

Flooding Hollywood

A Mike Scott Adventure

By Eric Douglas



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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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To Angie, Ashlin and Jamison—the three girls in my life.
Without you all, I couldn't do this.

To everyone who read this, and helped me improve the story dramatically, and to every one of my California dive buddies, without whom I wouldn't know what it was like to fly through kelp, thanks.

Chapter 1

The lights of southern California lit up the coastline, making it look more like dusk or dawn, rather than the midnight it actually was.

The old fishing trawler made its way north slowly, staying close enough to see the coast, but never getting close enough to be spotted from it; the men on board wanted to see where they were, but didn't really want anyone else to see them. The trawler's twin diesel engines were running slow, just droning along, barely making headway against the current. Only one light inside the boat illuminated the cabin, although it was running with its required external lights. The captain knew better than to run without those lights. He didn't want to get caught without them on, and sometimes there is nothing more obvious than a completely dark hole moving along.

It was somewhat unusual for a boat of this size and design to be running at this time of night, since most commercial trawlers did their work early in the morning. It wasn't just that it was an unusual time of the day for the trawler, the location would have raised eyebrows for those familiar with the area as well because fishing boats rarely plied these waters—the shipping lane between the Channel Islands and the southern California coast—although just a few miles further west, toward Catalina Island, sport fishermen still went out.

At a predetermined point, the Captain of the trawler altered his course from due north to slightly northwest. He wanted to come closer

to Catalina. He knew it was there; he could see it on his radar, but the lights of the largest community on the island, Avalon, still weren't visible.

Only one man sat behind the wheel of the fishing trawler—he was the Captain and had been since the boat came from the shipyard new. The console in front of him gave him an unearthly, ghoulish glow. Once, he had been a successful fisherman, and then a charter captain when the commercial fisheries collapsed. But hard times, an up-and-down economy and a tendency to drink too much had led him where those things had led a lot of people. He was run down and tired. There just wasn't much more he could do.

So when, out of the blue, two men had offered him good money to make this run a few nights a week, there was no way he could turn it down. He hadn't seen that amount of cash in a long time. He didn't know, or even begin to care, why they had him do what they had him do; as long as they kept paying him.

He passed Avalon by. As the boat quietly moved away from the hamlet, the Loran guidance system on his console told him he was where he needed to be. Just about every boat captain on the water now used a Global Positioning System (GPS) to place themselves accurately on the water, but the old Captain hadn't been able to update the boat. The money these men were paying him had begun to give him hope, though. He hadn't turned back to the bottle. He had been in the marine store a few days before pricing out electronics and he had talked to the dockmaster where he kept his boat, the *Laura*, tied up. He wanted to see about getting her hauled out of the water into dry dock and fixed up. *Who knows*, he thought to himself, *I might even try to contact my daughter.*

His family and marriage had been doomed by his work as a commercial fisherman and the time it required on the water and away from his family. He was divorced and his daughter gone from his life when he got this boat, his pride-and-joy. In an effort to keep some small part of his daughter with him, he had named the boat after her. He never wanted to forget her. In his memory, he was riding high on life at that

time, but the stress of losing his family and some bad turns in the fishing fleets had pulled the rug out from under him.

Laura had to be about forty now, but he really didn't know what had happened to her. Still, he thought, he would like to see her again. Just a few more of these runs and he would fix up the boat, clean himself up and track her down. A girl ought to know her father. Even at forty.

In spite of his less-accurate guidance system, the old captain knew where he was—experience told him. It was time. He growled out loud to the two men below. “You two. Get up here.”

He didn't really like the men who had hired him, but they kept to themselves and stayed out of his way. It was a simple trip to run up from Mexico every evening and let the men do what they needed to do. He was back on the water and in control of his own vessel. And the money was good.

As the men came on deck, the old captain reached forward and adjusted the engines. He pulled back on the throttles and slowed the boat down to where it just wallowed along with the waves. Quickly, the two men moved to the rail holding several packages the size of small cakes.

Softer this time, the captain said, “It's about time.”

