

Real Thugs

A Cult of Murder

ERIC DOUGLAS

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DEDICATION

For Beverly, Ashlin, Jamison and Kaitlin. Always for you guys.

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CHAPTER 1

Three young women stood in front of their car at the rest stop, simply staring at the mess under the hood. Their dreams of making it to the opening of the River Music Festival were evaporating as quickly as the water from their radiator.

"What are we going to do?" Janet asked. "I don't have a clue how to fix this."

"Neither do I," Stacey said. She had her phone out trying to make a call, but the service was spotty in the mountains along Interstate 81 through Virginia.

It was late in the evening, but a fair amount of traffic passed by with cars, trucks and vans coming and going from the rest stop. Not far away from where they parked, an RV pulled into a spot and three young men got out. They all appeared to be of Middle Eastern or Indian descent and were well-dressed.

The young men crossed the parking lot to the facilities together and came back separately a few minutes later. One changed course away from the RV and headed toward the women in distress.

"Are you ladies all right?" he asked. He had a slight accent, but it wasn't overpowering. "Can I help?"

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"Are you a mechanic?" Stacey asked. She looked skeptically at him. At a glance, he appeared to be more of a fraternity boy than a man who knew his way around cars.

"Sorry, no. Mechanical things aren't my strong suit. My name is Paul," he said. Stacey noted his accent matched his appearance, although she could tell he was trying to erase it and sound more "American."

"Thank you for checking, Paul, but unless you either cell service or a radiator hose with you, I am going to keep trying to get in touch with the tow service," Stacey said. It was her car and she knew her dad would kill her if he knew she had agreed to take it on this road trip. The last thing she wanted to do was call him for help.

"You all wouldn't be headed to the River Music Festival, would you?" Paul asked. He pointedly didn't answer the question about cell service.

"We are! How did you know?" Eve, the third woman replied. "We've been looking forward to it for months."

"Yeah, how did you know?" Janet asked. There was a more suspicious tone in her voice.

"Just a guess. We're heading there, too. And I see your friend's band t-shirt."

Eve was wearing a concert t-shirt from the festival's headline band, Compatibility Mode.

"Yeah, I guess that does make it pretty obvious," Janet agreed, relaxing a notch.

"Listen, I'm sorry I can't help with your car, but if you want, you can ride with us. We've got plenty of room in the RV. Once we get to the festival and get checked in, I'm sure you can get a better phone signal and get in touch with someone to come out and fix the car. They can probably take care of it for you and deliver it to the fairgrounds," Paul said.

"Listen man, I don't know who you are, but we're not the kind of women who just jump into an RV with a bunch of strange men beside the road. We've all seen that horror movie," Janet said.

Paul chuckled in response.

"Look, it's up to you. My friends and I are going to take off in a few minutes. We just wanted to take care of business before we got close to the fair grounds. The RV has a toilet, but we wanted to stretch our legs for a few minutes, too. If you want a ride, come on. If you don't, I get it. No problem for me, but I'm going to head back over to my friends. If you want a ride, you are welcome. But listen, it's getting late in the evening. I don't know how often the police patrol this rest area, but sometimes you get some pretty sketchy characters coming through here. You can be safe with us or take your chances."

With that, Paul waved and walked across the parking lot toward his friends.

"I say we go with them," Eve said as soon as Paul was out of ear shot.

"Are you kidding?" Janet asked.

"Not at all. I really don't want to miss this show," Eve said.

"I'm with Eve," Stacey said. "They just look like good guys to me. I don't get any bad vibes from them at all. It's not like they're a bunch of drunk rednecks in the back of a truck."

"I didn't even smell any alcohol on him," Eve said.

"How would you know? You've been drinking for three hours," Janet shot back.

"Come on, Janet. We came on this trip to have fun. You're going to have to unwind a little bit. Take some chances. You never know how it will turn out."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Janet said.

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"Think about it. All the cop shows say serial killers are always white guys. Those guys look Indian. Have you ever heard of them killing people?"

Back at the RV, Paul spoke to his two friends. He hadn't mentioned to the women there were two more men inside.

"Did you convince them to come with us?" Clive asked.

"Maybe. One seems hesitant. This would be a bonus if they did. I don't expect it to be much if they do," Paul said.

"The old ways say no women or children, unless it can't be avoided," Anthony said.

