

1 CIA, Langley, Virginia, USA, January 1, 10:15 a.m.

New Year's. Morning. The partying still carried on and on from one end of the country to the other. The shadowy groves and gardens inside the Agency's perimeter were blanketed in the thick snow that had fallen in the night. The CIA's vast parking lot was packed. It was a Red Alert: everybody had been called to work, in spite of the holiday, in spite of the weather, and in spite of their desire to be with their loved ones that day.

Chris Benson, assistant director of the Central Intelligence Agency, had summoned an urgent meeting of the key government officials with a hand in international secret ops.

The director, Norman Harrison, unexpectedly had been called to Congress to provide explanations. There was no time to wait for his return. The situation required immediate action, but Benson was not sure if he could chair the meeting on his own. He was nervous and anxious, afraid of not being up to it.

On New Years' Eve, earlier in the night, the president had signed secret Presidential Directive 20888165-BND-WAS, which called for taking all necessary measures to annihilate Al-Qaeda and all its components within a peremptory one-year deadline. The nation's security agencies and all Special Operations personnel were going to be on call 24/7, no matter where they were or what they were doing.

This time it was the CIA's turn to convey this Presidential Directive to the key players in the war on terror.

The war had been declared on September 11, 2001; now, after all these years, it was time for the United States to win it once and for all, using all the instruments of national power: human, technological, and financial. This, of course, was no conventional war. Operations were far more dangerous, far more difficult to manage.

There had to be painstaking teamwork and coordination across all the national organizations that in some way or form were combatting America's enemies.

The detailed reports on simultaneous suicide attacks in Beirut, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires, on December 8, had made it all come into focus. These attacks had left dozens of innocent victims in their wake, and had been conducted solely in order to extent a widespread sense of impending chaos. Al-Qaeda was not about to grant any truces: in fact, they were preparing to threaten world order even more furiously. The 9/11 massacres had not been enough. The terrorists were preparing to keep fighting their main enemy, the United States, and its foreign allies and to keep scattering terror around the world.

Chris Benson was extremely concerned about how the meeting might unfold, although he had a lot of other things on his mind. He had spent the night with William Roitgen, his chief advisor and direct report, making love until 4 o'clock in the morning in the intimacy of his tiny Georgetown apartment. They had used the black Egyptian cotton sheets he had carefully chosen that afternoon at his favorite shop, two blocks from where he lived. He was still cotton-mouthed from way too much booze and drugs, and his head ached, although he had taken quite a few tranquilizers since waking up at six in the morning, after just two hours of very poor sleep.

The deputy director was a 52-year old man, and a slim 6'3". He trimmed his blond hair very short, parted to the left, and had green eyes. He wore impeccable light suits and white shirts, and always with a yellow or orange necktie. He smelled of French scents and had a moody personality, with a weak but stubborn character. His reedy voice was not much help when he needed to project confidence. Nobody knew how he had ever managed to land such an important job at the Agency.

Benson was a convinced bisexual. No one at the CIA had any inkling of his homosexual relationships. He worked hard to cover them up, and purposefully courted most of the female employees he ran across. His relationship with William Roitgen was becoming a dangerous annoyance. They spent hours working together, and people might start getting ideas.

Chris had to find the way to end the relationship before it was discovered. He had no scruples, and put his ambition for power and money ahead of everything else; the rest was just necessary collateral damage in order to achieve his objectives. And his plans did not include his lover, Roitgen.

They had gathered in the fourth floor situation room, just a few feet away from the director's office. It was an enormous oak-paneled room; the main wall had three display monitors showing a map with the Agency's key offices around the world, and where its down-range agents were scattered around the globe. A side wall had two masts with flags: the USA's and the CIA's.

An enormous round table with twelve comfortable chairs was impeccably lit in the middle of the room. Only half the chairs were taken. Besides Benson, there was his assistant William Roitgen; Robert "Bob" Mills, director of the NSA (National Security Agency); Anthony Brown, director of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigations); Lieutenant General Ernst Robinson, commander of the Green Berets, and Admiral Adolf Stuart, commander of the Navy SEALs. Neither of the two military men liked or respected Benson or his deputy, but they followed orders and were there to hear what the Agency was putting at their disposal.

