

Checkmate, Death

"How long has she been dead?"

"A couple days," Mike explained. "The sheriff was looking into foul play, but it turned out to be just a car accident. Shame. She doesn't look bad, all things considered."

"As car accident victims go, if they aren't flat, it's a miracle," John smirked, trying to lighten the mood. Though he couldn't help but agree with him. She was sixteen according to her records, much younger than the type John normally prepared in the small town. One thing that caught John's attention was the calm serenity in her expression. If she had suffered, it had been short. He checked the toe tag and recognized the name.

"Ah, shit," John shook his head. "My son knew her. They went to school together...well liked and smart, too. Perry was their chess champion. She brought back the trophy and everything. First time I've ever seen a school throw a pep rally for a chess player."

"Poor kid," Mike shook his head. "Run of bad luck."

"What's the service the family is calling for?" John asked, pulling the cloth back over her face while he signed for the body.

"They want to bury her," Mike said, filling out the last of the paperwork. "No viewings, no fuss...just a stone to mark where she is in the cemetery. They've grieved plenty already."

"Their choice," John said, handing back the paperwork. "Thanks, Mike. Have a good weekend."

Mike only grunted in reply and exited back into his truck. John pushed the gurney down the hallway. He'd wheel her into the freezer until Monday. The paperwork said she wasn't going to the cemetery until Wednesday. She could last a couple more days in the freezer.

"Too late to start tonight," John said to himself, checking his watch. "Might as well not do the job if I'm not gonna finish."

John started humming and singing to himself. He stopped the cart in the middle of the room and sat at his desk to fill out the paperwork before closing her in the fridge. John stopped halfway through an incorrect verse of a Beatles song and stared at the body for a minute. He could have sworn the sheet moved. It was a slow wave that passed through the cloth, bulging from where her mouth would be. It was almost like she was...breathing.

The corpse bolted upright and tore the sheet off her face. Perry sucked in a deep breath of air and gasped for air. She turned to the side and gagged before vomiting all over the floor. She looked over at John and wheezed a little. "Where am I?"

John looked at the young woman, trying to form words. Stammering, he fell backward and landed on the tile with a loud *THUD* with his eyes firmly shut. His stomach still moved, but he didn't respond to any of Perry's attempts to rouse him with her soft voice. She slid off the metal gurney prodded the unconscious man with her foot, but left him alone when he didn't respond.

Perry wrapped herself in the sheet for her own modesty, though the morgue only held dead bodies and a passed out mortician. Perry walked over to the reflective surface of the fridge and looked at her reflection. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but she

thought she'd look different. She felt stiff and it was hard for her to focus. Her face was marked up by little cuts, but she couldn't recall where she'd gotten them. She felt sore. It was as if she'd fallen on her side. Perry pulled back the sheet and saw a massive bruise that was slowly returning to normal color and the memories all came running back.

"The car," Perry whispered, feeling the impact from when it struck her. "The road...the darkness and—" She turned around quickly and looked down at her toe. She lifted her foot up and yanked the slip of paper off. Her hand trembled as she read the tag.

NAME OF DECEASED: PERRY WILSON

AGE: 16

CAUSE OF DEATH: —

Perry couldn't read any more of the small tag, throwing it as far as she could. After a few minutes of frantic breathing, Perry ran a hand through her hair. She pushed up against the reflective wall and slid down the smooth, cold surface.

"Just relax," she whispered, trying to talk to herself. "This is all just a bad dream or a drug trip. You...you just—"

Perry suddenly burst into tears as the revelation hit her. She had been dead. She'd seen the other side. There was a wager over a game of chess. She had nothing to lose, but somehow she'd won. Now she was back. She'd seen the other side of the dark and--

Perry turned to the side and threw up again. She was suddenly very aware of the ache in her stomach. She stood and went over to the mortician's desk, hoping to get some answers there. It was Friday according to the desk calendar. The paperwork on the desk indicated she'd been hit on Tuesday. So Perry was probably hungry. She pulled a

mortician's jacket off the wall, tying it tight around her waist with the mortician's belt. Drifting around a little, Perry found an area marked break room.

Perry opened the fridge and was relieved to find it full of plastic containers stuffed with food. With the primal drive to fill her stomach, Perry grabbed a piece of pizza from a cardboard box and started tearing it apart with her teeth. Before the pizza slice was halfway finished, Perry opened a large bottle of water and drank half of it, only pausing for a breath between greedy gulps. She grabbed a large container of pasta with meat sauce and tossed the lid into the sink. She heated the entire container of pasta in the microwave and sat at the table, eating a second slice of pizza while she waited.

Wiping her hands on a paper towel, Perry noticed her fingers still felt stiff. *How long does it take rigor mortis to wear off?* Perry wondered, but realized the case probably didn't happen often enough for good documentation.

As the microwave buzzed, Perry tried to think about her next steps. She had somehow won her wager in the chess game. What happened now was something she hadn't planned on. She considered going to her parents but thought they might just panic in the end. If she were dead, they wouldn't take the news very well. Her little sister would take it worse. She ran through her friends and tried to think of who could help her.

"What about Abby?" Perry thought aloud. "No, she'd just scream. Leslie might help...no, she'd be practical. She'd want to solve it practically and then nothing would get done."

Perry thought for a little bit. Her usual group of friends wouldn't be of much help in the end. The timer on the microwave went off and Perry opened the door. She grabbed a handful of the steaming pasta and unceremoniously shoveled the food into her mouth.

She was a little relieved when she felt the sting of the hot noodles on her fingertips. Still chewing, Perry went over to the drawers and found a fork. She put another mound of pasta in her mouth and the ache in her stomach lessened. Still, Perry felt a hint of guilt at eating some poor worker's lunch. She wiped her face on the back of her hand.

"Clothes." Perry sighed. "I need clothes."

Standing, Perry made her way through the morgue. Perry wasn't sure if morticians had some kind of locker room to change or if they only changed into a lab coat.

*Strange the things you think about after you've been dead*, Perry wondered running her finger down the seam of the lab coat.

Perry wandered around a little before she eventually found a gym bag in the mortician's office. The clothes weren't her first choice, but it gave her something beyond the white lab coat. *I wouldn't be caught dead in these if I weren't desperate*. Perry chuckled to herself as she rummaged through the bag. *Well, no, I suppose I would be caught dead in these now*.

The sweatpants she found were too wide around her hips and she was nearly swimming in the t-shirt, but it was better than nothing. Perry put the running shoes on, knotting the laces around her ankle in an effort to keep them on. She grimaced a little and touched her side, wondering if the wound would ever really heal.

Standing, Perry put the lab coat back on. It looked out of place, but she knew that she would want as many layers as possible in the cold night. With no idea where she was going, Perry knew her first priority would be keeping herself as warm as she could. She

left a note, apologizing to the mortician, and headed to the nearest door. Taking a deep breath into her aching lungs, Perry turned the handle and stepped out into the night.