



THE
DEAD
JANITORS
CLUB

**PATHETICALLY TRUE TALES OF A
CRIME SCENE CLEANUP KING**

a memoir by
Jeff Klima 

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For my boss...

~~He pushed me to write this book~~

Now I bet he's sorry I did.

Also, for Happy.

All of what follows is true, but my apologies if my memory of chronology or events differs slightly from your own. It mostly shouldn't, though, unless you're a liar.

Maybe something good can come out of all this evil?

CHAPTER 1

from wine to spine

Man has to suffer. When he has no real afflictions, he invents some. —José Martí

I walk into the lobby of a shockingly splendid hotel, and the wheel on the cash register in my mind is clicking audibly upward. I anticipate leaving this place a few thousand dollars richer than when I walked in. So many factors are at play here; I am chomping at the bit, trying to discern them all.

French doors gilded with a gold overlay breeze open effortlessly before me, working off unseen sensors and a pneumatic arm. Caucasian employees stare pleasantly at me from behind the counter. From a financial standpoint, this is a good thing.

White people are terrified of death. An overabundance of detachment and safety in our culture has resulted in "whitey" becoming a benign collective of soft-shelled whiners, people who understand pain only in terms of there not being three-ply toilet paper on sale at the supermarket closest to their condo.

Ethnic folks are confronted by death more frequently than white people, and that numbed acceptance of it can mean a lot less money for a guy in my line of work.

I stroll around a polite setup of stain-free and richly upholstered dark couches arranged around a coffee table holding stacks of newspapers from various regions of the world. The smell of breakfast fills the lobby. Whether it's pumped in or they have a café tucked somewhere, it still means that they give a damn about their multisensory first impression, and that is good news for me.

I set my clipboard on the counter and straighten my black polo shirt so that the biohazard symbol is smartly on display.

"Hello, sir. How can I help you?" the attractive, brunette counter girl asks. The orange script practically glows off my chest, screaming out what I do, but her eyes never waver from mine, not once. She's been trained well.

"I'm looking for Gary," I say.

"Right away, sir." She picks up her walkie-talkie, blocking out her mouth, but I can discern the same clipped and effortlessly polite tone with which she addressed me.

I feel good...important...larger than life, and regret not parking beneath the valet awning, right in the middle of the lane, my car torqued at a hard angle to create an impasse, letting everyone know the *Crime Scene Cleaner* is here. It is the sort of dick move that I typically do these days—carefree, powerful me.

What stopped me on this occasion was that my car had the misfortune to be parked the previous night under some sort of avian toilet. A ridiculous amount of white bird shit, speckled with the green remnants of devoured insects, gave my red car a rather polka-dotted appearance.

I pick up my clipboard and step over to the coffee table to scan headlines from the news of the world, hopeful that the *Orange County Register* will scream about mass death and murder in its banner headline. But probably not, because I would have already known about it.

Gary appears from behind me, looking dapper but terribly ethnic, which yanks several thousand dollars off what I was hoping to make the price tag. I curse silently behind a confident and winning smile.

"Hi, Jeff Klima from Orange County Crime Scene Cleaners," I say, extending my hand and speaking first to inform him that I am the alpha male.

"Hi," he says, a bit puzzled, and I suddenly hope I am in the right place.

He introduces himself and looks around ashamed, as if I were a homeless urchin who had obstinately wandered into the ornate lobby and began snacking on the odds and ends in a trash—receptacle.

"I understand you have some sort of scene..." I query further, losing some of my swagger, and I can't help but note how two years on the job suddenly doesn't feel like that much experience at all. Shit, I might as well have acne and a pubescent hard-on, considering the detectable quiver in my voice. It shocks me how quickly my overwhelming shyness can come roaring back to capsize my confidence.

He politely shushes me with one raised hand, vibrating softly, panicked. I understand completely but say, "A suicide, maybe?" a bit loudly, as if I didn't, comfortably reestablishing my authority. The same trembling hand waves me out of the lobby and away from the guests checking in, who can undeniably read my shirt.

We step out into the courtyard, a lush open-air affair, where hotel workers are scrambling to set up for some speaking engagement to take place a little later in the day. None of them make eye contact with me; they've been well trained. We wait in silence for a short eternity, though I'm eager to persist having had to wake up well before noon to ready myself for this gig.

Another man, also ethnic (and more money off the bill), joins us. I don't remember his name, so we'll call him Osama. He is better dressed than Gary, and I clue in to his seniority when Gary quickly moves aside, his eyes slightly downcast. I introduce myself to this man as well, comfortably meeting his gaze through his executive eyeglasses. This guy may be a fearsome boss to the minimum-wage herd working here, but to me he's just another jerk who needs my skills. It further empowers me.

Osama shepherds Gary and myself quickly along manicured stone pathways past doors with placards that refer to the rooms beyond the doors as "suites." This is usually good news for me. This place, in its self-congratulatory way, considers itself a "nicer" establishment. I bet I can get some good money out of them after all.

The elevator is farther away from the lobby than I would like, though, which is a glaring indication that this is an older hotel with fresh polish—not a good sign. It was built when places put less consideration into guest needs, and more into overall aesthetics and intent. Old hotel casinos do this, making guests walk through the main casino floor en route to their rooms, hoping the whirling lights and cheerful pings of jackpots being wheedled out will entice the guests into making a long detour at their expense.

Stepping into the elevator further confirms my suspicions. The elevator, with its glass paneling staring out into the courtyard, has threadbare and nappy carpeting that would be completely *verboten* anywhere near the entrance or lobby. The elevator buttons, once a trickle of elite white circles, have faded to a stale version of their past glory. The elevator buttons run from top to bottom, though, with the higher floors listed at the top, convincing me that the hotel started off as a glitzy, hip place some time ago.

We head for the third floor, the elevator doors closing around us like a tomb. I tap "Another One Bites the Dust" on my clipboard with my fingers as the elevator chugs upward, its pneumatic lift struggling far more than its brothers operating the front doors. Nobody speaks and nobody looks at each other, which is fine with me.

The elevator halts with a lurch, and the doors swing open to reveal a maid's cart jutting obstinately across the pathway, completely oblivious to would-be passersby. The fat cats share a collective acknowledgment over this, and I develop the melancholy opinion that this year some woman's kids aren't going to have much of a...however you say "Christmas" in Spanish.