The men stacked solid packages against the gunnels of the boat on the port side and waited for their mark. They didn't make a sound as they prepared for the evening's task—one they had completed several times before. The two men picked up each package a final time and pressed a button in the center. A light blinked once and then went dark. Once they had completed the task, the first man spoke quietly to the captain.

“These're all ready to go,” he said.

With that, the captain slipped the powerful Detroit diesels into neutral. The men heard and felt the change in the trawler before they heard the captain confirm it. They each picked up a package and lowered it over the side, letting it slide into the water. The bundles slipped under the water with barely a sound. The men repeated the process for each package resting at their feet.

When all the packages were in the water, one of the two spoke to the captain. “We’re done,” he said.

The captain slipped the trawler back into gear and continued on his way, the pause imperceptible to all but the most intense scrutiny. He would head a little further north before he turned the boat around and headed back to Mexican waters.

The two men headed back below decks to make themselves comfortable for the rest of the trip.

“Before long, we’ll be finished. Four or five more trips should do it. All of the material will be in Los Angeles,” the man said as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. It was a cool night on the water, but this job always made him nervous.

“It won’t be too soon for me. It’s cold and wet out here. I don’t like the water,” the second man agreed as he flopped down on a cot.

“When it’s done, we’ll need to find a way to make the captain disappear.”

“I followed him like the old man told me to,” the second man said. “I saw him talking to some guy at the harbor. I think he’s planning to use the money we’ve given him to fix up this boat. But I also found out that he used to be a drinker. We’ll make it look like he was drunk behind the wheel. Maybe we’ll throw him overboard. I’d like to do it before he spends all of the money on this ancient tub. I want to take it back.”

“Keep watching. I hope we can make all of the deliveries before he spends it. Wouldn’t the old man be impressed if we brought back money to use for the cause.”

* * * * *

These things are never in the nicer parts of town, Mike Scott thought to himself as he watched the men around him prepare for their task. Professionals all, the members of the antiterrorism task force were relatively quiet as they prepared their equipment and readied themselves for whatever they might encounter.

Mike was a professional as well, just not a military one. He was a

seasoned photojournalist. War zones—he had done that. Combat—he had seen that, too. He personally was never interested in carrying a gun, but he had tremendous respect for this team, and others like it—civilian or military. These were men and women with a purpose, an *esprit de corps* and a camaraderie that couldn't be approached by people who didn't rely on their fellows in a firefight. When the difference between going home and seeing your kids that night might be the man or woman beside you, it broke down all barriers.

In a way, Mike almost envied the closeness of the team. Almost. He also had a job to do, however. He was a teller of stories. A photographer. A reporter. A documenter of the world. It was his job, currently for *Time Magazine*, to point his lens into the dark crevices around the world and bring back images of the things he saw there. To do this, he had traveled the world. The images he found and brought home had earned him honors.

That was how he found himself preparing to follow a group of heavily-armed troopers into a building for a raid on a terror cell. The group was operating out of Mexico but, in an unusual move, the Mexican and American governments had agreed to trade intelligence. And because the American antiterrorism group was stronger and better-equipped, the Mexican Federales had given the green light for them to go in and break it up—with local observers attached, of course. The Mexicans wanted to learn what to do so they could handle situations like this on their own in the future.

Mike looked around at the crumbling warehouses. This part of town had seen better days. No doubt about it. But terrorists rarely rented high-profile apartments or homes in upscale neighborhoods to build bombs or practice firing their weapons. Such activities required privacy and seclusion, but they also needed space. So old, run-down warehouses it was.

This group of terrorists had an unusual twist, different from many such groups. While they had a core belief that held them together and justified their actions, they believed in commerce. So while they had their own, supposedly noble or revolutionary goals, and had no compunction about using terror, murder and destruction to support

those goals, they also realized the need for hard currency. In order to meet that need, they sold their expertise and their materials to support their network.