Robinson and Stuart were both living legends in their units. They intimidated Benson. Heroes of many battles, neither man was used to wasting time on small talk. They went straight to the point.

They had been summoned that morning, and had expected to meet

director Harrison about an order, a Presidential Directive. They were very upset when they learned that Benson would chair the meeting.

Benson thought about his lover, uncomfortably seated beside him, and stridently but hesitantly began to read from the encrypted cable he had received minutes ago from the president's office:

Within a strict seventy-two hour deadline, the defenses of the enemy (AQ) must be shattered and Hasan Izz-Al-Din must be captured alive. Exploit sensitive

information and eliminate adjacent elements. Use security code 0045RTZMMDER-34555-LOTMB to conduct the operation. Unrestricted resources are to be at the commander's disposal. EAGLE-456YT7 Sends.

"Gentlemen, the director's office got this cable less than two hours ago. As you well know", he continued with a hesitant tone "this is serious. We must do what the President wants. The director will be back tomorrow if you need to corroborate anything pursuant to this directive".

Benson handed a copy of the cable to all the participants; and wondered if he should exchange views with the military officers concerning the scale of support the CIA would provide for their Special Ops troops.

Nevertheless, after taking the document, Robinson and Stuart stood up, collected their items, shook hands with those present, with unfeigned chilliness, and left the situation room. The directors of the NSA and FBI in their own way followed the officers after saying goodbye to Benson and Roitgen.

Robinson and Stuart got into their vehicles and headed toward the Pentagon. It took them less than fifteen minutes to cover the five miles between both buildings. As soon as they arrived, they headed

straight to their respective offices. After each one had entered the security code provided and verified the authenticity of the Presidential Directive on their core computer networks, they met again in Robinson's office.

Both men lived by a similar code. They voiced their thoughts; and agreed a select Green Beret unit commanded by Black Lion should conduct the operation. A SEAL Team Six would be up and ready as a backup on the USS Eisenhower (CVN-69) carrier in case anything went awry. They immediately delivered instructions to issue the corresponding orders and transmitted their encrypted action plan to the President's secret email.

Two days later, on January 3rd, they received confirmation from Black Lion:

Mission accomplished, per orders and schedules. Detainee delivered on carrier. No other prisoners taken.

Once again, the stated objective had been accomplished. General Robinson, now commander of the Special Forces, knew he could trust Major Harris, his much-esteemed subordinate, who had shown extraordinary courage, honor, and leadership going above and beyond what would normally be expected from a regular soldier.

Since Iraq, a few years back, Robinson had been closely following the major's career. His courage, decisiveness and unmatched fighting spirit had drawn considerable attention, all without the major even being aware of it. Robinson had done some in-depth checks into his Army background: family history, geographical background, and professional career. The information had perplexed Robinson to the point where he hardly knew what to believe. What he needed to do now was being 100% certain; and follow his subordinate's career even more closely.

Robinson reached for the red phone used for secret

communications among the various Special Forces units under his command; and called colonel Miller, who ran the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, also known as GITMO.

He then dispatched a terse encrypted cable to the CIA director:

Operation 0045RTZMMDER-34555-LOTMB complete, no significant issues to report, per EAGLE-456YT7. ER-GB Sends.

Meanwhile, the enemy was on the prowl. Terrorists were preparing fatal strikes at various locations in order to spread chaos and victims around the free world.

2 Kerman, Iran, January 2, 10:00 a.m.

Michael Harris boarded the British Airways flight to London.

After a luxurious shower in the first-class lounge at Heathrow, at 10:30, he boarded once again, this time destined for Doha, Qatar.

After a pleasant flight of just over seven hours, by midnight, he was inside the American Embassy, located in the Al Luqta District, ready to meet his colleagues who were already gathered with Mark Zakowski, the CIA officer permanently stationed at the Embassy.

He flashed his badges at the entrance of the closely guarded building, headed toward the changing rooms, donned his battle dress uniform, and immediately proceeded to the room where the seven other members of his team were gathered. All the men belonged to the Desert Lions, the most highly trained and secret of all the Green Beret teams. It was equivalent to the Navy's famous SEAL Team Six, which had garnered international notoriety and appeared on the front page of newspapers all over the world after they captured and liquidated Osama bin Laden.

