



BLOOD STAINS & BALLGOWNS

MY LIFE AS A CRIME SCENE CLEANER

DONNA NAYLER

BLOODSTAINS AND BALL GOWNS: LIFE AS A CRIME SCENE CLEANER

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Dedication

The dedication of this book is split many ways.

To Mum and Dad

To Lisa

To Rob, Jerry and Kyle

To Ocean and InHouse Publishing

To Jade and Mark

To Lynn

To all those who I met along the way behind the blue and white
chequered tape.

Most importantly those who lives were lost and reborn in the
pages, and to all of you who have listened to me, inspired me and
believed in me.

Thank you

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Crime Scene Cleaner

Everybody has a story. This is mine. What makes me think my story is worth telling?

I speak for the dead, and for what the dead have left behind.

When we are young, our teachers and parents ask the age-old question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

‘Crime scene cleaner’ isn’t the usual answer.

I grew up amid the sparkling lights of Australia’s Gold Coast, and my friends were all in sales or hairdressing, girls stuck in girly jobs. A bit of a rebel, I skipped school regularly until I convinced my parents I had made my decision in life. I was going to live in society and earn a wage rather than attend my final year of schooling.

My euphoric rush of instant adulthood was short lived. I was told to get a job and get used to the real world.

I’m still trying to get used to the real world.

I began hairdressing at seventeen, but by the age of twenty-five, I was tired of pretending I cared about what was going on in my clients’ lives, tired of their first-world problems. Venting to the unlucky hairdresser must be cheaper than going to a shrink.

I’d always been intrigued and fascinated by death services, eager to delve into the darkness, while at the same time it freaked

me out. I've always believed in the supernatural and wondered what happens after your heart stops ticking.

What is left in the silent moments after the grim reaper has come and gone?

It was finally the TV show 'Crime Investigation' that triggered me to look into the industry that so fascinated me. My dad was behind my questionable idea to clean crime scenes, and so my journey began. If there is one thing I am grateful for, it is my parents' unwavering love and support.

I researched extensively, but it was a tight-lipped industry. Only a handful of companies offered this service, and most of them were regular house cleaners who did it on the side to earn a few extra dollars. And I was to learn that it did pay extremely well. It was like a secret society.

This didn't deter me. My parents remained supportive. My friends told me to go for it, although I could tell they thought I was mad.

Life is for the living, even if it requires mopping up the dead.

I only wanted to learn from the best, and so it was that I came across Australia's biggest company. I was around at my friend's house drinking tea and working up the courage to call. If they say no, I'll cry, I thought. I called the number and started talking at a hundred miles an hour. They were based in Cairns although they worked Australia-wide. As fate would have it, they were in Surfers Paradise cleaning up a drug lab the police had found in one of the hotels.

They invited me up for an interview within the hour.

"This is it!" I screamed.

Wearing my friend's dress, stockings and heels, all black of course, I jumped in my car and flew up the highway to the unknown.

Walking into the foyer of the well-known Gold Coast hotel, my heels clacking on the polished floor, I looked over at reception

to see a man standing at the counter wearing a black-and-white checked shirt. He was deep in conversation with the concierge. I waited for them to finish talking and then politely asked the man if he was the person I had come to see.

He was a gentle looking man of strong build, with dark hair and a friendly smile. Containing my excitement and sheer terror, I shook the hand he offered in greeting as he smiled and introduced himself.

“Let’s go up.” He gestured to follow him to the lift.

As we were alone in the lift, he told me that the drug lab was on the same floor as they were staying. The lab had been discovered because the housemaid had passed out from the chemical haze in the air. Everyone from the floor had been evacuated.

“Did the guests ask why?” I asked, my mouth so dry I could barely get the words out.

“Their rooms were all upgraded,” he said, “so no one complained.”

This is so exciting, I thought, although I simply smiled and nodded.

We went up to a floor that I can’t tell you, in a hotel I can’t name. I can’t tell anyone. I am sworn to secrecy about all the places I visit in the course of my work. Names and addresses are not public knowledge, unless the media get their hands on the story, that is.

The lift doors opened and we turned right down the corridor.

A door at the end of the corridor was open. Bob told me it was the room they were staying in.

We approached the drug lab room and I saw that it was dark inside. Sheets covered the windows, allowing neither the light nor the outside world in. I looked around and said nothing for a few moments, taking it all in. It was bare; no carpets, no bed, no furniture. It didn’t look like a hotel room at all. He explained that all the contents of the room

were contaminated and had been removed. They were very lucky, he said, that the air conditioning was contained to each room and not ducted. Otherwise, the entire hotel would have had to be evacuated. I had heard of drug labs being found in hotel rooms before but I'd never realised the damage they caused.

