

Oil  
and  
Water

ERIC DOUGLAS

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## DEDICATION

To Beverly: I couldn't get up every morning and write if it weren't for your love and support.

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## PROLOGUE

To unfamiliar eyes, it was mayhem. Sawdust littered the ground. Animals of every size and description roamed the field. Men and women scurried around half-dressed and in makeup.

But, to a circus performer, this was the real magic of the show. For them, behind the scenes, everything that it took to produce a spectacle under the big top, or in the arenas where most traveling shows found themselves today, was the most exciting part of the show. Acrobats, clowns, gymnasts, and daredevils all came together, from nearly as many nations as existed on the planet to perform. All for that one kid in the front row at his first circus who was just blown away. Seeing his eyes glow never got old for the performers, even when the grind of another city and another hotel bed did. Every performer could tell stories about *that* kid. No matter what was going on around them, the kid would stare, and smile and yell and cheer and cry. That was what made it all worth the effort. That was why they loved it. They never forgot *that* kid.

And that was why they came back to this school each year as well. The choreographers and the designers were elsewhere, in some office somewhere, but when it came time to put together the next year's circus, it was up to the performers to make that vision a reality. Before they could take the show on the road; before they could affect that child in the front row, it took hundreds of hours of sweat, blood, tears and screams of their own.

For Mike Scott, the magic of the circus was behind the scenes as well. He had been one of those kids, captivated by every movement and every trick. He got to be a kid again now that his editor had asked him to visit the circus school and bring home the story of the performers. He was there for the spectacle behind the spectacle. And he was having a blast.

The circus school was at the show's winter home in Florida and Mike was finishing up three weeks of photographing the behind-the-scenes training, orchestration, frustration and work that it took to take one of the world's most famous shows on the road. While circus performers perform and entertain, they are very serious about their craft. Even the clowns spend hours perfecting their antics, pratfalls and jokes to make

sure they know them by heart. It takes thousands of hours of sweat and concentration to put together a show as complex as a circus and make it look seamless and easy.

Mike was a photographer for *First Account* magazine. He had traveled the world and photographed great news stories. He had covered war zones, elections and pure terror. But that wasn't what he was about. He was a photographer who enjoyed telling stories with his cameras. The stories didn't have to be monumental or earth shattering. He enjoyed telling stories about people, everyday people who worked hard and changed other people's lives.

He had literally fallen in love with the people and the excitement. These were dedicated professionals of the highest order. Like most closed groups, the performers, animal handlers and stagehands met Mike with some skepticism. They had all seen their fair share of reporters and photographers come to the training ground with an angle or an axe to grind. Mike expected that and used a different approach for this assignment. He didn't even break his cameras out for the first two days. Most of the performers found that odd when he was introduced as a photographer. He wanted them to know that he wasn't there for a quick story. It didn't come easy, though. Several times the performers challenged Mike to see what he was made of.

To see if he was missing something, Mike walked around with one of the circus directors looking at some of the acts that were still in development.

"Leon, what's this thing for," Mike asked. They were passing a 30-foot-tall acrylic tube standing on its end and filled with water. It looked like a display from a large public aquarium where the fish swim in the water column. A set of steep wooden stairs led to a small platform at the top of the tank.

"Oh, that's a new underwater act. The tube is about six feet across inside. Swimmers do an underwater ballet inside. They swim down in twos and threes to the bottom and perform. I know, it sounds a little strange, but it's really very impressive to watch. They stay under an incredible amount of time," Leon said.

"I've done some freediving myself. Thirty feet isn't that hard to get to if you know what you're doing and are in shape, but I imagine that is impressive. On the other hand, I haven't done it in a while and I'm not sure I could do it right now if I had to. Much less spend any time on the bottom doing stunts. Are they going to be practicing that one any time soon? I'd like to watch."

Mike was a scuba diver and instructor as well. After earning a degree in Journalism, he spent a few years living in Grand Cayman working as an underwater photo pro before he decided to return to the world and photograph people. When he wasn't traveling for his job, and even when he was, he did his best to get underwater and go diving. On more than one occasion his job and his passion had intersected when a story had taken him underwater so anything to do with the water intrigued him. A few times a diving vacation had ended up turning into a working holiday as he stumbled across news stories.