The doors here, each similarly designated as suites, belie the fact that this hotel has no real suites, only standard rooms. It's one of those places that refer to every room as a "suite." This hotel lures

guests in, rather like insects to a bug zapper, by using an alluring lobby complete with an English-speaking counter staff to make tourists feel comfortable—like they are going to have a high-dollar hotel experience.

Once guests check in and take the walk to their "suite," however, they realize they've gotten the bum's rush, and similarly, so have I. This job practically feels now like I will be doing it for free.

We step to a door conveniently located a short distance from the elevator, good for me on the likelihood that I will have to move a stain-mottled bed, flush with leaking guts and malodorous chunks, through the hallway. Few things are a bigger pain in the ass to a crime scene cleaner than a crime scene on the upper floors of a multipletory establishment.

I wait apprehensively for one of the two suits to open the door, but nothing happens. Glancing right to left, I suddenly feel like it's all a trick and I've been led here to be whacked, Mafia-style. (Since I dropped acid in college, my mind occasionally leaps to these extremes.)

"We wait," Osama says mysteriously. I step over to the railing, wondering if there is anyone around who will hear the gunshots and react appropriately, but there probably isn't. My jaded experience over the past couple of years has taught me that precious few people react appropriately to the sound of gunshots anyway.

"Did a man kill himself in there?" I ask, adopting a slight person-to-an-affected-child voice.

"Please, we must wait," Osama maintains, and I look to Gary for some semblance of understanding. He is deathly silent and subservient to his master; he, too, has been well trained.

The doors to all the rooms face inward, open to the courtyard air, and it is warming up quickly. It will be a hot day, and I pray the job will be over quickly. Working in a protective biohazard suit normally makes all the sweat from my body collect and slosh uncomfortably around me. In the July heat, though, it makes the sweat stink. I need the money, because summers in the crime scene business are always slow, but craving even more than that, I need a few extra hours of sleep. I think I'm still drunk from a party the night before.

The clip-clop of quickly approaching executive shoes drums out the nearby freeway sounds and I look up. A third man, dressed better still than Gary and Osama, has arrived and has an assistant in tow showcasing his importance beyond what a mere suit could achieve. Real power players have assistants, you see. Not that I care. I'm done introducing myself. Now I only want answers, not new friends to add to my Facebook account.

The top cat apologizes briefly and instructs Osama to unlock the door. His assistant steps forward nervously, holding a small handful of painter's protective breathing masks, but the master waves him back. The top cat then simply states that they will be downstairs when I am through and stands by the open door to let me pass, which is definitely a good sign for my pocketbook. He doesn't want to see anything more than a bill.

I step past him into the room, not waiting for the others to join me. They don't. The room, which is more opulent than I had anticipated, stifles the clip-clop of executive shoes moving away from the door in unison.

Decorated to allow for the matched prestige of the lobby, the suite is three rooms—a living room, bathroom, and, down a slight hallway, a bedroom. I check first for the presence of a minibar that I could get into trouble with, but finding none, I plunge down the hallway toward the bedroom.

The place doesn't have the rank odor of death attached to it, which is nice but mostly expected. Unlike homes or apartments, which can be left unchecked for months in the right circumstances, hotels have a quick drop-to-flop ratio (that is, from the time the bodies drop to the time the maid comes in to flop out the bedding and the towels and then cross herself while jabbering hysterically at the sight of some ruined and eviscerated ex-human).

I check the bathroom en route to the bedroom. The bathroom is immaculate, much to my dual relief.

and concern. Concern because the tiled multi-surfaces of the bathroom are generally conducive to easy cleaning. Relief at the overall cleanliness of the bathroom, however, because I indulged in a meal of Jack in the Box late the night before, and it is beginning to push its way out. Few things are more of a bummer than having to take a dump amid the unsanitary and potentially disease-riddled innards of some jilted, joyless corpse.

Walking into the bedroom, I can scarcely contain my glee for the moments it takes to complete my survey of the room. It is clean, save for the bed, which is a king-size wreck of tangled sheets, dark-red blood (which means the unlucky fucker bled through), and one very, very soiled remote control. Finally I can laugh, exhaling a great torrent of cheery exclamations, doubtlessly heard through paper-thin walls.

It is a dream scene. This wrecked life, its remnants spread gashed before me on the large bed, in its temerity was probably too miserable to run screaming through the room splaying its hacked-at wrists outward, polluting the walls with its cherry-red essence. No, whoever it was stayed perfectly still, mummylike in the center of the bed, bleeding slowly out into the night, the linens catching the life that he or she let slip away.

I even flip the mattress upward, as experience has taught me, smiling broadly when I ascertain that nothing has even leaked down to the box spring. Sometimes when people rot, their guts collect inside the mattress, and when you go to move the damn thing, all their guts go splashing out onto the flooring. But that isn't the case here.

So as I wrap up my inspection and get ready to start cleaning, I'm feeling pretty good about this one. It's a simple job that will net me five hundred or so dollars for less than an hour of work. I bet they even have HBO on the living room TV that I can kill time with so these sharply dressed ethnic men will feel as if they have gotten their money's worth. Too bad about the lack of a minibar, though.

* * *

Of course, I wasn't always this way—this racist, uncompassionate whelp who sees dead bodies as dollar signs and trauma as a means to a fancy dinner out with my girlfriend. No, I wasn't always like this. I used to be unhappy.

Picture yourself standing in a line at a retail store. It's a long line, and the clerk has to wrap and bag every item of the customer several people ahead of you. You grow irritated because the store hasn't bothered to open any other checkout counters, even though there are three people ahead of you and two people behind you.

All the customers are equally displeased, as they all have many places to go and this particular clerk seems to be taking forever. It has easily been six minutes since you got in line to check out, and you need the items that are in your cart, so you can't just step out and refuse any further patronage of said nameless store. You're also tired from having to navigate your SUV all over town and deal with traffic and other hazards of shopping. You just wish the clerk would hurry up.

Finally it's your turn and the clerk apologizes politely, if not seemingly a bit insincerely. You let him reach over the counter and into your cart to grab your purchases so he can scan them, refusing him any help whatsoever. All the while, you tell him how irate you are at having been so shabbily treated. He apologizes again and offers to get the manager to help make it right, but you are tired, and the manager will most likely just be a more slovenly, older version of this idiot who stands before you.