"It's safe now," he said, "but we've been here a week already. We're almost finished."

We continued down the corridor to the end room and went inside. This room was furnished normally. I sat down and at that moment, another man came through the door. He looked worn out from the day's work, but still had an air of energy and excitement about him. He was slightly taller, with sandy hair. He smiled at me, introduced himself and threw himself down on the lounge, kicking his feet in the air. I was sitting at a small round table with two chairs on either side. There was paperwork covering the tabletop and I was trying hard not to read it. The two men were very welcoming and they talked about the operation, asking me for my thoughts from time to time. They seemed impressed with me, even though I am a five-foot-nothing blonde hairdresser. I had the magic inside me, the drive. That fire in my belly pushed me in the right direction.

I felt like part of the team already, a secret society. I knew what no one else outside of this room did.

The drug cooks had taken off when the housemaid had collapsed, but the police knew they would eventually be lulled into complacency and return to collect the two-hundred-dollar bond from the hotel. Five unmarked police cars waited outside for their return.

The interview wound down after about an hour, and I'll never forget when they said, "Pack your bags and wait for a call." It was hard not to jump over the table in excitement.

The true events in this book tell the story about what can go horribly wrong in life, love and behind the chequered police tape.

We All Love a Bad Boy

I never thought the day would come.
“Want to come see another drug lab?” Bob said down the phone.

Without hesitation, I took the first flight out of the Gold Coast and headed to Rockhampton.

I was nervous, excited and scared all at the same time.

I had no idea what I would have to do or what I would see.
Would I be able to handle it?

I pictured it to be like a scene out of the movie ‘Wonderland’.
Drug-hazed rooms with holes in the walls and bodies that had been beaten to death, lying naked on the beds.

How wrong I was.

I arrived in Rockhampton late in the afternoon, on a hot, humid day. We were staying at a motel beside the highway. Our view was of dried grass and withered trees. The noise of trucks booming by went right through me. The motel owner showed me to my room. Standing in the corner was a toolbox on wheels, bigger than my suitcase, half the size of me in fact. I unpacked and went out the front to see the rest of the team. My new boss beamed at me, asking if I had seen my present. I nodded shyly.

“Come on, I’ll show you all your gear,” he said, walking into my room and wheeling the toolbox over.

I was in awe of the number of drawers filled with the unusual things I would need. It was the best gift I could ever have dreamed of. I am ready to become a crime scene cleaner, I thought.

The next morning, wearing my new uniform – white singlet with professional black-and-navy-blue button-up shirt with the company name across the back, and hat to match, I looked the part. It felt like my first day at school and I couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

It wouldn't be long before that grin was gone, although the fire would always burn inside me.

On the car ride to the site, it hit me; this was the first day of my secret life. Only two workers normally attended a job and I felt privileged to be allowed to come along for the ride. They laughed and joked and helped me feel at ease and to look forward to my day ahead, even though I might have felt nervous because I was on trial.

During the ride, they filled me in on what I would be facing at the end of the gravel road and what the 'stage one' clean-up had entailed. They had started the job a week before and were waiting for the payee to confirm commencement of 'stage two', which was where I came in.

They told me that the owner of the house, a known member of a notorious outlawed motorcycle gang, had been on the run since the police had found his drug lab and extensive gun collection inside the property, although later, we were told by the police he was away working in the mines. I was confused as to how someone could be caught with guns and a drug lab and not be incarcerated instantly. The only reason he had been caught was because he had missed his repayments on the property for some months, therefore forfeiting it to the bank, who upon changing the locks and entering were shocked at what they found inside.

Gases produced by the cooking of chemicals that make up illegal party drugs will knock you out as effectively as being in the ring with Mohammed Ali.

When the crime scene clean-up team had turned up the first time to inspect the property, the police had been there to escort them, because a sawn-off shotgun was reportedly missing. It was a concern that they had known about the shotgun in the first place and taken no action. When the police left and my two colleagues were left alone, the fugitive had come running from the bushes, screaming and yelling at them. My co-worker, who is an amazing man, stood up to him and calmed him down. He explained what they were doing there and that they had nothing to do with the investigation process, just the clean-up to ensure the safety of the child and those around him, including himself. My co-worker was the most dedicated and enthusiastic person I have ever known and to this day, I still love him.

