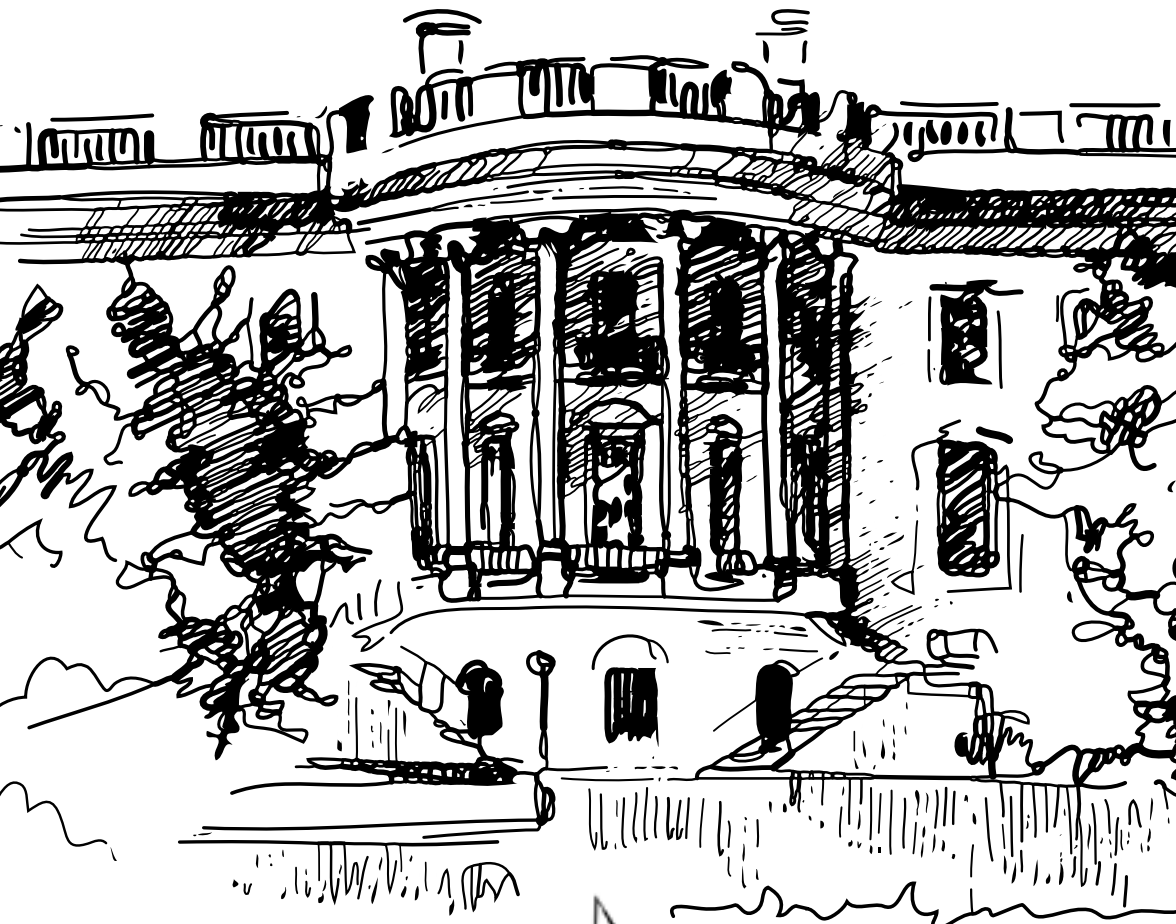


# THE FIFTH COLUMN

JOHN FENZEL AND TOM RENDALL



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*“A nation can survive its fools, and even the ambitious. But it cannot survive treason from within. An enemy at the gates is less formidable, for he is known and carries his banner openly. But the traitor moves amongst those within the gates freely, his sly whispers rustling through all the alleys, heard in the very halls of government itself. For the traitor appears not a traitor; he speaks in accents familiar to his victims, and he wears their face and their arguments, he appeals to the baseness that lies deep in the hearts of all men. He rots the soul of a nation, he works secretly and unknown in the night to undermine the pillars of the city, he infects the body politic so that it can no longer resist. A murderer is less to fear.”*

**Marcus Tullius Cicero**

## Prologue

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**LUKE ARCHER HAD COME TO EXPECT** the unexpected. That's what he attributed his survival to throughout all the years. But as familiar as the sound of incoming rotor blades was to him from years past, he never expected to hear them pounding directly outside his bedroom window at 3:07 in the morning.