The terror cell had been able to purchase more explosives than they needed for their objective and had actually sold a portion of the material to another, unrelated group bent on destruction. That they didn't know or agree with the goals of the other group meant nothing to them. That sale, though, had brought them to the attention of the Mexican Federales and, consequently, the antiterrorism unit from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The group they sold the material to had gotten away, but not before leaving this group open for a raid.

The antiterrorism team had set up a base of operations for the raid a few blocks away from their objective. Spotters were already in place watching the building, accompanied by sharpshooters in case things got out of hand. The bad guys weren't going anywhere without the good guys knowing it.

As the team members prepared their equipment, so did Mike. He needed to make sure everything was ready to go. He had to move and capture images quickly. He couldn't waste time on a faulty piece of equipment. For his own protection, Mike was dressed in battle fatigues and body armor, loaned by Commander Light, the leader of the antiterrorist team. At 6 feet 2 inches, with broad shoulders and closely-cropped hair, Mike looked as if he could very easily fit in with the group.

Once the team was ready, the members moved as a single unit to a back entrance of the warehouse. They maneuvered into position to get as close as possible to the second-story room where the terrorists were holed up. Waiting in a stairwell, just below the door that led to the intended target, Mike did his best to stay out of the way and let the troopers do their job.

"Man. You're nuts," one of the men whispered to him out of the side of his mouth, without taking his eyes off the door ahead of him. The first men that would go through the door were using electronic surveillance cameras to confirm how many men were inside the room

and where they were. They didn't want any surprises when they burst inside. "At least we have guns when we do this. They shoot at us, we shoot back. You can't even do that. You're either crazy or ballsy. I'm still not sure which. Maybe, it's both."

"You do what you do and I do what I do. That's how it goes," Mike replied, just as softly. "I've been shot at before. Can't say I ever get used to it, but I just think about doing my job and I trust that I'll be all right."

"You say so, man," the trooper replied with a shake of his head and a slight grin.

"I'm not the one going through the door first, you are," Mike said to break the tension a little bit. "You guys break up the problems and I let other terrorists know you're out there doing your job. I want the good guys to know what you're doing, too," Mike explained as he checked over his cameras one last time, a little bit self-consciously. "Like I said, you have your job to do and I have mine. I don't even think about it."

The other man chuckled, smiled, and turned his attention back to the door above them. Mike Scott was very serious about his work and his words came from the heart.

While they waited, Mike took a few images of the team. The whisper-quiet shutter on his Nikon D2 digital cameras held no risk of the noise giving away the position. He was able to capture, he hoped, some of the tension, and determination, on the faces of the team as they waited. It occurred to him that he could be photographing the last minutes of someone's life and he felt the responsibility of doing it right.

Above, by the door, Commander Light gave the signal. The team members were all tense, but ready to move. This is what they trained to do. As one body, they stood and moved up the stairs. The first two men advanced and positioned themselves on either side of the door, with a battering ram held between them. The rest of the team members prepared their weapons, and disengaged the safety mechanisms. They slid their blast goggles into place. On a final signal from Light, the two men with the battering ram smashed the flimsy wooden door off its hinges.

The noise created by the single stroke from the heavy ram was the signal for a second team of men to enter the room from the outside. That

team consisted of three men who crashed through the windows after they had repelled down the outside of the building from the roof. As they came through the glass, these men fired stun grenades into the room careful to avoid the explosives in the room, timing their entrance to minimize their own exposure to the detonations.

Mike ran as quickly as he could up the stairs, but, for his own safety, he was at the end of the line. After the initial thunder from the grenades faded, he heard shouts directing the men inside to drop their weapons and get down on the floor. Then he heard the distinctive sound of the response when one of the terrorists inside decided not to comply quickly enough and opened fire with a fully-automatic machine gun. It had to be one of the terrorists, Mike reasoned. Soldiers and professionals never use full auto for handheld weapons. It's too difficult to control. Then Mike heard the response as several of the troopers crashing through the door returned fire with tight, controlled bursts. The raid was over almost before it started.

A moment later, Mike heard the "All Clear" signal from inside and he stepped into the small room. The smell of cordite from the weapons and the stun grenades was still acrid in the air. Mike had a camera to his face, photographing the scene.