You aren't going to go down that road again, and you tell the clerk this in a biting, grating tone that perfectly conveys how you feel. As he sets the last of your bags in your cart, you make a tart aside about how you don't know if you will be a repeat customer anymore. He blinks a couple of times and the corners of his mouth twinge, and yet he says nothing other than to wish you a better day in a flat, emotionless tone.

Mostly forgotten, you steer out of the store, pushing your cart away and feeling better now that you are almost finished with your day and had the chance to do a little venting at some moron's expense. Really you aren't a bad person, or even a mean person, but sometimes life doesn't go your way and you have to let someone know it.

If you can picture that scenario perfectly, then know that I, Jeff Klima, hate you. I more than hate you, in fact. If you had tried that scenario outside of that retail environment, I would have beaten you to death. I still might. You see, for two and a half years I was that clerk at a Beverages & More, an upscale chain of wine shops in Orange County, California.

You mistakenly thought that the clerk, me, was responsible for the corporate policy that understaffed the store and required that the glassware bought by the customers preceding you had to be wrapped nicely in bubble wrap or paper bags to avoid breakage.

Know that while you had to stand there inconveniently for ten minutes or less, I had been standing there for five hours. And the bullshit amount that they called my paycheck didn't make it any more pleasurable or tolerable. And believe me, I was trying to do something about my situation.

But I didn't have an SUV—I was in debt up to my ears from rent and school tuition that didn't come anywhere near getting paid on what I made in a month or a year, and it wasn't easy trying to be responsible and stay alive free of mom and dad while driving around in a beat-up Chevy Cavalier that I paid for myself.

And you didn't make it any easier on me when you were buying Bordeaux that you didn't need to add to your collection. You made me feel on the outside what you must feel like on the inside: a real miserable son of a bitch.

If, on the other hand, you can't picture that little scenario, then welcome aboard. You seem like a friendly, cheerful person, and I can definitely deal with more of that in the world of the living. So if you're interested in blood, guts, funny stories, and the crazy couple of years I had going from being a shat-upon liquor store clerk to becoming a bad-ass crime scene cleanup guy, then hang the fuck on, because I've got a hell of a tale to tell you.

CHAPTER 2

so you want to be a crime scene cleaner

All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind. —Aristotle

The number-one question I get asked about the crime scene business is "how can you do it?" Typically I give the polite, short answer: "Someone has to," accompanied by a wan shrug. But in truth, that isn't even the tip of the iceberg. I do it for two very good reasons, and though I can't pretend they are the main reasons, they definitely are part of it.

I was born on September 11, 1981, the son of a magician and a psychologist. My father was a stage performer, and my mother was a school psychologist who analyzed the inner workings of children's minds, so it was no surprise that I wound up a bit odd.

In fact, my whole family is a bit odd. Everyone is on medication for a myriad of very real disorders with the exception of me. And I probably should be, too, but I'm terrified that medication will dull the spark that makes me the individual that I want to be. Or at the very least, I'm worried that medication will shrink my penis.

There are six people in my immediate family: my parents, who are still happily married; my older sister, Shaine, one of those religious types with a bipolar disorder; me; and my younger brothers, Chris and Ben, both creative types like me, who are prone to bouts of depression, anger, and attention deficit disorder. We're probably bipolar-lite, the lot of us.

We grew up in Sun Valley, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, in a house my mother inherited when her parents died. While it had been an ideal place for my mom to grow up with *her* brothers and sisters, the neighborhood had long since been seized by gangs, and I don't mean those crazy-fun dancing gangs from *West Side Story*.

By the time we were born, the area had become a dangerous place to live, a ghetto, where bullets zinged down alleys in pursuit of victims and street brawls with chains and bats were commonplace.

My parents once told me a story of how my sister Shaine and I, roughly aged three and four, were playing in the backyard of our little house on Haley Street. They say I walked into the house asking my parents where the kitty cat was. My mom wanted to know why.

"Because a man out back wants to see Shaine's pussy," I said.

My dad flew outside in time to chase some creep back over our six-foot concrete wall. It wasn't the last straw, but it was damn close.

In January 1990 we packed our bags and moved north to the very top of California. Eureka was a charming little burg, nestled between the mountains and the bay, with a population somewhere around twenty-eight thousand. My mom had visited Eureka in her youth and had always wanted to move there. For better or worse, it was the polar opposite of Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles I had been a popular kid on the playground, funny and well liked by the ethnic mix of low-income urchins who attended Canterbury Elementary School. But those Eureka kids were different. To them I was just another poor, big-city kid from far away, looking to get invited to their birthdays and clog up the dodgeball court with my presence. The elementary school in Eureka already had plenty of well-liked, funny kids and didn't seem to want to welcome another one, so I switched to the second most natural role for me, the quiet loner.

Ricky Moses was one of my first friends in town. We met at a Mormon church. We were just five

days apart in age, but we truly bonded over religion...or, rather, our dislike of it. Both of us were raised Mormon, and our parents made the two of us attend the church services, which was an absolute ruin of a beautiful Sunday. So naturally we clicked in thinking up methods to find our way out of the church and into the redwood forest surrounding it.

Ricky was a bad kid in a good way. His round face, overloaded with freckles that ran clear up to his curly red hair, always reflected the fact that Ricky didn't give a damn about authority, which was something that impressed me immensely. I instantly became the Tom Sawyer to his Huck Finn.

Religion hadn't been a problem for me in Sun Valley, because none of my school buddies' parents allowed them to come over to my house, thanks to its ghetto location. So church was where I went to be with kids my own age. I didn't like getting dressed up every Sunday morning, but I didn't know another reality.

When I moved to Eureka, though, my eyes were opened to the splendor that was a Sunday afternoon. Kids were out riding bikes, exploring, signing up for peewee football, or just lounging and basking in their freedom. At the Klima house, however, Sunday was "family day," a day when we all hung out with each other, couldn't have friends over, and couldn't leave the house, other than to go play among ourselves in the backyard.

Church evolved from my social life into my social prison. Worse, with the exception of Ricky, all of the other kids at church whom I could socialize with were feebs and wieners.