The Lions were routinely entrusted with the most dangerous missions conducted by US military forces worldwide. They were commanded by the legendary three-star Lieutenant General Ernst

Robinson, himself a Green Beret and Desert Lion for over twenty-five years. They worked closely with the Navy SEALs while also coordinating their duties with other secret US Government agencies and relying on the CIA for logistics around the world.

Mike was thirty-two years old and held the rank of major in the US Army. He had become an officer through the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) at the University of North Carolina and the OCS (Officer Candidate School) at Fort Benning. Now he was team leader. He had earned the nickname "Black Lion" on account of his

excellence, strength, courage, and leadership capabilities. Mike had continued to hone his gifts and skills at Fort Benning, with all kinds of weapons and martial arts. He had transformed himself into a hard man, in excellent physical shape, with finely tuned skills and the utmost preparedness for the dangerous missions that took him all around the world in order to fight for his country's freedom. No doubt about it: He was the elite of the elite. His capabilities were comparable only to those of his fellow Desert Lions in the Green Berets, or the Navy's SEAL Team Six.

In truth, Mike's training, like that of the Lions in his group, never ended. They were thoroughly trained, several times a year, in one-to five-day sessions at secret Army bases around the world. The most important training took place at Base Alpha, somewhere in the Arizona desert, and at secret facilities on the base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The training was about much more than weapons and combat. It included deterrence techniques, camouflage, languages, quantum physics, knowledge of the financial and stock markets, history and world literature, and many other subjects that, in some form or another, might come in handy on one of the difficult missions he conducted.

In the entire Army, there were no more than one hundred Desert Lions. Each year, only five carefully selected new candidates were

recruited. They usually worked in eight- man teams.

The huge room in the Embassy was in the second basement level and had been swept to ensure there were no hidden mics or cameras. It was a windowless safe room, with only one door. Wall monitors displayed a variety of images: satellite imagery of their area and their target area, photos and specs of the weapons that would be used on the mission, mug shots of several terrorists, and other mission-critical info.

The room held the men Mike considered his best: Mack “Erin” O’Reilly, Jim Garcia, Bill Lewis, Tony Nolte, Sam Dickinson, Jacob Newton, and tiny Mark Ryan, a.k.a. the “Black Shark.” Along with Zakowski’s eight Lions, there was the Embassy’s military attaché, Colonel Anthony Roberts, as well as General Robinson’s deputy, Brigadier General Andrew Clark.

Once they had all taken their seats, General Clark started the meeting. “Gentlemen, good evening,” Clark said in a neutral tone. “Evening, sir,” they chimed back.

“Let me be short and sweet,” said the general in his firm command voice. “After I lay out the situation for you, you’ll have exactly five minutes for questions. After that, you hit the road, OK?”

“Got it, sir,” replied the eight Lions in clear, strong voices. Zakowski was amazed at the discipline this unit rolled with and the respect of the men at the table for their chief. He had never served in the military and could hardly believe there were men like this, who lived by such a strict code. On the one hand, they seemed quaint and old-fashioned to him, but on the other, he knew the country was safer from its enemies thanks to these kinds of guys. No doubt about it. He had some really hard fighters in front of him who in combat would become a smooth, precise, lethal weapon of war.

“Intel says one of the terrorist most wanteds, FBI Top Ten, will be

in Kerman, a city about six hundred miles from Teheran. Over the next two days, he'll be huddling with terrorist representatives from the key splinter groups in the zone, and he'll have critical information on potential strikes in the U.S.," said Clark, unemotionally. "Your mission is to capture Hassan Izz-Al-Din, grab any info he's got with him, destroy his hidey-hole, and take out his buddies. When you have him, you'll bring him back, immediately, to the Eisenhower, which will be cruising the Persian Gulf. No chitchat with the detainee. Upon delivery, DOD Intel guys will question him, and then he'll be transferred to Gitmo." The general wrapped up saying, "Your responsibilities end after you've delivered him."

Next, referring to information flashing on the screens, Clark went through the mission details.