None of the antiterrorist team members were injured in the raid, but three of the terrorists lay dead on the floor. Two others—they must have been right on top of the stun grenades when they went off—were still alive, but they were rolling around on the floor holding their ears. Their hands, faces and ears were bloody from the concussion and shock.

Surveying the room, Mike noted the cheap furniture strewn around. Tables covered with bomb-making equipment were knocked over and the room was a shambles. Mike realized that the room was probably somewhat of a shambles before the team members entered. It had the look of a college dorm room where several young men lived for an extended period. Food boxes and trash littered the floor.

A few of the tables, though, were neatly arrayed and arranged.

"Hey Mike, come here. Let me show you what we got," Commander Light said as he motioned Mike over. Tall and dark-skinned, Light was

a Marine Corps officer who was on temporary assignment to the Department of Homeland Security. He had been brought in to train this team. Not thrilled at first about Mike's presence, like most operators Light was also smart enough to realize the need to have the public on his side. In spite of the initial wariness, Mike spent several weeks with the team and the two had developed a good relationship.

"Do you know what this stuff is?" Light asked, gesturing with one hand toward the neatly arranged table.

"Oh yeah. I saw it in the Middle East last year and in Africa in '99," Mike replied, his eyes taking it all in, and moving in close with his cameras to document the look and placement of everything he saw. Mike knew he would get to publish whatever he saw, but he also knew Light would want copies of his images for his reports. It was an exchange they had agreed on and one Mike was happy to accommodate.

"Plastic explosive materials. Some cruder stuff over there. They were probably building a car bomb. Simple and easy to prepare. That's all it takes. This much stuff could easily blow up this entire building," Light explained. "Probably planning to drive the stuff through a small border crossing and trash some federal building. Maybe even blow up the border station itself. Figuring out the target is up to the intelligence guys. It's my job to make sure they don't get the chance to hit it."

"So where does this stuff come from?" Mike asked, as he continued to work, one of the team's Kevlar helmets resting backward on his head so it didn't interfere with his camera's viewfinder.

"Depends. Some of this is pretty high-quality, probably stolen from a U.S. military base. At least we know that makes it pretty stable. We're safe standing here. With some of the stuff we see, I would immediately call in the bomb squad and you and I wouldn't be in the room," Light continued.

Walking to the table, Light picked up a cake of plastic explosive. "Here is one they've assembled. This is a new variety of plastic explosive. It only takes one detonator and it all goes off. You just have to wire them together. The good news is, all you have to do is pull the detonator out and it can't hurt anyone. On the other hand, if this one

detonator went off and set off this piece of explosive, it would all go off. You get a chain reaction,” he said.

“So, a detonator is basically a small bomb itself, right?” Mike asked, leading Light into giving him more information.

“Exactly. It’s a small but powerful charge. A detonator could easily blow off your hand or your arm,” Light explained. “It begins the process and they all begin exploding. Remember, the whole chain reaction only takes milliseconds. You certainly don’t have time to run when one goes off.”

* * * * *

“Detective Banks,” Tommy whispered into his cell phone. “I think they’re finally going to let me in. We’re going to hear the ‘old man’ speak tonight and then afterwards, the guys tell me he is going to tell all of us his big plan.” He was sitting behind the wheel of an old truck he had driven to the meeting site.

“Do you have any idea what he’s planning?” the detective asked his undercover officer.

“Nothing yet, but they tell me it’s big. They say this is going to make Oklahoma City look like a firecracker. These guys are serious,” the operative answered quietly, sneaking a look around to make sure no one was nearby.

“Look. You be careful. We know these guys are nuts. Up until now, they haven’t done anything serious, just scared some people—protested and picketed and made some noise—but everything we hear is they’re planning on setting the world on its ear. I don’t know what they’re capable of. You watch your back,” Banks replied.

“Hey, Tommy, are you ready to go? What are you doing? Setting up a girl for later? You know the man said not to use cell phones around here—they can be traced,” another man called out to the operative from the front steps to the old abandoned “church” the group was using as a meeting site.