The man calmed down and left, albeit temporarily. The police weren't far away and he was a wanted man. He wasn't stupid.

The bank had changed the locks to stop the owner getting inside. Touché to the bikie, in the middle of the night he changed the locks again and barricaded himself inside with the sawn-off shotgun. Nobody dared demand to be let in. During the day, he disappeared again. The team needed to get rid of his belongings, including a Dodge Viper and a custom designed Harley Davidson in the garage attached to the house, to prevent him from coming back.

I'll admit I was nervous, yet what normal nine-to-five worker gets this much excitement in an office? Secretly, I was very excited about the experiences to come. Every girl loves a bad boy, a leather jacket and a motorcycle. Think Marlon Brando, Grease and The Fonz. However, bad in the days of these icons wasn't the same as

what bad is now. When bad becomes ugly, that's a turn-off, and bad becomes ugly when a guy is a drug cook who sticks needles in his arms to get high and wonders why he is shunned by society. He thinks he is above the law.

We drove down the pebble-stone driveway leading to a shed behind a brick house in matching tones. It was a barn style shed standing alone in an open field with overgrown grass, and the shed was sealed off with the familiar blue and white chequered police tape. A rusty chicken wire fence encircled the property.

Leaving the vehicle, I followed my colleagues to the front door so they could unload the car and begin setting up the equipment. With my new toolbox in tow, I entered the home. It looked to be only a couple of years old, with large bedrooms off each side of the long corridor.

It was hard labour, with every square inch of the house having to be washed clean. If we missed any part, it would cost my boss thousands of dollars to have the site retested. Unlike blood or brain, the drug residue was invisible. The work was tedious at times, but I had to be focused. My career depended on it.

My excitement rose when I found shotgun pellets, .22-calibre rounds, along with parts of the meth lab and multiple syringes. In his bedroom alone, there were a hundred and sixty unprotected needles. All the carpets in the house and any porous material had already been removed. I learned that paint is a porous substance that holds chemical residue.

The five bedrooms were empty, with bare concrete floors. The house echoed. It was an eerie feeling being in this house that had once been full of life, used as a seedy drug den with endless parties.

In the back shed, a disturbing array of chemicals was displayed on the manmade wooden bench. If the people who took these

substances saw them sitting on a dirty shelf in a biker's shed, they might think twice about what they put into their bodies.

The most sickening part was that one of his girlfriends stayed over regularly. She had a child who always accompanied her whenever she was summoned over for a booty call. My colleagues knew a child had been there from the cot and the toys scattered everywhere. Who knew if the baby had ever crawled over the unprotected needles, or along the carpet saturated in chemicals from the lab set up in the kitchen, or breathed in the fumes swirling in the air from cooking the drugs on the stovetop.

During stage one, my colleagues told me they used to go for a drink at the pub to wind down after work. It was amazing what they found out at the local watering hole. People love to gossip. The topic of conversation in between swigs of beer and slurring of words was the activity surrounding the biker's home. The drunken men would all put their two cents' worth in. They did manage to sort out the truth from the lies.

I enjoyed going to work every day and developed a great friendship with my co-workers. Two days into the job, the work phone rang and I could hear muffled shouting coming through the speaker. My boss's face dropped. The accused had sent someone up for a sticky beak and that person had got our number from our sign-written truck. He was mad that we were back. My stomach dropped the same as if I'd been on a rollercoaster.

He paced back and forth after hanging up. He told us that the biker knew how many of us were at his house, what time we arrived each day, and what time we left.

"I'll break your legs!" he'd said.

Having someone want to break your legs was preferable to what I was about to experience.

Blah blah blah. I wasn't scared. I knew many boys just like him on the Gold Coast. All talk, no go. Their tattoos make them appear tougher than they are. My boss explained again to the biker why we were there, and that we didn't work for the police. The biker was afraid that we would incriminate him more. He was told that we were there to make his house safe again. We had heard from the local pub that his father was buying the house back off the bank. He brought to his attention again about the child's safety and told him he could watch what we were doing if he wanted to. Too far, I thought to myself. By the end of the phone call, he had calmed down. Several more times, he rang back to find out what was happening.

By moving his meth lab into the kitchen, the biker had contaminated all the insulation in the ceiling above, and so to make the house safe, all the insulation had to be removed. These chemicals cause skin irritation, and breathing them in can cause respiratory damage and in severe cases, respiratory failure resulting in death. I was told that if I felt light-headed and my heart started racing, I needed to remove myself from the situation.