"I know what the old ways say, but back then women didn't travel on their own, either. If they did, they were poor or widows. Today, if women want to be seen as equals, they are open to the same risks of the road as everyone else."

"So you're all about equality now?" Anthony asked.

"Equal opportunity for us. Definitely." Paul intentionally kept his back to the women and simply appeared to be joking with his friends. He knew his friends would let him know if the women seemed to decide.

"Is everything in place should they come?" Paul asked. He laughed as he said it to make it appear to anyone watching him that his friend had just told a joke.

"It is. There is a place near here. We've used it before, but it won't be a problem. There is plenty of room," Clive said.

"What are they doing?"

"They are still talking, but they keep looking this way."

"Okay, let's up the pressure a bit. Get inside and start the RV. They will be forced to decide."

Clive and Anthony opened the side door and climbed inside. Anthony went straight to the driver's seat and started the engine. It made noise starting and then immediately settled down to a dull idle.

Paul turned to look at the three women by their car. He raised his arm to wave goodbye and felt an instant jolt of excitement as he saw one of the women shutting the car's hood and the other two grabbing overnight bags from the trunk of the car. They began to call out to him. He leaned inside the RV to tell his friends the women would be joining them.

CHAPTER 2

Her three assailants, two men and a woman, came directly at her. There was no hesitation in their step and no need to hide their motives. They were going to take her down.

AJ West faced the three without fear. She was in a slight crouch, assuming a fighter's stance. She had a black bandanna tied around her head to keep her hair out of her face. A few strands of her dark brown hair broke loose anyway and hung in her face. She was already sweating from the exertion, but she wasn't about to stop.

AJ circled to her right, trying to change their angle of attack. And her own. She fought using a technique developed by the Israeli military called Krav Maga. It blended techniques from multiple disciplines and a basic philosophy of the style dictated that defense and offense happened at the same time.

Without warning or hesitation, AJ leaped toward the attacker closest to her. She wasn't going to let them control the fight. As she jumped, she drew her fist back, landing a punch at the same time her feet touched down. The force of her jump doubled the force of the blow. Her first attacker hit the floor in a ball.

AJ barely had a chance to turn before the second attacker, the woman, grabbed her in a judo hold and attempted to throw her to the ground. Instead of resisting the throw, AJ charged into it, unbalancing the woman.

AJ locked her arms with the other woman and bowled her over, throwing her onto her back and twisting her in a head and leg lock.

The woman struggled against AJ's hold, but AJ wasn't going to give up. Their position on the floor made it impossible for the second man to get involved in the fight. Any blow or kick he threw would hit the woman. AJ made sure of that. Quickly, the woman's body went slack and AJ rolled her away while springing to her feet so she could face the last man.

He was taller than AJ, standing about six feet and dark skinned. He outweighed her by at least 70 pounds of solid muscle. The sustained strain of the hold on the female attacker had turned her arms to lead but she wasn't about to give up. There was nothing in her that understood the idea of surrender.

Circling to her left, AJ weighed her options and controlled her breathing. Every second that passed allowed her time to regain energy. Her attacker knew that and came at her. He tried to grapple with her, relying on his superior physical strength and mass to tie her up and end the confrontation.

AJ knew that matching brute strength was a sure way to lose. As soon as the man closed on her she dropped to the floor and kicked out her right leg. She swept the man's left leg into his right, overbalancing him. She grabbed his outstretched arm and twisted it behind him while she stood back up. She used the man's momentum as he careened past her and slung him the rest of the way to the floor.

A wrestling match with the man was a no-win situation. She had to take him out immediately. Like a cat, AJ pounced on the man's back, and wrapped her leg around the man's thick neck. She quickly locked her feet together and began to squeeze. She could feel the blood in the man's carotid arteries bounding in his neck against the muscles in her leg. The exertion and the pressure from her hold making it impossible for enough

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oxygen to reach the man's brain. Sweat poured off the man's bald head, but she wasn't going to lose her grip.

He smacked the floor with an open hand.

AJ continued to hold the pressure. In just a moment, he would pass out.

The man slapped the floor again, harder and louder this time.

"AJ, he gives. AJ!" The shout cut through the heat of the fight.

AJ began to slowly relax her grip on the nearly unconscious man and then rolled off him.

It was over. There was no need to finish it. She quickly pulled the man to his back.

"Dwayne, are you okay?" she asked.

It took the man a moment to reply, while he struggled to catch his breath and clear the cobwebs from his brain.