But Ricky was like a twelve-step program for me that combated my naturally shy disposition, a personality trait that I inherited from my mother's side of the family, one that hadn't yet formed while I was living in Sun Valley. My brothers and sister were all performers, taking after my father, so they had all adapted and made friends easily in Eureka. Ricky was all I had. So when Ricky joined Boy Scouts, I joined Boy Scouts, too, even though my heart wasn't in camping or tying knots or earning merit badges. Eventually scout campouts became cathartic for me while giving Ricky all the more opportunity to get into trouble through such activities as pooping where we shouldn't or stealing other troops' tents. Fishing poles were another frequently heist-worthy item, made easier by the fact that they could easily be thrown away after use. Ricky was a hell of a friend and got me into some crazy (and scatological!) adventures that, left to my shyness, I would otherwise not have known.

Ricky got into drugs at a ridiculously young age, though, which was an adventure that I was too afraid to join him on. When I was just out of the sixth grade and just through my school's anti-drug D.A.R.E. program (which had made perfect sense to me), Ricky brought a bag of marijuana along on campout.

He was insistent that we smoke it, but I only knew enough about marijuana to know that smoking it at age eleven was pretty much the last thing we should do. Instead, I coerced Ricky into selling it to the two teenagers who ran the campsite where we were staying. Needless to say, they were all too delighted to indulge in what was probably mostly just stems and trim.

The end of our friendship pretty much came when we were about thirteen and Ricky's dad accused me of breaking into his garage and four other garages along the six-block span between our houses. It was a fair assumption at the time, because I had turned into a pretty reckless kid with a sneering attitude toward any authority figures in the church. His parents and my parents forbade us from seeing each other, and apparently I was still just enough of a mama's boy to obey.

Ricky and I fell out of contact, although I occasionally ran into him when we both had the small-town good fortune to attend the same high school. He had been held back in first grade or kindergarten at the elementary school he attended, so I was already established by a year in high school when I ran into him again.

He had made further exploration into the drug world, and we had become two vastly different people, as I was still happily drug free and writing for the school newspaper. Still, we always said hi

each other when we passed in the halls.

By the time Ricky's sophomore year rolled around, he was trying to get back with his ex-girlfriend and kick the drugs, which seemed like a pretty good move for him. So it was an enormous surprise for me to arrive at school one morning and find out that Ricky was dead.

The previous day, he had called the fire department, where his father worked as a volunteer fireman and asked them to come clean up his body before his mom got home and found it. Then he shot himself. He was sixteen years old, younger than me by five days no longer.

After the funeral, his father and I talked for the first time since he had accused me of B&E all those years before, and we made everything as right as it could possibly be under the circumstances. Now every time I go up to visit my parents, who still live in Eureka, I stop by Ricky's grave and marvel about all the wonderful things that I have seen and done and learned in the years since his death, and that I wish he could have experienced as well.

Ricky made a choice, though. Christopher Simons never even got to do that much.

* * *

Finally having decided that small-town life was too small for me, I moved down to Santa Clarita, a northern suburb of Los Angeles. For the nineteen-year-old man that I was, full of piss and Fritos, Southern California had always felt just a bit more like home. All my aunts and uncles lived there, and besides, I knew that if I was going to become a bigwig in advertising, like I planned to, I'd have to be in a major metropolitan area.

The move also completely freed me from the indoctrination of the church, which was, in hindsight, the sweetest part of all. Once I had turned eighteen, I was no longer required to go to church by my parents, who hoped that by my eighteenth birthday I would have discovered my spiritual side and would want to go willingly. Nope, I was a non-Mormon on midnight of September 10.

By the morning of the 11th, I had practically forgotten what a Mormon looked like. I escaped before they could get their "secret underwear" on me. Mormons are friendly people who mean well, but I smoke cigars, drink whiskey, and cuss like a shit farmer with a sore dick. I like to think I was rejecting them before they could reject me.

The first opportunity I had upon moving back to Los Angeles, I got a job at a porn shop. My parents weren't all that happy about it and chalked it up to petty defiance, but they were seven-hundred-plus miles away and I was looking to sow my wild oats.

Porn fascinates me. My relationship with porn is one-sided (as most relationships with porn usually are, ba-dum-chee). Strangely, I'm not that interested in actually looking at the porn itself. Watching some party girl get anally reamed from multiple angles by a bunch of well-hung meatheads, I just end up thinking about whether or not that girl will have to wear a diaper when she gets older.

It's just the idea of porn and the world of people who watch or participate in it, or both, that I love. I don't know whether it is the effect of porn's forbidden aspect on my force-fed religious soul, or whether it is that I have always been shy and awkward around girls and am shocked to witness folks who had no shyness or inhibitions whatsoever.

At the porn shop, we had a DVD player beneath the counter to make sure that the DVDs people were returning were really defective and not just boring. The other employees used to sit and watch porn on it for hours. On my shifts, I would smuggle in Disney musicals.

Don't get me wrong; I've happily watched far more than my fair share of porn and have seen some shit that would make you want to wash your eyes while viewing it. But for me it was always enough to just be around naked people getting fucked. I didn't have to watch them. I knew they were there.

The store was a really nice place, surprisingly. It was nestled in a little strip mall between a tattoo parlor and a bunch of auto part stores, and the clientele was mostly comprised of upper-middle-class types, both male and female.

Doctors, lawyers, Hollywood laypeople, and some of those auto part store employees made up the customer base. Frequently, they were more than happy to oblige me, solicited or not, with tales of their sexual misdeeds and fantasies that they probably wouldn't even tell their psychiatrists.

Average couples came in frequently, and on several occasions normal people in the throes of an affair would frequent the place with their lovers one week and their husbands or wives the next, throwing me a pleading glance not to betray their secrets. It was a high-dollar place, and I sold many women of all ages their very first vibrator, patiently, calmly explaining the sizes and shapes and functions of each, doing my damndest to make sure their first porn-shop experience was a pleasant porn-shop experience.

"Dirty Pete," the owner and my boss, was something else entirely. He was an ex-rocker from the eighties whose band had opened for some really huge acts, though he himself had never made it big. With longish, dirty-blond hair that looked like it had been washed with beer more times than with shampoo and a small hoop earring to let the "youngsters" know he was still "with it," Pete had the sad scowl and chubby cheeks of a party animal gone stale. He had drifted into porn and, somewhere along the way, opened up a shop of his own in Santa Clarita.