"I'm not sure when they're going to practice again. But, I'll be sure to find out for you."

“Thanks, that’d be great. Is that performance going to make it in the show this year? How do you decide what acts are featured each year and which ones never leave Florida?” Mike asked as they walked away from the tank.

“It’s interesting you ask that. There is a very involved process where choreographers and designers at our headquarters review possible acts, including the staple performances that everyone expects at the circus – the lion tamers, the clowns, that sort of thing – and decides what else can fit with the theme of the show. Each show has a look and feel and each act has to work with that look. Then they design costumes and figure out how to make it...”

Before Leon could finish his sentence, the men heard a blood curdling scream from just behind them.

“Help, somebody help! Ridian fell into the tank. Someone please help!”

Mike and Leon had walked about 20 feet from the acrylic tube. When they turned, Mike saw a child sinking slowly toward the bottom of the tank. The boy appeared to be unconscious. At least he wasn’t struggling or trying to swim. The girl who yelled for help was on the platform at the top. Both children looked to be about 10 or 11 years old.

Mike immediately bolted for the stairs. He knew a circus performer would probably be able to help the boy better than he could, but he didn’t know where they were or how long it would take for someone to get there. He wasn’t about to stand by and watch the boy drown through the acrylic.

“What happened?” Mike shouted as he ran, taking the steps two at a time.

“We were playing. Ridian said his father was going to let him in the act, but I didn’t believe him. We snuck up here as soon as you walked away so he could prove it to me. He was showing off and slipped and hit his head. He just sank.” The young girl began to sob.

When Mike reached the platform, he immediately stripped down to his shorts. The sprint to the tank and charging up the stairs had Mike out of breath. He was in good shape, but not perfect condition. He had been traveling too much to exercise regularly. Mike took a moment to slow his breathing and focus on what he was going to have to do. He knew it was going to be difficult to swim to the bottom. Looking around, he saw what he would need to get down. Two weight belts were lying on the platform with five pounds of lead on each one. The performers had been using them to train with.

Mike picked up both belts and draped them over his shoulders, took three quick breaths and did his best to relax and then simply stepped off of the platform and into the water. He knew the extra weight from the belts would help him sink quickly so he opted to descend quietly rather than trying to swim down. He might have made it down a second or two faster by swimming, but he knew he was going to have to save his energy to grab the boy and get them both back to the surface.

The cool water in the tank was a shock to Mike’s system. His body immediately began demanding that he breathe, but Mike suppressed the urge and did his best to focus on what he had to do. He knew twisting, turning or struggling would slow his descent and use up the oxygen in his body that much faster. The only

movement he allowed himself was to bring his hand to his face to pinch his nose and equalize his ears with the increasing pressure of the water as he made his descent.

Freedivers prepare themselves. They relax. They don masks and specially-made, extra-long, extra-large fins to propel themselves through the water. Mike had none of that. He going to have to grab the boy and swim him to the surface. Without fins or help. He would be cutting it close by the time he got to the surface.

The pressure of the water surrounding him increased the concentration of oxygen in his blood. As Mike ascended, he would be using more of that oxygen. Coupled with the dropping pressure on his body as he swam to the surface, he could potentially black out. He would be in danger of a shallow-water blackout. He might end up grabbing the boy and making it almost all the way back to the surface before losing consciousness and sinking back down with the boy. That would make things even worse. The boy wouldn't make it to the surface to get the air he so desperately needed and then someone would have to rescue Mike as well.

These thoughts flashed through Mike's mind in the moments it took him to descend through the water. He knew he knew it was dangerous, but he also knew he didn't have a choice in the matter. He just hoped other rescuers would be there in time to help.

Landing on the hard acrylic bottom of the tank, Mike immediately began to search for the boy. He hadn't been able to grab a mask before he got in the water so everything around him was a watery blur. To make matters worse, the performers had equipment on the bottom of the tank to use in their show. They would hold on to it or swim around it while performing their underwater ballet. These props broke up Mike's line of sight making it even harder to find the boy.

