

It was getting close to noon and we still had about half an hour to get to our destination. Some town called Hudson out in the middle of Wyoming. There's really no reason for me or my brother Lucas to be away from our home in San Diego. But we were getting four grand for this job out in Wyoming, so it'd be worth the three days' drive. Dad taught us everything he could about our business and it's a pretty lucrative living once you get it down right. Lucas was pretty clever in getting clients for us. He likes to think it's his hair and his toned skin that make him more attractive to prospective customers. Lucas is the brains behind the operation and he always does the talking. He knows what to say and he knows how to talk his way out of trouble. And it does help that he has good looks. I'm the brawn. Once Lucas softens up the customer, I take care of the dirty work.

I looked at Lucas who was driving our van. His face was peppered black with stubble. He hadn't shaved since we left San Diego, otherwise he's clean shaven. I prefer to keep a moustache. His skin was lighter than mine, but he was just as much a Mexican as I was. He looked more like a model in a men's clothing ad. I looked more like the tailor that would be selling suits that Lucas was modeling in.

The road seemed to never end. The colors of the landscape never seemed to change. It was the white sunshine on the grey and brown. I was trying not to fall asleep. I looked at my brother, but I couldn't read his state of mind through his sunglasses.

"How long we got till we get there?" I asked Lucas.

"The sign said 20 miles till Lander. Then it's another ten miles to Hudson, I think," he said.

"Uh huh. How long you think this job's gonna take?" I asked.

"Couple hours maybe. How long you think you need?"

“Half an hour to setup. I just don’t want to do this gig too slowly. I’ve never done this trick before on anyone besides you.”

“Don’t be so nervous, Matthew,” Lucas said. “You’ve done shit like this plenty of times. I do the talking because I know what to say, and you do the acting because you know how to get things done right.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

We rode the rest of the trip in silence. I spent the ride going over all of the motions in my head. When we reached Lander we found a place to eat. We looked about as subtle as a dropped piano in our business clothes. Some of the patrons gave my brother and me looks of disapproval. Some of the other men in the restaurant wore tight blue jeans and white t-shirts tucked into their pants; their guts rolled over their belts and looked uncomfortable. Lucas finished eating his steak before I could get halfway through mine. He seemed excited to be all the way out here in Wyoming. I could stomach this place about as well as I could stomach my food. I sat there holding my fork in my hand studying the many red fibers that made up the meat of my steak. I didn’t feel like eating and I was under the weight of the stares of the other patrons. Lucas tossed his napkin onto his empty plate and started to fish in the pocket of his slacks and pulled out a dinged up Tracfone. He searched for a phone number under his contact list. He found the number and pressed the send key. After a few rings, I could hear a muffled “hello” come from the ear piece.

“Hello, Mrs. Clayton? Yes, this is Fernando. Yes, we’ve found the motel you talked about in your directions. Yes, we’re fine. Is your husband feeling all right? Uh huh. Uh huh. Good. Yes, yes, we’ll be there soon. Yes, Mrs. Clayton, we’ll see you at five.” When he hung up

the phone, our waitress approached the table asking if we were interested in dessert. I stared at my half-eaten meal, but Lucas was ready for some apple pie. The waitress' blonde hair was made up into a style I've never really seen before. It was like an A-line haircut, but the back was raised high. It looked like she was trying to hide a deformed skull. She also had that kind of lip gloss on that was shiny enough to signal airplanes. When she was walking toward the kitchen, Lucas nudged me with his elbow a couple of times and winked.

"I'm going to go make sure everything we need is in order," I said to Lucas.

"Okay," he said. "See if you can't see a grocery store from here. We need to pick up a few things before we go to Hudson."

I walked to the parking lot and unlocked the back door of the van. When I climbed inside, I started looking over all of our equipment. In the back of the van was a box with a glass bowl, cotton balls, a package of round sponges, a smaller glass bowl, a roll of red biohazard bags, a box of blue surgical gloves, and a container of stage blood. Next to it was a folded up hospital bed and mattress and the white bed sheets and pillow that went with it. Beneath all that was a metal folding table. Our luggage sat on top of the back seats that we folded down to make room. On top of my things was a garment bag for my suit. I opened it and my lab coat was inside. After making sure everything was still in place, I stepped out of the van and scanned the landscape. I could see a sign for Safeway sticking out from the other buildings. When I went back inside, Lucas had already eaten his dessert.

"Ah, Matthew, you should have had the pie. It was so good," he said.

"I'm not very hungry right now."

He put his arm around me and said, "You shouldn't worry too much. Everything will go just as we planned it. Here, I'll buy some chocolate ice cream. It's your favorite."

I ate it slowly. I managed to fight my anxiety for long enough to finish one scoop, but it was too much. My mind was on the job. It's not often that we have to go out of state for a job. I don't like working so far away from home. But there's one good thing about being all the way out here in Wyoming: no one here knows us.

It's perfect for our line of work.