Between the drugs he doubtlessly still indulged in and his creepy and constantly suspicious Asian girlfriend, Dirty Pete was an increasingly paranoid individual. On the day after he hired me, he installed closed-circuit video cameras throughout the store that he alone could watch from a briefcase monitor. He somehow "forgot" to tell everyone that the cameras also secretly recorded audio. In addition to being paranoid, Pete was scummy, anal retentive, and prone to yelling at everyone and then apologizing to their faces before talking bad shit about them behind their backs. He was one of those people who would promote you the day before he fired you, just to keep you guessing.

He was also incredibly secretive and instructed that if anyone called or came in the store looking for "Dirty Pete," I was to say I had never heard of him. I'm sure he was in trouble, but I didn't want to guess what kind. I worked for him for two years and never even learned his real last name. But I guess he trusted me somewhat; Dirty Pete had plans to one day run a porno empire and promised me that if I stuck with him and remained loyal, he would make me a millionaire.

I had other plans, though.

* * *

After two years of dually managing Dirty Pete's Santa Clarita shop and another one that he owned down on Melrose Avenue in the heart of Hollywood, I was burned out on the porn industry. If you let it be, porn and hanging out with the porno crowd is a twenty-four-hour party that would have thrown even Ricky Moses for a loop. Everyone parties with everyone, and almost everyone fucks everyone else and does drugs. Fortunately, AIDS was a nonissue because of tight regulations created out of the industry having learned its lesson in years past.

During those two years, though, even just existing on the fringe of things, I met porn stars, got high, saw many uninhibited customers naked, and learned to use the word "cunt" in a casual conversation about fucking.

Girls at bachelorette parties at the store, drunk or on drugs, or both, would frequently try to get me to whip my cock out for their delight. But what with me genetically having a fat upper-penis area (or F.U.P.A.) that made my dick look small, particularly in the presence of the monstrous polyurethane-molded cocks I sold, I frequently said no. For a shy, small-town, ex-Mormon, it was an electric, Technicolor, blistering jack-off experience (and that's a good thing).

I wanted to go back to college, though, and focus on getting my degree in advertising, where I would put my creative brain to the test in minting millions of my own dollars. I love advertising. It is a weird hybrid of psychology and creativity that sums me up completely. I am advertising personified. I will explain to you if I get drunk enough.

Advertising makes sense to me in a way that few things in America do. What other occupation in the world allows you to find ways to sell cigarettes to children the day before you write a jingle about diarrhea medicine? Maybe an elementary-school custodian, but that's about it.

Yet as underhanded and manipulative as Dirty Pete was to everyone who worked for him or had been fired by him, he had still given me a job and eventually trusted me enough to give me managerial experience. Perhaps I'm a softie, but I didn't want to leave him high and dry when I left town to go back to college, so I set out to hire someone honest to replace me.

Christopher Simons wasn't even looking for a job when he strolled into the porn shop with his fiancée, Janine. But he was a friendly guy who loved porn and made the mistake of complimenting me on how cool and classy the store looked. I hired him on the spot.

He was a thin black guy and, based on his light skin, probably had some white guy thrown somewhere into his ancestry recently. He wore baggy jeans to match his baggy sweatshirts and smoked cigarettes incessantly. Personable but poor, he was the kind of guy who, if there weren't any people to bum cigarettes off of, would grab a used one out of the ashtray to light up.

Over the weeks that I trained him, Christopher and I would sit and talk about life and what we wanted to do with ours. Christopher wanted to be a record producer and was working with a buddy who had studio access to help move his dream along. I just no longer wanted to work in porn.

One day Dirty Pete and I had a falling out over some money that had gone missing. Whether it really was missing or he was just setting me up as the fall guy that all previous managers of the store had been at one time or another, I'll never know. I set the keys on the counter and walked out. The stores were now under Christopher's command.

I moved down to Orange County, a culture clash of the extremely poor and extremely wealthy, and would never have looked back, except for the day I read in the newspaper about Christopher's murder. He was working my old evening shift, around New Year's Day, when a young man walked in with a gun. The punk stole a two-hundred-dollar Jenna Jameson fuckable pussy and anus mold, complete with a fake pubic-hair landing strip, and on his way out shot Christopher in the chest.

The man shot two other people in the surrounding shopping strip with his small-caliber rifle before returning to the store, fearing that Christopher might have lived. Leaning over the counter, the bastard shot Christopher in the face, finishing him off. The guy then went to a nearby fast-food restaurant, called the police, and shot himself. He lived.

Dirty Pete, the class act that he was, taped down cardboard over the blood and bits of Chris's skull that the coroner couldn't get out of the carpeting and was open for business the next day.

While I had indirectly caused Christopher's death, I never thought I felt guilt over it. But as I'm sitting here typing this now, the article about his death hangs framed on the wall behind me.

At the time, I was angry about what Dirty Pete had done. He was crooked and always terrified of his business partners whom he had doubtlessly screwed over coming and finding him. I knew he was dirty, because I frequently had to commit mail fraud for him, shipping strange packages out to Australia for him and lying to the post office about the contents. I don't know what was in the packages, but it wasn't the clothes and schoolbooks he instructed me to tell the postal clerks that it was.

In the aftermath of Christopher's death, I wanted to bring Dirty Pete down. He'd eighty-sixed his humanity long ago and needed to be taken down a peg. I wrote a letter to the FBI detailing the numerous boxes I'd sent, the days I sent them, and the addresses to which I'd sent them. I didn't know what I hoped the Feds would do, if anything, but I was angry for Christopher and probably for me, too.

The letter sat on my desk, printed and ready, for weeks. I just couldn't commit to dropping it in the mailbox; it felt too much like I was being a rat. I never, ever wanted to be a rat. Finally I destroyed the letter, dropping it into my aunt's paper shredder.

That action didn't feel too good either, so to compensate, any time I told people about Christopher's death, I told them I mailed the letter and that the Feds hadn't done anything about it. That way, at least in the eyes of the people listening, I didn't come off like a coward.

So when people ask me why I got into the crime scene business, I can't say that Ricky and Christopher instantly pop into my mind, but they are definitely baggage that I pull along with me on every scene I work.

It probably was only an intense yearning to finally rid myself of the misery that was retail employment that prodded me into the business of scooping up the dead, though. I had my thumb out on the employment expressway, and crime scene cleaner just happened to be the truck that stopped.