As Mike searched his lungs began to burn. His mind was screaming that he needed to breathe. Every fiber of his body told him to bolt for the surface. Mike swallowed to suppress the urge and kept searching. He knew he would not be able to swim to the surface and make it back down again in time to save the boy. He had one shot at this and he was running out of time. He was the boy's only hope. And then he saw the small lifeless shape lying on the bottom of the acrylic tank.

The boy was lying against a block that formed the base of one of the performer's supports. Mike dropped to his knees and lifted the boy over his shoulder while he dropped the two weight belts. From his crouched position, and with all of the energy he had left, Mike sprang from the bottom, propelling the two of them toward the surface and air.

Mike kicked with his legs as hard as he could and swam upward with his free arm. His mind was screaming for fresh air. He had no idea how far he was from the surface. Doubt started to creep into his mind. *Can I make it? What if I'm too late? Should I have done this differently? What if I had...?*

Mike's head began to swim and he knew he was close to blacking out.

As his brain started to shut down, his head broke the surface. As he felt the water fall away and air on his face, Mike breathed in as rapidly as he could. A second breath. He was able to focus his eyes. There were



people on the stand. Hands reached out and grabbed the boy from Mike. Others helped Mike climb out of the water.

The performers were used to taking care of their own so they immediately began caring for the boy. One rescuer opened his airway and delivered two rescue breaths. When the boy didn't immediately respond and begin breathing on his own, another performer called 911 while a third jumped in to set up an oxygen kit. They immediately began CPR and started giving him oxygen.

After just a minute, the first rescuer rechecked the boy and could tell he had begun breathing on his own. They kept the oxygen in place and watched the boy to make sure he continued to breathe.

By the time emergency medical services had arrived, just a few minutes later, the boy was beginning to regain consciousness. The quick action of the rescuers had saved the boy's life. There was no question in anyone's mind; Mike had saved the boy's life.

Mike would have won the performers' confidence at some point and gotten the story he was really looking for. He was a professional and he took his time and got involved with the people. That was the way he liked to work and he had earned the right. Winning just about every photography award possible — including the Pulitzer Prize for News Photography for a story that nearly ended his career until he found his bearings again — had given him the luxury of doing what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. Mike would have gotten the story, but his selfless effort to save the boy opened every door and broke down every barrier that anyone could have ever thrown up. They accepted him as family immediately and allowed him inside their homes and allowed him access to their lives without hesitation.

When it was all said and done, Mike uploaded his photos to the magazine headquarters and then relaxed. In the morning, he would climb onto an airplane for a brief vacation before his next assignment, but for one night, he was going to have some fun.

The circus performers were holding a dress rehearsal of their complete show before heading out on the road. Each of the performers had done their acts hundreds, if not thousands, of times before, but this was the final chance for everyone to see how it would look for that kid in the front row with the big eyes. Mike was going to be there for that too, although not as a journalist. For him, the stress and the intensity of the assignment were over. Now, he got to enjoy this last night with his new group of friends. He got to sit in the front row, in the owner's box, and enjoy the show. He got to be the wide-eyed kid again. He couldn't wait.

## CHAPTER ONE

There was no place in the world Mike would rather be at the moment than where he was. The assignment at the circus had been great, but he needed to recharge his batteries before his next one. For him, there was no better way to start the morning than staring at the bright blue Caribbean water with the sun rising in his face and a gentle warm breeze coming across the water. The island he was on this time, Curacao, was beautiful, but in some ways it didn't matter. It was all about making a connection to the water. It was a joke, but he felt if he was away from the ocean for too long, his gills would dry out. Mike grew up in land-locked West Virginia, but fell in love with the ocean when he was young. For him, the ocean held promise. It was vast and frightening, but it was also warm and inviting.