Not any more at least. After twenty years in the most secretive corners of the Special Operations community, and another decade and a half in the CIA, he thought those days were over. After a turbulent career in and out of uniform, building a cabin on a remote lake in midcoast Maine, and teaching fifth graders at a local elementary school was his way of sealing that deal to himself. And yet, through the years, he'd come to understand that for every promise made, they usually came with a price attached, and this would be no exception.

Beau, Archer's German Shepherd, began whining intermittently at the foot of his bed at first. And then as the pounding intensified, he started barking wildly at the front door. Archer felt a familiar sensation in the pit of his stomach. He rose quickly, put on a pair of coveralls and boots, and grabbed one of the semi-automatic rifles standing inside his closet—this one, a 7.62mm DPMS carbine, equipped with a night vision sight. He stepped outside his side door into the frigid winter air—made colder by the helicopter's rotor wash blasting snow as it landed. An extended whiteout descended on the house, sending drifting snow, a fierce wind, and frigid air in a ubiquitous cloud around him.

It was bitter cold, even by Maine standards. Standing behind a tree, shivering—Archer's heart was beating like a bass drum. He could dimly make out the outline of the helicopter only yards in front of him.

Brown-haired, with broad, well-formed shoulders, and a former weightlifter's build, Archer was barely provided cover by the tree. The powerful wind from the helicopter rotor wash blew snow into his shoulder-length hair. His face was weathered and unshaven, with skin taut along high cheekbones, a strong jawline, and crow's-foot eyes that looked as if they had seen too much in a single lifetime.

He'd purchased the property ten years ago from a friend, sight unseen—but he'd never expected his front yard would someday serve as a helicopter landing zone.

Squinting his eyes and shielding them until the rotor wash diminished, he recognized the black helicopter to be a UH-72A Lakota—a Light Utility helicopter that he knew was used by both the Army and the “three letter agencies”—including the CIA—principally for VIP transport.

Archer swore under his breath—the Army wouldn't be paying him a visit at this late hour and after all these years, so that left only one other possibility—and the realization gave him an even greater feeling of foreboding.

A crewman exited the helicopter and as the rotors slowed, he opened the passenger door. A tall man stepped out—ducking his head and walking quickly toward the front door, wearing what appeared to be jeans, boots and a leather aviator's coat. As he drew closer, Archer recognized the man well before he reached the porch as Chris Stockman—the Chief of the CIA's Special Activities Division, or “SAD.” Only a year ago, Stockman had worked for Archer when Archer was the SAD Chief.

“Chris?” Archer shouted above the helicopter's whine. “Why are you here?”

Stockman extended his hand to Archer, but it was not reciprocated. “Can we go inside?”

Archer nodded and opened the door, giving Beau a command in German, to which he laid down, just inside the doorway. Maintaining an intermittent, low growl, he never took his eyes off Stockman.

“He's well-trained,” Stockman said, removing his jacket. “But I'm not sure he likes me.”

“He doesn't like anyone at 3 o'clock in the morning.” Archer said, placing the carbine on “Safe,” and setting it back in the closet. “Normally I'd say it was good to see you, but at this hour, even a rabbit knows a weasel's track same as a hound does.”

Stockman shook his head, confused by Archer's southern colloquialism. Stockman was an imposing figure. Six and a half feet.

Thick legs, like a Russian power lifter's, and a barrel chest. Archer recalled that he would not hesitate to use his stature to his advantage—to intimidate, or to threaten, if necessary. He wiped the snow free from his cowboy boots in the entry before walking over to the stone fireplace in the center of the cabin. "Well, if you have to know, the most obvious reason is that your phone number isn't listed, and you only list a post office box for your pension. Some folks in the office remembered your plans to relocate here. We would've called, but we had no other way of getting hold of you."

"I prefer it that way," Archer replied quietly, motioning Stockman to the sofa opposite him.

As he sat down, Stockman pointed at a photo on the mantle beside a wooden box. "A good photo of you and Becky."

Becky had been Archer's wife, murdered under mysterious circumstances years before. Stockman had met her several times in social settings at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, when he'd been assigned to as an advisor to 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group.

Archer nodded, looking up at the picture. "It was the last photo of us together."

Stockman nodded his understanding. "What are you doing with yourself these days?" Stockman asked conversationally.

"Teaching fifth graders," Archer replied. "Hardest job I've ever had." Anxious to change the subject, he asked pointedly. "Now, maybe you can tell me—what's the real reason you just landed in my front yard?"

"We have eyes on a funeral in Peshawar," Stockman answered directly.

"I'm done with all of that," Archer interrupted. "You, more than most, should know that."