“Gotta go, honey. See you later,” Tommy said into the phone as he snapped it off. “Hey, you know I like to have a girl waiting for me. It

was a short phone call, I promise. No way anyone could have traced me,” he said to the man calling for him.

“Well, don’t let it happen again. If the old man caught you, you’d never get to be part of what’s going on here,” the other man grumbled as he stepped out of the shadows.

“I know. I know. Sorry, man. It’s just so hard to believe I’m this close. It’s really time we stuck it to the evil in this world. We have got to let the queers and the Jews know who’s really in charge of this country,” Tommy replied, trying to change the subject to one of the favorite topics of the group he had been assigned to infiltrate.

Domestic terrorism had become a chief concern all across the country, especially since 1995 with the bombing in Oklahoma City. Terrorism in general was a priority for every law enforcement agency since 9/11. In vast convoluted cities like Los Angeles, every minority group was present. Every group that was hated by extremists, religious and otherwise, and every group that did the hating, religious or otherwise, was represented there. All those contrasting elements tended to escalate differences into an all out war. And that was why the city’s antiterrorism task force was involved.

Word on the street over the last few months had it that this group, called the Brotherhood of the Holy, headed up by a character always referred to as “the old man,” was planning something more than rallies and fund raisers. It had built a core of people who had the skills necessary to do more than talk. However, that core group was pretty well camouflaged in the larger group whose main skill was parroting whatever the old man said. The core group led from the back and didn’t take risks.

Now that the group members had raised the money they needed, using whatever means necessary, they were dangerous. They had worked themselves into a frenzy. It was only a matter of time until they pulled something off. But unfortunately the word on the street didn’t know what was going on.

Detective Karl Banks had been named head of the city’s antiterrorism task force a year before. He had operatives working to track down suspected terror cells from Al Qaeda and other external

groups, but this was the only domestic terror threat on his radar at the moment. For personal reasons that he never divulged to his men, he took domestic terrorists more personally than he did international ones. Not that he took the outside groups any less seriously, but the domestic ones bothered him more. His upbringing in a military home and his own service to his country, both in the military and then law enforcement, made it more offensive to him when his fellow Americans turned against his country. Banks was not single-minded about his country—he knew there were things wrong in the U.S.—but he also truly believed it was the best place in the world to live and that anything that was wrong had to be changed peaceably from inside, by Americans. Killing innocent civilians was never the answer.

And that was why he worked directly with the agent he had on the inside. As the head of a task force he was, or should have been, anyway, much more of an administrator and a policymaker than a field cop. But it was his background, again, that wouldn't let him stay out of the field. He took it personally.

As his agent—known as Tommy to the other fanatics—hung up the phone, Banks was already giving orders to tighten up the surveillance. He didn't want anything to go wrong this warm evening. He hoped he could shut down the entire operation later this same night. All he had to do was get the “old man” giving out details of his plans and he would raid the church where the Brotherhood was meeting and charge everyone present with conspiracy. He wasn't going to stand by and watch anyone die.

The “church” was an old, rundown structure in the hills overlooking L.A. It had once been a community center, the kind of place you find in small towns all over the country. There was a common misunderstanding about L.A. that the city was one huge carpet of people, but there were actually small communities just outside the city limits that hadn't been swallowed up by the sprawl of the city in the valley below. You just had to search for them.

The “old man” was Ike Runyan, a felon who had gone into prison as nothing more than a common thief. A second trip into the California Penal System—for a murder he was able to plea bargain down to

manslaughter—he had come out a man transformed; but not in a good way. He had slowly built a core of believers who followed him blindly. He hated everything. And he preached about it with the power, conviction, and authority of a man possessed.

As part of the efforts to raise money and obtain manpower for whatever it had planned, Runyan's group had begun actively recruiting more and more people. That had given Banks the chance to get Tommy inside the organization. The Brotherhood didn't have the ability to investigate all the new followers thoroughly.