From the open air restaurant at the hotel, Mike could see the semi-circular bay with its sugar white sand beaches and to his right, there was a dock where the dive boats tied up. Mike could see the boat crew making the final preparations so he signaled for his breakfast check and took a long last pull from his cup of coffee. Mike stood and stretched. He was stiff from his recent travels. He wasn't 25 years old anymore and it took him longer to recover from long flights. *Heck, even short flights hurt more than they used to*, Mike thought.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you going out on the dive boat this morning?"

"What? Oh, sorry. Yes, I'm going out this morning. Are you guys coming along, too?" Mike was startled by the question, but quickly came out of his reverie to focus on the couple standing across the table. He hadn't seen them approach, lost in his own thoughts. They were in their middle-40s, about Mike's age.

"Yes, we are, but honestly, we're a little nervous," the woman answered. "I'm Myra and this is my husband Doug, by the way."

"What are you nervous about?"

"We've been diving before, but we are still sort of new to it. This is our first time out on a dive boat like this. We go diving in Florida and use our shop's boat, but we've never been diving outside our home group."

"I understand, but don't worry. These guys are great. They'll take good care of you, today. I've been out with them several times and I keep coming back, if that tells you anything." Mike glanced out at the dock

and saw the dive boat's captain signal that they were all set. "Looks like they're ready to go. I tell you what. My girlfriend Frankie had other commitments so I'm by myself on this trip. We can buddy up together if you'll let me use you as models for a few of my underwater photos. I promise you I won't be a nuisance."

"I don't know if we're exactly model material," Doug said with a laugh in his voice. It was the first time he spoke.

"Don't worry about that. I just like to have people in my photos."

"Then it sounds fun to me," Myra said. "And thanks." She understood that Mike was taking them under his wing to get them going.

"You're welcome. Come on. Let's go get wet."

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"Is the team in position?"

"We are ready and awaiting orders."

"You must stop him before he makes it to the meeting. Do you understand exactly what you need to do?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have men at the point of departure and on the ground at the destination. All contingencies are covered." The man knew his business, but his client obviously didn't. He was a professional, but he knew the people who contracted him and his team weren't always as solid in their determination. They wanted the job done, but wanted to talk about it more than he liked. The man thought of himself as a fire and forget missile. Point him at a target and let him go. He'd get the job done. He knew part of his job was dealing with clients and making sure they were committed to the job, and making sure they paid for the work in advance, but it wasn't something he enjoyed.

"Okay, just walk me through it again, so I know how you're going to do it."

"No, ma'am. We discussed that. It is best for all involved if you don't know exactly what is planned and when it will take place. This is for operational security," the man said. *And better for me and my team if you get cold feet and try to put a stop to things by alerting the authorities. The last thing I need is for you to tip off the cops to keep yourself out of jail,* he thought. He also knew that using terms like "operational security" made his clients feel better about what they were doing. It made them feel like a general sending a team into battle and made ordering a hit on someone seem less like murder. It didn't matter to the team either way, but their clients seemed to appreciate it.

"Okay, okay, I understand."

"All we need now is for your final okay and we will get started. Once you give us the green light, my men will immediately get to work." He didn't add that they would double check the numbered bank account to make sure the deposit was made before they lifted a finger.

“Did you set up the misdirection I asked for?”

“We took care of it.”

“Then you have my final okay. Stop Stone from talking to the president. Do whatever you need to do, but it has to happen before that meeting. Do you understand that? It has to be done before he speaks to President Arturo. There is a big meeting coming up and I don’t want him to be able to affect that. Do you understand?”

“Thank you, ma’am. My men will get to work immediately. It will go as promised and the meeting in Venezuela will not take place.”

## CHAPTER TWO

The Gulfstream G650 was the most advanced business aircraft his company owned. It could go farther and faster than any other privately-owned business airplane in existence. It featured the finest in avionics, noise-reducing insulation and had room for eight passengers and four crew members. But Ryan Stone was alone in the cabin. That was okay with him. It gave him time to think without being forced to make small talk. He hated to make small talk. And besides, he really needed to get ready for this meeting. He had all the facts, figures and statistics. That was all done before he left New York. His final preparation had to do with attitude, approach and determination. Stone was headed to Caracas, Venezuela for talks that no one imagined were even possible just a few years ago. He was going to talk to the government of Venezuela about oil production and prices.