"I was beginning to wonder how far you were going to take it," Dwayne replied. "I would hate for you to kill your own partner."

"I agree, the paperwork would be a nightmare," AJ said. They both chuckled.

The fight was a training exercise. AJ had intentionally challenged her three assailants to see how she would do against multiple attackers. It turned out much as they all expected, even though none of them was a slouch at hand-to-hand combat.

Turning to the woman who had called her name, AJ said "Thanks, Dierdre. I was in a zone."

"I could tell. Remind me to have a referee here the next time we spar."

AJ stood up and stretched out her hand to Dwayne. The man grabbed her arm, acting as if he was going to stand and then dropped back to the exercise mat on the floor, pulling AJ down. She executed a roll and spun to face him.

Dwayne laughed and raised his hands in front of him in surrender.

"I should have known you would be ready for that," he said. "I'm done. No more."

AJ gave a little bow to each of her three friends and then walked to her gym bag on the floor to grab a towel. She pulled off the bandana, but her hair was still matted to her head with sweat. Looking in her bag, she realized her phone was blinking. Checking her messages, she saw she had missed three phone calls and had two text messages. All from her boss. The Deputy Director of the FBI.

CHAPTER 3

The three young women climbed inside the RV and were relieved to see it was neat and tidy inside. They had each imagined that a group of guys heading to a music festival would be in party/road trip mode. They expected beer cans and liquor bottles to be everywhere.

"Maybe they just got started," Eve said to Stacey. Her tone was slightly disappointed. Her friend just giggled.

"Ladies, I'm glad you decided to join us," Paul said, sounding more like an emcee than a twenty-something college guy taking a road trip for a party weekend. "This is my friend Anthony." He gestured toward the driver as the young man behind the wheel backed the RV out of the parking spot and then merged onto the interstate on-ramp.

"And another of my friends, Clive." Clive smiled at the women.

It was only then that Paul turned his attention to the back of the vehicle. The women were surprised to see two more men sitting in the back. They knew Paul had two friends. They had seen the three young men talking outside. But this brought the total up to five. All three women shifted uneasily as Paul continued talking.

"Have a seat, ladies. Have a seat. We're a couple hours away from the music festival site, so you might as well make yourselves comfortable. Leave the driving to us."

The five men in the RV were all about the same age, early to mid-20s.

"Are you guys in a fraternity or something?" Eve asked.

"Something like that," Clive replied, moving forward into the kitchen area. "Can I get you ladies something to drink? We do have some beer and some wine." He opened the fridge to demonstrate the selection.

"Do you have any Rosé? I only drink Rosé," Eve said.

"As a matter of fact we do." Clive smiled and pulled a new, unopened bottle out of the refrigerator. Eve and Stacey took the wine, but Janet declined. She explained that she was still worried about her car.

After a half an hour on the road, even Janet began to relax. Anthony was a responsible driver, going just below the speed limit. Paul and Clive continued to talk to the three of them, but no one said anything aggressive or even slightly sexually suggestive. Janet wasn't sure she had ever been around a group of five young men when alcohol was involved that the conversation didn't turn to sex.

She did note that both Paul and Clive were nursing their own drinks while continually offering to refresh the drinks of her two friends. The other two men smiled and laughed at the jokes but stayed quiet and out of the way. She tried to remember if Paul had even introduced them. She decided they must be pledges to the fraternity or something. They were probably forbidden to speak or some other silly hazing ritual.

Not interested in the conversations in the back, Janet moved toward the front of the RV to speak to Anthony.

"How did you get stuck driving?" she said after a moment of silence in the front passenger seat.

Anthony looked over at her for a moment, a sadness in his eyes, and then answered. His accent was a touch stronger than Paul's but still seemed like he worked hard to minimize it.

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"Someone has to drive, or we wouldn't get there. Don't worry. One of my brothers in the back will take over and drive later," he said. "We share responsibilities when we are traveling."

"Do you guys make a lot of road trips? I assumed you were college students," she said. "My friends and I go to school together."

"Oh, that's what I meant. When we take road trips together, we take turns at all the jobs that have to be done. But some of us are better at certain jobs and some are better at others, so we do tend to gravitate to certain positions. Don't worry though. I get out from behind the wheel and participate, too."

Janet smiled at the way Anthony had answered her question. He seemed vague on details, but she couldn't quite put her finger on the problem. Something was off, but everyone seemed so nice and polite, she decided she was being paranoid.