Unlike other domestic terror groups, Runyan's growing organization wasn't a white power group. It was more a phobic group. While it was made up mostly of white men, that wasn't Runyan's line of hate and rhetoric. He seemed to have chosen a select few special causes from history to emulate, while holding the whole thing together with a general message of "us versus them." Members hated homosexuals. They hated the Jews, because they felt that group had God's glory and then denied him. They hated abortion to the point that the idea of killing people in protest made sense. They hated everyone but their own members. Instead of espousing white power, the group was really fanatically religious and misguided. Its members had turned away from the doctrine of any religion known to man, and created their own twisted ideology and faith justifying their personal need to hate. Every one of the major religions in the world teaches love for others and compassion. But that was conveniently forgotten by Runyan. He preached hate. And fear. And loathing.

"Well, it looks like it's time to go inside, Tommy," the man said as they waited by the door of the "church." They were standing guard and were the last two to enter. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready. And excited. This is going to be it, right?" the undercover agent asked nervously. "We're finally going to find out the master plan to strike at the heart of the nonbelievers, right?"

"That's what the old man said. Now, let's go."

Inside the building, there were more than thirty men, sitting on folding chairs, talking quietly among themselves. It was a warm evening outside, and the air inside was oppressive. The tension in the

air was palpable. Tommy realized he was sweating and willed himself to relax. As he looked around, Tommy noticed that most of the others in the crowd were sweating as well.

The “church” itself had been chosen for its convenience. It sat back in the hills, but had a commanding view of the surrounding area. It was easy to defend and difficult for others to see what was going on inside. As Banks surveyed the situation, he realized he couldn’t hope to get his men close without being spotted. Runyan had security personnel on the roof and in the trees that came close to the structure, Banks noted. Tommy had been standing guard by the door, but had been called inside. Those men didn’t appear to be moving, however.

As a result, Banks was forced to keep his police task force members back and monitor the meeting using laser listening devices that picked up vibrations in the windows. Tommy wasn’t wearing a wire for fear of being discovered. Banks wasn’t too far away, though. He had his men stationed on the next hill over and planned to move closer as soon as he got proof of what was going on. He guessed he could have men entering the house within five minutes of giving the signal.

“My people,” Runyan began before he even stepped to the pulpit, positioned three feet above the floor where the rest of the men sat. “My friends. Give me your attention.”

All eyes in the room turned to face Runyan. While not truly old, his long gray hair, flowing loosely around his shoulders, his long beard with gray streaks in it and his simple robes made him look older than his actual 50 years. It was a look he affected purposely. He wanted to look more like a prophet than the criminal he was. Whether he truly believed in his divine guidance or was just using it for his own benefit was up for debate.

When he wasn’t recruiting or working up his followers, he was normally casually dressed with his hair in a ponytail and his beard trimmed back. He could easily fit in on the streets of L.A. and Hollywood, looking like an agent or a movie producer. While he didn’t actually have anything to do with the entertainment industry, he often enjoyed the irony in passing himself off as if he did.

“My friends. Thank you for coming here tonight. Thank you for

your donations to our cause and thank you for being true believers,” he began slowly. He was already worked up, so it didn’t take him long to break into the passionate rhetoric of this speech. “Without men like you who believe in the sanctity of life and marriage and all the things we hold dear, we could not exist. This evil world we live in needs a wake-up call. The heretics and followers of Mohammed provided that call, but we didn’t listen. AIDS provided that call, but we didn’t listen. Those messages weren’t strong enough. The people of this great nation of ours need to know what is going on. The gays and the Jews are taking over. They are bringing in the Mexicans to take our jobs.” Runyan had the cadence of an old-time revivalist and was in full swing, pounding on the pulpit to emphasize his points of hatred.

“I know a few good people died on September 11. Some of you in this room lost loved ones on that day. But I say, ‘Thank you, God, for that day. Thank you for beginning the process we are blessed to continue. Thank you for taking the good people home to be with you, while you destroyed the gays, the lesbians and the Jews who were in that building. Thank you for showing us the extent of the evil in this land and making it apparent that more has to be done.’” A few of the men in the room, including Tommy, blanched at what he said, but most had the rapt attention of devout followers.