Around the world, oil production was at an all-time high. The OPEC nations were producing oil. So were North and South America. The North Sea was still delivering oil, but it was slowing. Overall, consumption was down, though, and those high production numbers were driving the price of oil through the floor. Oil companies were going bankrupt and drilling operations were shutting down. Politicians pointed fingers at each other, analysts pointed their fingers at the Chinese and the American people pointed their fingers at the oil companies.

Of course, the average consumer loved the low oil prices. That meant they were paying less for gas than in years and keeping more money in their pockets. It also meant they could get their gas-guzzling SUVs and Hummers out of the garage and take road trips. They loved those low oil prices until the layoffs started and their retirement accounts took a beating. It was one of the disconnects of the business world that the public hated the oil companies, but loved what their profitability did for the stock market and individual retirement programs that were invariably heavily invested in oil. It was like how everyone hated Congress, but loved their congressman.

Still, there was growing concern about what this overproduction and falling demand was doing to the country's economy, and with it the rest of the world. There was tension in Washington D.C. Their

constituents at home were demanding their representatives *DO* something, with enough force and enough volume that the normally reluctant members of Congress were starting to pay attention. They knew free trade was a good thing, and the root of the American economy, but trade in oil didn't seem to be *free* at all. The whole system seemed rigged.

It was a small voice in the wilderness, but there were even those who shouted for the nationalization of the oil industry. They said the price of oil, and its ripple effect throughout the rest of the world economy, was a threat to the economy of the United States. And that made it a national security issue. They called for the US to remove its oil from the open market and keep it all at home.

Stone was the lead negotiator for a conglomerate of oil companies. The various companies, normally competitors, had joined forces to present a united front. His job was to head off the problem before the ground swell of support got too strong. His bosses wanted things to stay the way they were, without too much government oversight. At the same time, the companies were hemorrhaging blood across their ledger books and needed it all to stop.

Venezuela had plenty of oil and it was nationalized. The government subsidized the price of gasoline to provide a benefit to the people. And that was why Stone needed Venezuela's help. Saudi Arabia, as the leader of OPEC, was manipulating world oil markets. They were pumping out all the oil they could to keep the prices low for one simple reason. Hydraulic fracturing, known as "fracking", had opened up the oil market in the United States, giving the Saudis competition. They were flooding the market with cheap oil to drive the American companies into bankruptcy. Everyone expected the Saudis would cut back on production at some point, but no one knew when or how many companies they would put out of business before they did so. The potential economic crisis was the new world order's version of nuclear brinkmanship. Stone's plan was to organize the non-OPEC nations, and get Venezuela to join them, to combat the oil glut. Acting together, they could beat the Saudis at their own game. It might seem like market manipulation, but he believed they were fighting for their very survival.

Stone was shaken from his thoughts by the sound of a *whump* below his feet. The plane was traveling just short of the speed of sound 35,000 feet in the air so he knew they hadn't hit anything. He looked around, confused for a moment, but then started to relax as nothing seemed out of order. Until the next *whump* and then the plane bucked up and down violently.

Stone, like most passengers on private planes, had unbuckled his seat belt immediately after take-off. The plane's sudden moves slammed him into the padded ceiling of the plane's cabin so violently he was knocked to the floor in a daze. The plane was in trouble.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Shhhhh, chhhhhh. Shhhhh, chhhhhh.”

Mike could hear the “Shhhhh” with each inhale and then the “Chhhhhh” with each exhale through his scuba regulator. In the space between inhalation and exhalation, he could hear the metallic sound of his exhaled breaths as they tinkled past his ears.