The humidity in Rockhampton is at a hundred percent in the middle of summer. I was standing with my colleagues beneath the manhole, the three of us debating who would be the unlucky soul to squeeze up through the manhole into the sweltering heat of the ceiling. I was wearing a white suit toggled tight up under my chin, latex gloves and a full face mask, trying to prepare myself for the thought of going up into the roof for the rest of the day and possibly all the next day. My body was already dripping with sweat from the intense heat inside my suit, and I wasn't even in the double insulated roof yet, where the toxic gases had been sucked through the kitchen exhaust fan and absorbed by the pale yellow, fibrous, itchy insulation.

There was only one way to get insulation out: by hand.

If I was going to prove myself worthy, that moment was now. Being the smallest and the newest, I pulled the short straw. I had never been into a ceiling before. All I kept thinking about were snakes. I hate snakes. They make my skin crawl. Australia has the five most deadly snakes in the world all living in our back yard. The Taipan is without a doubt the most deadly. The Taipan prefers warm climates. The further north you travel, like Rockhampton for example, the more prominent they become. To a cold-blooded reptile, there is no better place than the dark, warm protection of a ceiling.

We were hoping that the roofing was metal sheeting, as cyclones are common in a tropical climate and tiles peel away like the skin of a banana when one hits. That way, we would be able to remove a couple of sheets to allow air and light inside, reducing the fear factor. Unfortunately for me, the roof was tiled and so my journey into the darkness began.

I began peeling the insulation away at the opening of the manhole. It was like stale fairy floss. I kept my feet firmly on the ladder to reassure myself I was still in touch with the outside world. My colleague and I took turns. Once the insulation was removed from the easiest section, we began venturing into the darkness. We had to balance like gymnasts on the crossbeams at diminishing angles as they reached the corners of the house. Then I stopped dead at a long black shape that lay ahead. If I scream, no one will hear me in the mask, I thought. I crept closer, fear engulfing me, but the closer I got, the more the fire in my belly drove me forward. Electrical tape. You've got to be kidding me. A nervous laugh escaped my lips.

This joyous task lasted for three days. Once we had removed all the insulation, we had to spray a sealant along the base, inside

the roof, and across every beam in that dark hole of hell they call a ceiling. No matter how much gore I see in my life, nothing sends a shiver down my spine more than the thought of that dark hole covered in yellow fairy floss.

Once that task was complete, we continued cleaning the rest of the house. The days were long and the work hard, but I loved almost every minute of it.

One day, when we were eating our packed lunches under the veranda, we were greeted by a voice oozing with cockiness. The man was an ex-policeman who owned a crime scene cleaning company in a different state. He displayed faded old tattoos on his upper arms and he smoked like a chimney. He had come to take the final swabs from the house and shed to make sure we had completed the work to expectations. My boss had told me they had never had a call-back. I was hoping I had done them proud. The man was pleasant at first but he then became creepier and creepier towards me, making my skin crawl more than the thought of snakes did. He made crude comments when I stayed close by him, only because I was interested in his work, not in him.

He finished with, “Make sure when you’re down my way you look me up.”

I scrunched my face up in disgust and walked away as he left in a billow of smoke. I told my colleagues in the politest way possible what I thought of him. I was new, but I wasn’t going to put up with that crap. They supported me and even went as far as to look for another avenue to get the place tested. He was the best in town, and they were the best company. They needed him, and I was ok with that. Nothing was going to get in my way.

Our work wound down and I returned home, excited about what lay ahead, and waiting for my phone to ring.

Greed and Gluttony

Two weeks went by and I was itching to get amongst it again. My boss would soon be flying down to give me the necessary training. We were going to set up mock scenarios so that I could learn the techniques. When the phone rang, I jumped up to answer it and listened intently to what he said. My mind started racing. What will I see? Will the body be there? Will there be blood all over the walls?

He picked me up in the truck, and I caught myself smiling nervously in the side mirror as I got in.

We drove to the inner suburbs of Brisbane City, passing old fibro houses that had stood there for decades. We stopped outside one such home. The gates were rusty, with Singapore daisies reaching for the sun, twisting along the suffocated iron bars. Like all the other houses in the street, peeling white paint hung off the wooden panelling nailed to the front of the fibro.

A woman was standing in the driveway that was overgrown with weeds. She was a short Asian lady, skinny, with short dark hair cut into a blunt bob that framed her protruding jawline. She wore pressed white pants and a white Ralph Lauren polo. In contrast to the decay around her, gold dripped from around her neck and sparkled on her fingers.