“We need to rid our country of those vile influences. We need to take back our land and get this country headed back down the road of righteousness. To do that, we need to destroy the influences that are tearing this nation apart. We need to clean out the pestilence and evil, just like God did when he brought down the rains and destroyed the world,” Runyan continued. He had worked himself into a furor. He thundered around the room. He held the men in the palm of his hand as he shouted, barked and commanded them. “I know, as do you all, that God promised he would never destroy the entire earth with floods again. But he never said he wouldn’t allow his followers, his true believers to use water and flood as tools to remove evil. When you have a wound, don’t you clean it out before you bandage it? When you have dirt and filth around your home, don’t you wash it away? That is what we are going to do.”

The men in the room were completely enthralled. They would have done anything Runyan told them to do. The group literally breathed as one. They were all completely in his control.

“I know you all came here to find out God’s plan for us to rid this nation of the cancer that eats at our very hearts,” Runyan said, over shouts of agreement and encouragement from the men in the audience. Runyan’s very own core group of followers encouraged the outbursts and enthusiasm from around the room as well.

This is all extremely well set up, Tommy thought to himself. He has plants all over the room; it’s like a political rally, getting the volunteers wound up before sending them out into the streets.

“But, my friends, before I can tell you just how I plan to begin erasing the pestilence, I must tell you, we have a problem,” Runyan said, a masterful presenter, lowering his voice as if taking the entire group into his confidence. “There is one among you who is not here to support us, but is here to stop us.”

The men in the room quickly began looking at each other, wondering who was the traitor to their cause. Tommy did his best not to look suspicious and peered around as well, trying to guess who Runyan was talking about.

Suddenly, heavy rock music started blaring out of the speakers. The pounding beat shook the very walls and floor of the structure. The effect the music had on the men was startling. They all stood up, surprised and began talking loudly to each other.

“Men,” Runyan shouted to be overheard. “The one among us needs to be dealt with and quickly. He must not be able to tell anyone about our plans. I will leave you now, but I will be in contact tomorrow. Then we will try again to discuss our plans and move forward.”

“But who is it?” shouted one man.

“Just show us who,” another one yelled.

One of Runyan’s trusted associates quickly grabbed Tommy by the shoulders and threw him to the floor at the front of the room. He didn’t say anything and didn’t have to. Runyan had already turned and walked out of the building into a waiting car.

The loud pounding music had effectively negated Banks’ ability to

listen. It canceled out the ability of the laser microphone to detect vibrations. He paused for a minute, trying to figure out what was going on, until he saw a car leaving the scene. He gave the order for his men to move in, but he was afraid he was already too late.

He was. In their anger and passion and without thinking, the men in the room quickly grabbed Tommy. Normally rational people will do irrational things in a mob and these men weren't exactly rational to begin with. About the only positive thing that could be said for Tommy's death was that it was quick. The men savaged his body, but only after he had been quickly dispatched with a simultaneous blow to the head and a knife between his ribs.

Banks' men arrived on the scene, guns drawn. None of the men in the room escaped. It hadn't occurred to them that they had been set up to kill the police officer, or that Runyan didn't want to be present when it all happened. It also didn't occur to them, or at least not until later for some of them, that Runyan never intended to tell them his plans. The only way to run a covert operation was to keep it as small as possible. He never needed any help. He already had his team in place—men he trusted from prison and elsewhere. They had all been with him for years. The men in the house simply provided him with more money, like a grotesque pyramid scheme where the participants never get anything. They were pawns to take the blame for killing the cop. Runyan escaped into the night.

From Banks' perspective, the operation was a complete disaster. One undercover cop dead. Thirty suspects for the murder and none of them talking. No information on what was going on. None of the leaders in custody.

Banks knew it wouldn't go well for him. This big of a screw-up was a career-ender. There was no way the mayor and the chief would allow him to keep the task force now. He would be lucky if he kept his job.