"Can I get you anything?" Janet asked.

"No, don't worry about me. I am used to driving and like the quiet."

Just then she heard louder giggling and laughter from the back. Eve was already feeling the effects of the alcohol in the wine. No one was out of control, and Janet felt like a mother hen, but she decided to move back with the group to keep an eye on her friends.

"Okay, well if you change your mind, let me know I'll be happy to bring you water or a Coke or something. I don't know what you guys have," she said.

"Go on back with your friends and be at ease. Leave it all in my hands," Anthony said.

Janet couldn't shake off the feeling that something was amiss, but she moved back to the main passenger area. She realized she was right about Eve. And Stacey wasn't far behind. They had both been drinking earlier and they hadn't stopped since getting into the RV. *How much have they had?*

Looking at Clive and Paul, she was puzzled by the men's lack of reaction to the state of drunkenness. Neither of her friends were stunning or sex kittens that oozed sex appeal, but they were attractive and healthy young women. She imagined one or all the men would be moving closer on the couches and getting friendly. *That was the whole reason for having an RV wasn't it? To pick up women at the music festival and get lucky?*

A song came on the radio and Eve stood up and began dancing. She moved toward Janet.

"Come on, Janet, loosen up! Let's have some fun!" She shook her best assets toward the young men and got appropriate smiles back. Eve grabbed Janet's hands and pulled her up to dance with her. Janet hesitated at first and then realized she had come on this trip to have fun and maybe meet a guy and get lucky herself. She had never dated, or slept with, an Indian guy, but she didn't have a problem with it. These guys were nice, and they seemed like they had money and good manners.

Janet took Eve's drink from her hand and downed half of it before she started dancing in earnest. Stacey joined in the fun and the three women danced together for a minute. Then they turned around and each grabbed a guy and pulled them up to dance. Stacey tried to get one of the two quiet ones in the back to dance, but both men shook their heads and refused.

Paul grabbed Stacey around the waist and brought her back to the main living area and danced with her and Eve.

They danced and flirted for four more songs, having fun. It wasn't until Janet felt the RV begin to slow down that she looked forward at Anthony again. She quickly realized he had turned off the road onto a smaller one. Janet didn't think they should be at the music festival yet, although she realized she had lost track of time. Not seeing anything in the dark windshield, she moved toward the driver's seat to see what was going on.

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"Where are you heading? This doesn't look like the road to the festival. I thought there would be signs."

"It's a special back road for RVs. They sent us an email and told us to go this way to our assigned parking area. It's for VIPs only," he said.

"Oh, okay. That makes sense," Janet said and then she looked back at her friends. The two quiet men had stood up for the first time and were standing close to Eve and Stacey. Clive was standing with them, but Paul had moved up to a position directly behind her.

"My brothers. The time has come," Paul said.

In an instant, Paul whipped a long scarf from his pocket and wrapped it around Janet's neck. He pulled it tight and she began to choke. A hard knot in the fabric pressed directly against her throat, making it impossible to breathe.

She tried to struggle and fight, but there was no way to get her fingers under the fabric around her neck. The blood in her head began to pound as she struggled for a breath, realizing that she was about to die.

Janet attempted to turn around and get her friends' attention, hoping one of them could help her. She got partially turned to see both of her friends already on the ground. Clive had a scarf around Eve's neck and the other two men were strangling Stacey in the same way.

A moment later, Janet lost consciousness.

Anthony never stopped driving the RV.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Join Eric's [Tides and Tales Mailing List](#) to get regular notices about new releases, special offers and free stuff. Don't worry, we will never spam you or sell your address. (We hate that, too.) You can also download a free short story, only available to members of [the mailing list](#).

Eric Douglas spent his childhood Sunday nights watching “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau” and dreamed of diving alongside the Captain. He became a diver, and then a dive instructor, meeting his goals and pursuing a life of adventure and travel.

Through his fictional works, Eric takes readers on adventures of their own. His stories have everything thriller junkies crave; action, adventure and intrigue, set against a backdrop of beautiful locations, the ocean and the environment, and scuba diving. The fast-paced stories are exciting, but Eric also hopes to inspire future generations of explorers and adventurers like Cousteau did for him.

After completing a program at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, Eric jumped into documentary work, creating nonfiction works on lobster divers, war veterans, and cancer survivors.

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

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