In a week Mike was scheduled to be in Natal, Brazil, off the country’s northeast coast, to photograph a group of men, and a few women, who hand-caught lobster using homemade dive equipment. They often ended up with decompression sickness, the bends, and were just as often paralyzed or died. It galled him that his favorite sport was killing desperate men and women who didn’t have an alternative. Knowing that job was going to be stressful, Mike decided to stop on the island of Curacao to visit some friends and take a break for a few days before continuing his journey and getting to work. Curacao was the largest of the ABC islands: Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao. Bonaire was internationally known for its diving, but Mike liked Curacao best. The ABC islands were formerly known as the Netherlands Antilles. In 2010, Curacao was granted its independence, although it is still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The nation’s capital, Willemstad, was an interesting mix of Dutch architecture and Caribbean color. Just off the coast of Venezuela, the island also boasted its own oil refinery and saw a significant amount of shipping and cargo traffic with goods intended for the rest of the western Caribbean. Shell Oil opened the refinery in 1914 after they discovered oil in Venezuela. Curacao’s deep water port was an ideal place to establish a refinery for the crude oil and send it to Venezuela’s customers. Ultimately, Shell sold the refinery back to Curacao who leased it to Venezuela.

The reef Mike and new his friends were diving was beautiful. Normally more interested in shipwrecks than reefs, Mike still loved to cruise over the top of a healthy dive site and absorb the sights and colors around him. He was relatively shallow on this dive, only 25 feet below the surface. The water was warm, in the low 80s, so he was only wearing a t-shirt and shorts over his fit 6’2” frame. He didn’t need, or want, a wetsuit on this dive. He wanted to feel the water all around him.

Often, when Mike dived in the Caribbean, he liked to put a macro lens on his camera inside the watertight housing. He loved to dive slow and see how close he could get to the tiny, colorful creatures on the reef before they sensed him there and hid in their coral nooks and crannies. This time, however, he had a wide angle lens fitted to his digital camera body that was better suited for photographing the other divers in the water and the bigger reef. He made his living with a camera in his hand, but even on vacation, he didn't feel right diving without his camera.

Mike was following the dive buddy pair he had just met and they had been more than happy to pose for him and allow him to photograph them while they swam. He didn't interfere with them too much, only occasionally giving them directions to swim one way or another. He wasn't trying to accomplish anything on the dive, other than to relax, have some fun and capture some sunshine. They had been diving for about 45 minutes when the couple signaled they were low on air and ready to head to the surface. Mike still had plenty of air left in his tank, but he headed toward the boat as well. There was no reason to push the dive.

Mike's head broke the surface about 10 yards away from the stern of the boat. They were about 500 yards off the northeastern shore of the island, as far away from Willemstad as they could get and still be in Curacao.

Mike waited for the other divers to climb on board the boat, chatting among themselves about what they saw on the dive or discussing how much air they had left. He was quiet, though. He didn't really know anyone on board. So he simply relaxed and floated in the water while he waited his turn to climb on board. Mike turned slow circles in the water while he waited. He was staring at the ocean, away from the island, marveling at the bright blue Caribbean water when he noticed a plane approaching low and fast just above the horizon. He pulled his mask down from his eyes so he could see more clearly. He immediately saw smoke trailing out of the back of the plane. It was in trouble. And worse still, it was heading straight for them.

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### **Say Hello!**

Eric talks about adventure and taking time to be creative, along with diving and writing, on his blog at [www.booksbyeric.com](http://www.booksbyeric.com). He would love it if you dropped by to say hello.

You can also follow him on [Twitter](#), get in touch on [Facebook](#) or through [Google+](#). Lastly, you can always send him an email: [eric@booksbyeric.com](mailto:eric@booksbyeric.com)

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Life is an adventure for Eric Douglas, above and below the water and wherever in the world he ends up. Eric received a degree in Journalism from Marshall University. After working in local newspapers, honing his skills as a story teller, and following a stint as a freelance journalist in the former Soviet Union, he became a dive instructor. The ocean and diving have factored into all of his fiction works since then.

As a documentarian, Eric has worked in Russia, Honduras and most recently in his home state of West Virginia, featuring the oral histories of West Virginia war veterans in the documentary West Virginia Voices of War and the companion book Common Valor.

Visit his website at: [www.booksbyeric.com](http://www.booksbyeric.com).

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