"Questions?" he asked, after finishing his extensive presentation. Mike spoke up. "If we can, should we take any other detainees?"

"Any hostiles other than Hassan Izz-Al-Din are to be taken out," replied the general.

"Got it, sir. No further questions," ended Mike.

"You've got one hour to brush up on the detail. Then good luck and git 'er done." Clark finished up, saying, "That's all."

The meeting had taken just fifty-five minutes. They had another full hour to review the details of the operation, become familiar with the target area, and memorize the available references for the compound they had to breach in order to accomplish the mission.

When the assigned hour was up, the eight Lions headed to the roof of the Embassy to board the Stealth Black Hawk that was waiting for them, engines running. The public had first heard about these secret Pentagon helicopters when Osama bin Laden was captured. They were the state-of-the-art of advanced aviation technology,

and each one, fully equipped in accordance with the guidelines from Pasadena, cost over thirty million dollars.

As soon as the men were inside, without speaking a word, the pilots launched off on their previously agreed vector to the border. The distance to Kerman was just over five hundred nautical miles, and they would have to be dropped at a landing zone a couple of miles from the suburbs of the city.

The cockpit was dimly lit by the emergency lights, which could not be seen from outside. The equipment they would need to conduct the mission was inside the chopper.

All the latest nanotechnology devices the military division of the Pasadena Laboratory had specially developed for the Army's Desert Lions were there: next-generation laser weapons, night vision contact lenses, and real-time internet connectivity. Each of the Lions also had an eyecell implanted by microsurgery to his nervous system, just above his right ear. They did not have to talk in order to communicate.

They had unique, totally silent sidearms with laser sights that could drop ten men with a single burst. Their regular training at Guantanamo included these weapons, which were available only to the Army, and within the Army, only to the Desert Lions.

Their mission was clear. There was no margin for error. Mike glanced at each of his men and, after a quick rundown, felt himself infused with a feeling of serenity, knowing that he had the best and most highly trained teammates for this mission. These men not only wanted to succeed: They themselves were success.

No one spoke. They just focused, mentally preparing for the mission.

On reaching the objective, the pilot double-checked the coordinates, and they all got ready. No one hesitated. Each of the

men was mentally and physically prepared to carry out his mission. No one had the slightest doubt that he was doing the right thing. They were fighting for freedom and their country.

The Stealth Black Hawk the Desert Lions were using was not only invisible to radar; it was utterly silent. The helicopter flew noiselessly just above the ground, with all sounds being filtered out by the powerful atomic compensators in each rotor blade.

When they reached the landing zone, the pilot activated a button on the control panel, and the door on the right side opened silently and immediately. The eight men jumped, hitting the ground almost simultaneously. The helicopter veered off and disappeared within seconds. The night was black, moonless.

They hid in a nearby grove, and after scouring the terrain with their powerful night vision devices, Mike gave the order to head south toward Kerman. They were on the outskirts of the city within less than thirty minutes, crouched in front of the house where Hassan had held his meeting. It was a crumbling adobe structure with scant outside illumination.

Thanks to the information Intelligence had gathered beforehand, using a variety of methods, including high-definition military satellites, each of the Lions recognized the house, inside and out, as if he had lived there his entire life.

The powerful infrared thermal sensors allowed them to make out six heavily armed enemies in the garden of the compound. A second quick scan revealed eight individuals in the hallways inside.

It took them two minutes to take in the situation. When Mike gave the order to roll, Mack and Bill aimed their weapons on two guards with AK-74s slung over their shoulders that were leaning against the sidewall. They both fired their stealth laser pistols. Two hollow thuds indicated that both guards dropped together, bullet holes in

their foreheads.

The other four guards were dispatched almost simultaneously with daggers deftly aimed at their throats, thrown by Jim, Sam, Jacob, and Mark. In just a few minutes, the group had obtained control of the outer area of the compound. They were ready to go in.

Mike's micro sonar, tucked in his flak vest, showed him the movement of each of the eight men in the living quarters of the compound. Mike issued a mental order to go in and eliminate all the guards.