When Lucas and I finally left the restaurant, I noticed that the sun was lower in the sky. I pointed out the Safeway and Lucas drove. He talked about the waitress the whole way. Lucas went into the store to get what we needed while I stayed with the van and got out my lab coat and put it on. I also grabbed the box with the stage blood and put it in my pocket. When he came back to the van, he tossed a sack of items onto my lap and started the engine. As we drove through town, I wriggled my way into the back of the van and started preparing the last of our things. Inside the Safeway bag were some boneless chicken and a box of sandwich bags. I opened the box to test the plastic. The plastic bags didn't have a Ziploc seal on them and were very thin. When I rubbed the plastic on my fingertips, they made very little sound. I opened the container of chicken and ripped a few pieces off the breast and put it in the bag. I wormed my way back into the passenger's seat.

"Is it the right kind of plastic?" my brother asked.

"Yeah, this will do. It tears very quietly."

I pulled out the container of stage blood from my coat pocket and held onto it until Lucas had driven onto a smooth stretch of the highway. Very carefully, I poured a little bit of the stage blood into the bag with meat into it and tied the loose end. I turned it upside down to see if any of the contents would leak out. It was sealed nice and tight.

I paid little attention to the scenery during the short drive to Hudson. After a few swings around the town, we found our client's address. It was a small house that was painted white. The lawn was overgrown. We got out of the van and Lucas knocked on the dark grey screen door. A short woman could be seen walking to the door through the screen.

"Mrs. Clayton?" my brother asked.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Clayton. You must be Fernando. Please, come inside," the woman said. We stepped into the living room. Facing the door was a big, flat screen television on top of a glass table with black metal legs. There were two grey-blue recliners against one wall. A couch with bright yellow floral decorations was on the other wall. Family pictures hung above the couch. The whole living room was adorned with crosses and pictures of Jesus and one of an old man at his dinner table praying with his hands held together. The living room smelled like cigarettes.

Mrs. Clayton was short and blonde haired. I never did get a good look at her face. She wore a red t-shirt with a high school logo on it and it had the names of different sponsors on the back. It was tucked into her blue jean shorts. She walked around her house barefoot. I didn't notice that she had left. I had been mesmerized by the tackiness of her home décor.

"Steven? Steven?" she kept calling. Mrs. Clayton came back inside and a tall man slowly walked in from the kitchen. He eased himself down into his recliner. His wife took the other chair. Lucas and I sat down on the couch. She said, "Steven, these are the gentlemen I told you about. They're here to help you."

"Uh huh," he said. He pulled out a lighter from the pocket of his white shirt and lit a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros that were in his hand. He exhaled the drag he took and said "You're the boys my wife hired, huh? What is it that you told her you do?"

Lucas said, “My brother here has a remarkable talent that can cure you of your stomach cancer, Mr. Clayton.”

“And what might that be...Mister...”

“Fernando. Just call me Fernando. My brother Pedro can pull the tumors in your stomach from your body without any need of tools. He is a prolific psychic surgeon in São Paulo. He has cured many patients with illnesses like yours.”

Mr. Clayton’s jaw hung loose, his cigarette barely being held up by his lip. I almost wanted to reach over and push his mouth shut for him.

“You...what?” Mr. Clayton said.

“That’s right. My brother Pedro here is a psychic surgeon. He will be able to do what your physicians have not been able to do here today.”

“You can’t fucking be serious.” Mr. Clayton turned to his wife and then looked back at me. He leaned to his wife and said “Are you out of your god damned mind, Virginia? What the hell are these cooks asking for?”

Mrs. Clayton’s looked at me and then back at her husband. “Less than what that doctor is charging us in Casper. You know all he’s doing is ripping us off and we can’t afford him anymore since you lost your insurance with Stallion.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Clayton,” my brother said, “My brother is very good at what he does. I guarantee that he will cure you of your cancer. You have my word.”

Mr. Clayton looked at me. He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and blew his smoke at me. “And what about you? What’s this thing that you do?”

“I’m sorry, but my brother Pedro does not speak English,” Lucas said. This was usually the routine that we would use with our clients. Whenever we told a client that we were from

outside the country, I was always the one who couldn't speak English. It was meant to remind me to keep quiet. Mrs. Clayton argued with her husband some more over our procedure.

Whatever pain he was feeling in his stomach once his cigarette was finished made him lose his argument. I found myself lost in the tacky decorations again. I just wanted to get this job over with and get the hell out of here. Even the pictures of Jesus made him look like he had something better to do.

My brother spoke to me in what little Portuguese he remembered from a language and grammar book he read when we were staying in Utah. I don't know what he was actually saying, but all it meant to me was my cue to go retrieve my things from the van. We went to the van and unloaded all of our equipment. When we unfolded the hospital bed and set it up with its mattress and sheets and unfolded the metal table, I went into the kitchen with the box of materials I had inspected at the diner. Lucas stayed in the living room with our clients to keep them busy. First, I put some of the cotton balls into the bowl and then the bag with the chicken parts and blood on top. I then concealed it with more cotton balls and made the pile tall enough that I could remove a few of the cotton balls without revealing the bag inside. I filled the larger bowl halfway with water.