CHAPTER 3

a new hope

Don't worry about life. You're not going to survive it anyway. —Unknown

The two and a half years I spent working at Beverages & More after leaving the porn biz were dismal, a real drain on my soul. That fact really bummed me out, considering that working in a wine shop was probably the best retail job on the planet. To me, though, that only made it the cutest girl in an ugly contest.

I wanted to be a good and exemplary employee, one of those guys who whistled while he worked and always had a grin ready, no matter what the situation. But retail was retail, no matter how much "sampling" we were allowed to do at the liquor store. All too quickly, the work once more became mind-numbing and repetitive.

I needed something more challenging, more creative, and with my school loans completely wiped out for the year, something better paying. By then, fall of 2004, I was back in school at California State University, Fullerton, working toward my advertising degree. BevMo was flexible around my class schedule, but the well of my humanity was drying up quickly.

While toiling at BevMo, I had begun to grow surly toward the customers and increasingly lazy in my job performance, which swerved violently against everything that I had resolved to do as a retail employee. During the day, while the manager (shockingly, a really good guy) was there, I would perform above and beyond expectations in my menial tasks as a way to endear myself to him.

The second he was gone, though, I would head into the stockroom and crack open a few German beers while whiling away the hours playing mini-golf on the store's inventory computer. If the night supervisor was finally able to convince me to get off the computer, which he frequently couldn't do, I would go outside under the guise of gathering shopping carts, only to disappear into a nearby Circuit City for an hour to browse their DVD selection.

It was as if I was subconsciously begging to get fired but smart enough to realize that I needed the income, so I would eke out what needed to be done while the manager was around, just enough good work to make him think that the night supervisor was full of shit.

I was living in a one-bedroom apartment in the ramshackle, dustbowl north territory of Orange County. The Joads would have flipped their shit if they had moved from the scenic Midwest and wound up in dismal North Orange County. The more prototypical Orange County residents derisively referred to the area as "NORCO." It's the industrial sector of Orange County, a place mostly left out of that show *The O.C.* A lot of the folks who cleaned estates and mowed lawns for the elite living in "South County" commuted down from their homes around me in NORCO.

I was living with my brother Chris, four years my junior. He wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and be an entertainer, maybe the next David Letterman or Jon Stewart. Chris was a tall, handsome but chubby kid who spent hours every day on a skateboard until he thinned out. He worked at Home Depot, and Disneyland before that, while attending a junior college in the area with an emphasis on TV and radio broadcasting. Chris and I were not all that close growing up, but as adults struggling to survive on our own, we were bonded in the manner of best friends. Lacking money, know-how, or experience, we forged an existence that was both sour and sweet, taking on adversity headlong because we knew no other way.

When we moved in, there was no refrigerator in the apartment. Neither of us had a truck or knew

anyone in the area, so we ended up buying a fridge at the local Goodwill store and pushing it on a dolly the two and a half miles through the ghetto streets and hills back to our apartment, mocked by thugs and passersby along the way, only to find out the fridge was too big for the kitchen. As Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times..."

We lived in Sycamore Terrace, the most affordable apartment complex in town. Well maintained, the complex was built on the edge of the dangerously seedy area of Fullerton, the kind of place where white guys had no business jogging or riding skateboards at night. But for two brothers sharing one bedroom, the price was right at nine hundred dollars a month, plus utilities.

The neighbors were nice folks, if not all a bit clichéd. Across from us upstairs, we had the snooty couple who never talked, even when we said "hi" to them. Downstairs from them was a hardworking Mexican family with a young son who rode his plastic-molded car up and down the cracked pavement of our shared walkway.

Next over was the fitness addict, Doug, who could never remember our names and always had ridiculously hot-sounding women over to his house for drinking, smoking weed, and sex of the rough variety. We rarely saw the women, but through concrete walls that were more water than rock, everyone could hear them. Regularly, Doug would strut around the complex, shirt off to showcase the thin, red slits raked the length of his back that could only have been made by fingernails in passion.

Chris and I spent many nights on the patio, drinking beers, playing chess, and enjoying the company of the occasional passerby. It was a nice place, maintained by maintenance guys who looked like ex-cons and made you want to hide your electronics equipment before they came to service your apartment. I could have called it home for a long time.

* * *

But the good times couldn't last. I was enrolled in school, working as many hours as I could squeeze around my class schedule, and paying monthly dues to a school fraternity I had joined to make friends. I had barely enough cash to survive as it was—the proverbial weeks of eating nothing but ramen noodles and drinking non-Blue-Ribbon Pabst (yes, they have another, *cheaper* brand) were a big part of my life. And then the apartment complex raised the rent.

I didn't like to think it was a personal attack; I'm sure they raised everyone's rent. But it was a little suspicious, because not too long before the rent change, the apartment complex had stolen my car.

Let me explain: I raced out of the apartment one morning, fairly running toward my car, already close to being late to work at BevMo. I was in the midst of an experiment to time out exactly how long it would take me to get to work and punch in with not a moment to spare. This particular morning, I was already playing to the late side of things.

Stopping short of the parking area, not quite seeing my car in the space where I thought I had parked it, I was nonplussed. During this period of my life, days and nights were a little blurred together, and as a result, I wasn't always sure where I had parked my Cavalier.

I jogged around the perimeter of the apartment complex twice, frantic now as I became certain that the car was no longer there. The place had an electronic gate around it, so I was doubly worried about the abilities of high-tech thieves preying on shitty red sports coupes. Sweating, gasping, and desperate to remember if I had paid the antitheft insurance premium that month, I floundered into the complex office to report my vehicle stolen.

The assistant manager, a fat lady with eyeglass lenses doubtlessly made from the viewing ports on a space rocket and nappy hair that would have been a delight to Don Imus, sat behind a desk glowering almost awaiting my arrival. I told her my plight, and she splayed a collective of Polaroids on the desk between us.

"Was it one of these?" she cackled.

The Polaroids were close-up photos of car license plates that looked trapped in the square frames of

their pictures. One of them was indeed mine. I nodded my head yes.

~~"The car's registration was expired, so we had it towed," she said cruelly.~~

My car's tags had expired in October, and this was now the first week of November.

"I thought you guys were an apartment complex, not a tow company," I said, incredulous. Other than mentioning that towing companies paid a nice kickback to apartment complexes to have vehicles towed off their property, she didn't feel like discussing the matter. Then she told me where I could pick up my car. It didn't seem to matter to her that my tags were, in fact, paid up and somewhere in the mail.