In barely six and a half minutes, they were at the door of the room holding Hassan and his followers. Facing no resistance, they opened the heavy double doors that led into the room. Flushed with the adrenaline of the moment, Mike brushed a tuft of hair from his forehead and wordlessly gave the order to move.

The five men were gathered at a frosted glass round table. They represented the most fearsome of all Islamist terrorists, with an incomprehensible hatred of all things associated with the lifestyle of the West, and America in particular. Hassan was standing, in a white gown, and speaking ecstatically as he described how to pierce the heart of the American forces.

"Our soldiers are ready to strike right away," said Hassan, speaking in Arabic as he waved his hands vehemently, haranguing his subordinates. "We must be ready to strike the infidel where it will be most painful. We have just started on our path. We cannot show weakness. Allah is great and will light our way on our mission. Our leader

has also given orders that the war against the infidel must continue until we have gained total victory," he added.

Horrified, he saw Mike and his men just as he was about to finish his speech. Before he could utter a word, the Lions fired their

weapons, and Hassan's followers fell lifelessly before his eyes. Hassan was no warrior. He would never admit it, but he was a coward. He did not know how to fight, and he had no desire to. He fell on his knees and begged for his life.

"Please don't kill me! I have a family ... little children. I'll give you ... money ... women ... whatever you want," he implored with tears in his eyes.

Mike wanted to strangle him with his own hands. He could hardly believe that this lowlife could be responsible for the deaths of so many people, without the slightest quiver of conscience. Now that he was face-to-face with his own destiny, he was cowering and begging for his life. It was unbelievable that this wretch could have been the cause of so much mayhem. But Mike's orders were clear and precise. He knew he had to bring the man in alive. None of that would be questioned: Mike was a soldier and would do his duty.

Without a word, they subdued Hassan, bound and flex-cuffed him, and duct-taped his mouth. Tony Nolte immediately led him outside the building. The Cuban, Jim, along with Bill and Mark, scooped up the hard drives from the laptops on the tables, along with any documents they could find in the room. Jacob and Mack emplaced the powerful explosive charges that would detonate in twenty minutes and totally wreck the house.

Half an hour later, they were at the rendezvous point with the helicopter. Within three hours, they were on the aircraft carrier, delivering their detainee. The mission had been a success. Not one mistake was made, and the mission had been fully accomplished.

Mike and his men had two hours to rest before getting on a helicopter that dropped them off at Camp Behring, the US base in Kuwait. Once there, they delivered an exhaustive after action report to their command, briefing all the details of the mission, and

they delivered the captured materiel. After six hours of intense questioning, they

declared the mission to be concluded. Before he left, Mike took charge of dispatching the encrypted cable describing the mission's success to General Robinson, back at the Pentagon.

Now they had a short, well-deserved break, where each man could take an all- expenses-paid trip to wherever he wanted. This was how the Government recognized the Lions' service provided on each mission at the risk of life and limb.

On January 15, they would be back at Guantanamo to attend their first training mission of the year and to receive instructions for the next mission.

Mike had agreed to meet Marcie in Paris. That is where he headed, after an almost magical transformation into a respectable coat-and-tie civilian flying on a regular Air France flight after a regular week of work in an Arab country.

At 5:45 a.m., his plane touched down on French soil, at Charles de Gaulle. It was a sunny but chilly twenty degrees. Paris was coated in a veneer of frost, sparkling in its splendor. Before taking a cab, Mike phoned Marcie, and they agreed to meet at ten at the Café de la Paix. When he got to the Hotel Le Grand, he showered and changed clothes. With ten minutes to spare, he was promptly sitting at a table waiting for his heavenly Marcie to arrive.

Mike cleaned up nicely. At six foot two and only a hundred and seventy-five pounds, he was in awesome physical shape. He kept his light chestnut hair cut short but with a tuft that often fell across his forehead. His piercing maroon-colored eyes projected a strong, trustworthy gaze, suggesting an extraordinary intelligence. His entire being radiated serenity, presence of mind, and a contagious likeability.

As he waited, Mike steered his thoughts back to the Kerman op. He was happy with the outcome of the mission, and with the performance of each of his men. But he did not notice that he was under close observation by a party of two, sitting at one of the tables by the window.