"Now, Mr. Clayton. In order for my brother to work at his full potential, I need you to always be facing upward to Heaven and to God. Please do not let go of your gaze up to Heaven until Pedro has finished." I grinned when I heard Lucas say that. It made us sound like men of God. Mom and Dad gave us names out of the Bible, but we never went to church. The grin was a little bit refreshing, and it reminded me of the things Dad used to say. Everything would turn out fine so long as we were prepared for the job. Lucas had put in a few advertisements inside some of the tabloids. They have ads for all kinds of stupid things. Ads for astrologers, palm readers,

and psychics who can talk to the dead. Our ad had a picture of a friend of ours in a lab coat, smiling. We were offering alternative medicines and techniques for curing terminal illnesses.

When I was finished, I carried my materials into the living room and put them onto the table. The day was turning to dusk. I noticed that the front door was shut and the blinds were closed, making the room darker. The room was now a pool of dark blue and grey light. There was still enough for me to see what I was doing. Lucas asked Mr. Clayton to lie down on the bed. He made it on slowly with the help of his wife. He was sweating from the pain in his stomach. I rolled up his shirt so that his stomach would be exposed. He was a little overweight and his skin was very pale underneath. The source of light was coming from the direction I was facing, through the window. His skin was easily visible, but my brother and Mrs. Clayton did not appear to me to be very detailed in the light. I rolled up my sleeves, put on a pair of surgical gloves, and took a handful of cotton balls from their bowl. I gripped them in such a way that I could also conceal the plastic bag underneath my palm of my right hand. I wiped with a cotton ball on the skin of his gut to wipe off any sweat or oils that would be on his skin. When I finished, I dropped the remaining cotton balls into their bowl, but I still held the plastic bag in my palm. I raised my hands to the same level as my head, both of them had four fingers up and my thumbs resting on my palms. I took in a deep breath and put my hand with the plastic bag onto my client's stomach. I made sure to be careful not to let Mr. Clayton feel the plastic bag. My wrist was turned and my palm would have been facing away from him. It felt uncomfortable, but I had to do everything I could to keep him from noticing the bag.

Slowly, I inserted my middle and index fingers of my left hand underneath my right hand. My fingers searched for the plastic bag and I applied pressure onto Mr. Clayton's stomach. I just needed enough to hold down the bag so I could rip it open. I tugged on the bag carefully.

The plastic of the bag is weak, but I didn't want to struggle with it. I varied my pressure on Mr. Clayton's stomach while I tried to rip the plastic. I breached the plastic and the stage blood began to pour out. I could hear the tear, but Mr. Clayton was in such pain that he didn't seem to notice. I raised my hand just a little so more could pour out in sight of Mrs. Clayton. She put her hand over her mouth and started crying. I could hear her concealed whimpers from her hand.

I proceeded to press sharply into Mr. Clayton's abdomen. He moaned in pain. While he made noises, I started removing the chicken parts from the bag. They were long and stringy. Mrs. Clayton cried while she watched me pull pieces of poultry that she thought were the tumors within her husband's stomach. She was tightly gripping Lucas' hand. He had his arm around her. I removed more of the meat from the bag from underneath my hand and placed it into the bowl of water. The water assimilated the stage blood's red color.

I removed my right hand from Mr. Clayton's skin and started to clean up the mess I had made with my sponge. Stage blood had dripped onto the bed sheets on the mattress. Lucas arose and opened one of the biohazard bags so that I could put the chicken meat inside. I removed my gloves and placed them inside and the sponge too. Mr. Clayton got off of the table and stood up. His wife had paper towels to wipe off the remaining stage blood from his skin. She put them in the biohazard bag and Lucas sealed the bag tightly. I took the bowl of water and dumped it outside on the grass.

For the next hour, Mr. Clayton sat in his recliner holding onto his gut in agony. I was disassembling the hospital bed and the table to put back into the van. When I had finished, Mr. Clayton was looking more comfortable.

"How do you feel now, Mr. Clayton?" Lucas asked.

“Much better,” he said. Of course he does. When he was more relaxed, Mrs. Clayton showed Lucas and me the door. We went outside with her and she followed us to our van. She was carrying her purse with her.

“Thank you so much for helping my husband,” she said. Her eyes began to water again.

“It was our pleasure to help you in your time of need,” Lucas said. Mrs. Clayton opened her purse and took out a wad of hundred dollar bills from inside. Lucas counted the money, and it added up to four grand.

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Clayton.”

We drove out of town and into the night. The sun had descended beneath the horizon, but the blue sky had not quite faded away. I watched as the stars started to show themselves from the daylight. Our next stop was in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Then after that was one more job in northern Arizona. Each stop would take us closer to San Diego, and I was ready to go home.