I was able to catch a ride to the tow company from my sister, who was in town meeting a potential roommate. To both of them I looked like a total loser. My boss at BevMo, good guy that he was, ended up being completely understanding.

At the beginning of the next month, when I paid our rent, I underpaid by \$210, the cost of the towing fee, which I felt I had been improperly charged. I included a letter in the rent envelope "from my attorney" detailing how the apartment complex had wronged me and how the cost of the tow was theirs to pay.

I thought I had gotten away with it, and that the karmatic powers of the universe had sorted themselves out. However, a couple days later I received a call from the apartment complex manager. She was a curvaceous Latina girl with big boobs and low-cut shirts to match, and she definitely had the fiery temper to round out the equation. To this day, I can't explain quite what she said to me, but her tone was that of wicked and icy non-restraint, full of innuendo for a fate easily worse than death.

My only response was something to the effect of, "Ma'am I am terribly sorry about all this. I will come in this evening and give you a check for the remaining balance."

It was like getting chewed out by Satan. I wanted to continue my crusade and fight the good fight, but this bitch had caught me off guard and knocked me cold. I had never considered myself a pushover, but here was a test of manhood, and I was evidently lacking. With one phone call, she had reduced my sensibilities to that of a child's. My will defeated, I paid up.

Amazingly, though, I received a check from the tow truck company a couple weeks later, compensating me for the full amount of the tow. I think it was the apartment complex's way of admitting that they'd been ticky-tack assholes, but it was the sweetest moment of my life up to that point, and I would have framed the check were we not running precariously low on that aforementioned Pabst.

When the apartment complex suddenly raised our monthly rent by more than \$170 a month, I couldn't help but wonder if that apartment complex manager wasn't Satan after all. She had placed what I thought I had wanted in front of me, only to snatch away something far more valuable, my home.

Chris and I couldn't afford that kind of increased payment, and our options seemed to be: 1. We could crawl back home to Eureka, defeated, or 2. Be homeless. My brother was enthusiastic about the second option, having always wanted to embrace his earthy, hippy side. I, on the other hand, was more inclined to create a third option.

My fraternity had a large house on Fraternity Row that was essentially four two- and three-bedroom condos linked together. I knew they had a single empty room, and Chris and I could be just the guys to fill it. The fraternity graciously suspended their bylaws to allow my brother, a nonmember, to move in. Chris and I were now officially and unofficially frat boys.

While the rent was cheaper living in a single room of the frat house, the kitchen wasn't something you wanted to cook in, due to the high proliferation of cockroaches and ants constantly investigating any and all food items. And so the cost of eating out for every meal put us right back in our original quagmire. We were also having a fine, drunken time on a nightly basis, which further drained the

wallet. So the bottom line was that not only did I need to find a new job, something out of retail, but had to pay better, much better.

* * *

Dirk Whitmore was a sheriff for the Orange County Sheriff's Department, working in the evidence storage rooms as a property handler, one of those "civilian cops" who didn't seem to want to walk a beat and be a real cop. Dirk also had a side job as owner of a DJ business that he managed on nights and weekends. But Dirk, like me, was after more money, and had grown weary of spinning "Celebration" for drunken revelers at graduations, birthdays, and funerals alike.

Somewhere along the way, he had happened upon a fairly new industry that was poking its uncertain head around Orange County, crime scene cleanup. Always having been more of a doer than a thinker, Dirk immediately contacted one of the forefathers of the crime scene cleaning industry, a guy named Schmitty.

I don't know how the industry started, but the occupation of crime scene cleaner seems to have emerged out of the late eighties or early nineties. Like a teenager's acne, at first there were no crime scene cleaning companies, and then suddenly there were several, each spawning itself and wholly independent from other companies in other cities.

Schmitty himself got the idea around 1995 from watching the movie *Pulp Fiction*. In one scene a character called "The Wolf" aided the protagonists after they'd accidentally shot someone's head off in a car. The Wolf showed up and discreetly helped them clean up the mess. Schmitty wanted to be The Wolf.

Schmitty had been running a crime scene cleaning business out of Oakland, California (a dynamite place to have a crime scene business, considering the 145 murders there in 2006, not to mention suicides and other deaths). He agreed to let Dirk attempt a franchise in Orange County.

For a week, Dirk trained with Schmitty's crew in Oakland, during which time he witnessed them charge a little old lady in excess of twenty thousand dollars to gut her home after a police raid. A criminal had broken in while she wasn't home; a standoff with the police had occurred; and gas pellets fired into the house by the officers pretty much made the place and its contents uninhabitable.

Dirk realized there was money to be made, especially in Orange County, where the rich are very rich, and the poor are very armed and jealous. Dirk sold the DJ business to an employee of his and offered the rest of his employees a stake in his new business. The employees, being more comfortable spinning records than sweeping up what was left of someone's grandpa, all declined the invitation.

I was interested in crime scene cleanup the minute a BevMo coworker told me it existed. The coworker introduced me to Dirk, and I was on board right from the first call he made to my cell phone in late November. I neglected to tell him that I had never seen or smelled a dead body, but I figured it wasn't that important. Anyway, I had a secret.

When I was about ten and my mom was in college, looking into getting her doctorate in psychology, she and I would go on road trips to the University of Oregon to assess their doctorate program. These were special bonding trips between mother and son that the other kids in my family were either too young or too busy to go on. I liked the trips because I got to miss school and feel for a couple days like I was the favorite kid. But more importantly, on one of these trips I realized my life's work. I was going to be a serial killer.

Before my mother met with professors, she would drop me off at the school's library, leaving me with hours to meander through the shelves and read to my heart's content. I was a prodigious reader, so getting dropped off to wander the U. of Oregon library was something akin to being the proverbial kid in the candy store.

There, in my hunt for Stephen King books that I hadn't yet read, I happened upon a tome much more sinister in nature. It was an anthology of serial killers, complete with gruesome crime scene photos. I

was blown away and yet oddly titillated by the grainy black-and-white photos of dead bodies under sheets, skeletal remains, blood, and larger-than-life mug shot photos of men the book described as monsters. Forgetting Stephen King and his now-mundane chills, I curled up as best I could in one of the library's stiff plastic chairs and got to learning.

