike the lazy, despondent approach of the local sheriff, she knew these two would be different – slick, controlled, ruthlessly efficient. She understood she should not underestimate them; she needed to exercise caution.

In the end they didn't speak to her, and eventually the door opened and the portly sheriff poked his head through the gap.

'Okay, honey ... you're free to 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.

Finally, she could make her way back to her man.

The sheriff stepped out into the hallway and looked her up and down, sighing at her dishevelled state. As he walked her out of the building, he said, in a moment of compassion, 'Look, miss ... do you need a ride somewhere?'

She did. She needed to get to the diner as soon as possible to see if he was there. The thought of never seeing him again tugged at her mercilessly. A ride would save her the walk – but for reasons she still didn't fully understand, he needed to avoid the police. He had made that clear.

A ride was a risk she simply couldn't take.

Making a polite excuse, the woman left the tired stone building, aiming to put as much distance between her and the sheriff as possible. The morning was bright – hopeful – but the air she breathed was fresh yet humid, something tight and oppressive lingering beneath it, the promise of a storm.

Without looking back, she set off walking toward the diner.