* * * * *

The woman was stunningly beautiful as she spun and leaped, striking out at her two masked Ninja assailants, her long auburn hair

fanning out around her. They traded blows, but neither side appeared to get the upper hand. Finally, the woman dropped one ninja with a vicious kick to the stomach.

The second Ninja realized he was no match for the woman. In desperation, he charged forward, trying to catch her off guard. If he couldn't win with help, there was no way he could win one-on-one. What the woman didn't realize was that it wasn't a fair fight. The masked assassin pulled a special knife from underneath his tunic. It glistened with poison dripping off the end. One tiny scratch would kill.

As the Ninja lunged forward, the woman leaped into the air, spinning gracefully and avoiding the man and his deadly weapon. She rotated through her spin kick and caught the man in the back of the head. He tumbled forward and fell on his own knife, instantly dead.

The woman landed from the kick gracefully and stared down at her dead and incapacitated opponents. "Maybe you'll listen the next time I say freeze," she said, as she pointed down at them, every hair perfectly in place.

"Cut. Good job, everyone. Great job, Diane," the director said as he ended the scene. "All right, everyone, that's it for this location. I want cameras moving to scene 41 B now."

The film crew began to hurry in and move sets, cameras and equipment around on the sound stage. Diane Taylor reached down and helped up the Ninja she had just knocked to the ground. The one that had died on his own poisoned blade stood and dusted himself off, smiling as he did so.

"Great job, Diane. You've really got that spin kick down," the first man said as they walked off the set together. The Ninja pulled off his mask to reveal his red hair and freckles.

"Thanks, Phil. You're a great teacher," Diane replied as she looked down slightly on the two men. She was nearly 6 feet tall and both of the stuntmen were two or three inches shorter.

"Yeah, that was great. I thought you were actually going to get me with that last move," the other Ninja chimed in as he too began taking off his costume, breaking the image of the Japanese Ninja and reinforcing the unreality of the movie business. "Made a believer out of me."

“Thanks, guys. That means a lot,” she responded, a little embarrassed at the compliments, but thrilled just the same. “This action stuff is new to me. I need all the help I can get. You’re the best.”

The two men headed toward their trailer to get cleaned up and change clothes for the next stunt they would have to stage. Diane moved off toward her own trailer, only to be joined by her agent.

“Di, that was great. You looked great. The camera just loves you,” the agent said. “Now look, honey, I’ve got a couple of things lined up for you. It’s been a couple weeks since anyone heard anything about you. If we’re going to catch this right, we need some major media coverage to keep the attention on you.”

Diane remained quiet as she opened the door to the trailer and entered. She slumped down in a chair and suddenly, she felt very tired. She was only in her mid-20s, but her schedule and the pressures of being constantly on display got to her after a while.

“I understand what you’re trying to do for me, Ann, but you promised me some time off,” Diane complained. “I need a break. I’ve been working sixty and seventy hours a week on this movie, and then making public appearances. I’m tired. I need some time for me.”

“That’s why this opportunity is great. I’ve lined up an interview with *Time Magazine*. The interview is in about a week, but they want to send out the photographer ahead of time to spend a few days following you around,” Ann replied, attempting to smooth the feathers of her latest discovery. She knew Hollywood talent could be high strung and very high maintenance. That wasn’t the case with Diane. She rarely complained, applied herself to her work and focused her energy. For her to complain, Ann knew it must be real, not just more acting.

Still, the agent knew from experience that this was a critical time for Diane. She couldn’t get overexposed—like too many other young stars with their personal problems and temper-tantrums or drug and weight problems—but she had to stay in the public eye. “Look, honey, this’ll be a great time to show the world how Diane Taylor relaxes. Do whatever you want, but the photographer goes with you.”

“If you say so, Ann. What do you want me to do?” Diane asked.

“Do something exciting. You like to dive, right? Go diving for a

couple days,” Ann responded, trying to find a way to make this a positive situation.

“Does the photographer dive?” Diane wondered out loud.

“No clue. I don’t even know who they’ll send.”