The killers were a mix of fascinating loners and well-liked funny men, but they all shared characteristics that made my budding pubescent hair stand on end. Serial killers, according to the FBI's psychology files, typically shared three common traits in their history. They were bed wetters; they were attracted to fire; and they were cruel to animals. I had found my people.

I had been a bed wetter, to my immense shame, for most of my early life, right up until my early teens, older than most bed wetters had been when they stopped. In fact, I thought I was going to wet the bed forever and would live alone in mortification for the rest of my life on rubber sheets.

I also delighted in maiming insects, as all young men did, but I made it into an art form. I couldn't wait to get home from school each day so that I could spend my afternoon torturing flies and ants and spiders. At one point I came up with the brilliant idea of spraypainting red ants blue and then depositing them in spider's nests. The spiders, much to my delight, would then descend godlike and bite the struggling blue ants, poison themselves on the paint, and drop down dead, their bodies falling from the web as their silk webbing unspooled slowly behind them. Everybody died, and it gave me enormous pleasure. I was also quite fond of pouring wood glue on anthills to make huge collages of twitching ants intermingled with the dried glue and sand mounds of their homes.

And as for fire, my friends and I once set fire to the back of our house by touching a match to a bowl of gasoline. The fire grew faster than anticipated, and one of my idiot friends kicked the bowl in fear, spreading the burning liquid onto the painted wood panels comprising the exterior of the house. Spraying everything down with water from a nearby hose squelched the fire, but we had to rub mud on the blackened scorch marks to cover up the evidence.

Reading that book, though, everything clicked for me, the bed wetting especially tying me in with the killers and providing a kinship I had never felt before, an understanding of loneliness that no one else could fathom.

When my mom picked me up that day, I wisely told her that I wanted to have a career *catching* serial killers. (My serial-killer cunning and strategizing was already at work.) She promptly drove me to a bookstore, where she bought me a book about serial killers to have for my very own.

The more I read, the more I believed in my destiny. It was almost too logical: profile after profile documented men like Albert Fish, John Wayne Gacy, and Ted Bundy, and each one was shown to have a higher-than-normal IQ. In fact, serial killers are routinely shown to be smarter than most people, and I was sharp enough to discern what that meant. If these men were proven to be smarter than normal people, their capacity for understanding far exceeded that of a normal person.

Society was clearly flawed in locking up America's intellectuals! It was typical bureaucracy at work when the stupid, terrified of the intellectual, isolated and executed them to maintain the ignorant status quo. At the tender age of ten, I realized that the serial killers were, in effect, the victims. And I was determined to be the most intellectual serial killer of them all.

Matters were made only more concrete when my mom underwent regression analysis therapy and discovered repressed memories that led her to believe that her own father, who had worked for a time as a grave digger, was, in fact, a serial killer who had never been caught. Certain factors, such as locations, a string of unsolved murders in the area at the time, and her father's fascination with death compounded her belief and increased my joy. It was all a dream come true.

The end of the dream came a few years later when I came across an FBI behavioral list regarding my future line of work. That list basically divided serial killers into two groups: the organized and the disorganized. The organized were the intelligent ones, who kept their rooms and work spaces very

neat. They were usually very social and were characterized by how they killed their victims in one place and then left the bodies elsewhere.

The disorganized, on the other hand, were messy, dirty individuals who were most often portrayed as the loners and chronic masturbators. They were more apt to spring out, animal-like, and ambush their victims, leaving them for dead where they were attacked.

Almost as much as I respected serial killers, I respected the FBI and its accuracy in profiling said killers. And to me that FBI behavioral list was absolute. I couldn't help but notice that most of my demeanor put me on the wrong side of the list, the *disorganized side*...the chronic masturbator side. I would be lost among obscure killers like Carlton Gary and David Carpenter.

To me, at the mature age of twelve, being a largely forgotten and, therefore, lame serial killer was more embarrassing fate than working some bland office job for the rest of my life, high-fiving coworkers and being unnecessarily self-satisfied. I decided to break from my fate, forget the serial killing business, and become smug and boring.

But years later, when the offer came to work around crime scenes, the concept of being around the gore that had so fascinated me in my youth was too sweet to conceive—and part of me wanted to see if I could handle it.

* * *

My first meeting with Dirk didn't happen for several more months, but we eventually met up at a Starbucks by his house in late January 2007. I wasn't a typical Starbucks customer, since coffee tends to run right through me, but I could still pick Dirk out of the early morning crowd because he looked exactly how he sounded on the phone.

His round, observing eyes belied a silly grin, and he had the slightly bulging gut of a married cop who didn't report in the field very often. He looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. I finally sided with his forties because of the two clean bald patches peeking out of his short nest of hair.

"Hi, Dirk?" I inquired, giving him the benefit of the doubt. He beckoned for me to sit and offered to buy me a coffee, but I declined, giving him the same reason I just gave you. He started on a sales pitch, virtually the same thing he had done on the phone two months earlier. I stopped him as politely as I could, informing him that he already had an employee. Whatever crime scene cleaning involved, was in.

He had a binder full of Xeroxed articles on crime scene cleanup, which he flipped through as he spoke. One headline in particular caught my eye: "Crime Scene Cleaner Makes Six Figures a Year." That was going to be me. That was where I wanted to be.

Our discussion meandered around different topics until finally we got to the money part. Because I was getting in on the ground floor, Dirk wanted to make me a partner, sort of. Since we were a franchise, Schmitt was to receive 50 percent of our gross profit, meaning out of all the money we made, before taking out anything for expenses, 50 percent of it would be shipped off to him. I found that a bit high and unfair, but I didn't have any money to invest or experience of my own to benefit from, so I kept my mouth shut.

Dirk and I would then split 50 percent of the net profit, basically any money left over after expenses. When I was in my late teens, I ran a small T-shirt business, so I knew full well how you could screw people on receiving "net profits." But again, I said nothing, because I was flattered that Dirk would even cut me in for an equal share, especially since I didn't have to put my name on any paperwork.

And besides, it was anything but retail. Half of the net profits seemed like a fair enough start toward making that six-figure income. What I didn't know, though, was that there were still ways to screw someone earning that 50 percent share. I'd find that out soon enough.

Dirk, apparently satisfied with me in person, took me back to his house to get me my crates. His

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