Stockman nodded, paused, and continued. "They're all noncombatants—civilians—but the funeral is for the cousin of Omar Mehsud Shah, and we have two sources who say he's attending."

"How reliable are they?" Archer asked. "...Your sources?"

"Very," Stockman nodded. "Confirmed and corroborated. Listen, you're the only one who knows what Shah looks like—his mannerisms

— who's seen him up close. We need positive identification before we can act."

"Where are you conducting this from? CTC?"

Stockman shook his head. "Too sensitive. We're doing it all in-house, at Langley."

Archer stood up and walked to the window, fighting back a whole host of visceral responses that involved completely losing his composure. Just the mention of that name—*Omar Mehsud Shah*—was enough to bring a series of long-suppressed memories flooding back. In Technicolor. Traumatic, painful memories he preferred to forget.

Archer nodded his understanding, feeling his adrenaline beginning to surge. He looked down at Beau. "Okay, if I'm going to do this, I need someone to watch my dog." He inhaled deeply to calm himself. "And I'll need a substitute to teach for me today. Let me send a few emails, and we can go."



As Archer typed an email to the principal at his school, and then to Beau's Veterinarian, Dr. Elena Campbell, he contemplated the reason for such a dramatic interruption in routine...for being pulled back into a world that was all-too-familiar, yet one he had desperately been trying to escape for good.

*Omar Mehsud Shah.*

By any measure, Omar Mehsud Shah was a ghost. He seemed to exist in name and deed alone—no one in Western intelligence or military circles had ever seen his face, until Luke Archer had viewed him through the scope of a sniper rifle in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province more than a decade ago. After his escape from captivity under Shah, Archer never thought he'd see him again. And yet, he realized there were few other people who would create quite as irresistible an incentive to return to Langley and its dark underbelly of clandestine operations.

After sending a few emails, Archer stepped away from his desk, and picked up the black tactical style pack lying next to the front door. "Okay, let's go."

“Were you *expecting* to go somewhere?” Stockman asked, visibly surprised. “You’re already packed?”

“My ‘A’ Bag,” Archer replied, slinging the backpack over his shoulder. “Old habits die hard.”

Boarding the helicopter, Chris Stockman pulled out the dossier on Omar Shah and handed it to Archer as they lifted off. “You’re familiar with most of this,” Stockman shouted over the rotor noise. “But it’s been updated since you left Langley.”

Archer took the file and kept it on his lap before opening it, recalling the events of that day long ago in the Frontier Province, and those that followed.

It wasn’t a routine mission. Both USSOCOM and the CIA had classified it as “Extreme High Risk,” with several layers of “Top Secret” Code-Word Special Category/“SPECAT” information classifications assigned. The mission required that he, alone, link up with a local CIA asset in Peshawar, and infiltrate into Northern Afghanistan by any available indigenous means to conduct a reconnaissance of a planned meeting of Taliban and Al Qaida leaders.

It was the most dangerous “Singleton” mission he’d ever conducted in his career, and it didn’t end well.

Shah’s identity was confirmed by the local Pakistani CIA asset—a physician based out of Peshawar—accompanying Archer. Even when Archer called the identification of Shah into Langley, they wouldn’t approve the Predator strike, despite Archer’s repeated requests. He was about to pull the trigger himself when a group of young Pakistani boys stumbled upon his position. Archer could have killed the boys as they were approaching, and no one would have faulted him for it. But he didn’t. As a consequence, they began shouting, and Archer and his asset were both captured by Omar Shah’s militia. The asset from Peshawar was executed on the spot, in front of Archer.

Archer had been taken prisoner—shackled, tortured, and interrogated continuously for two weeks. As terrible as the physical punishment was—the electrical shocks, the beatings, a broken arm, and branding to his back, the worst part of his ordeal was the sleep deprivation. During that time, he began hallucinating, and could feel

himself gradually losing his sanity. Oddly enough, the pain he sustained from the other methods of torture, however excruciating, brought him temporary moments of lucidity. After many of those sessions, Omar Shah would appear in his cell, speaking to Archer as if they were good friends. Shah had done his research, and somehow knew Archer had been a Special Mission Unit (SMU) Operator. He correctly surmised that Archer was now working for the CIA, leaving Archer no real space to counter or equivocate, only to resist as best he could. Ultimately, he broke under the torture he sustained—something that still haunted him.

Over the course of those two weeks, when he wasn’t being observed, Archer was able to gradually loosen the fixture holding his chains to the concrete wall. The day before his birthday, he learned from one of his guards that they were planning to execute him, by beheading—and were planning to videotape all of it for propaganda purposes.

“Do me a favor, and come with a sharp blade,” he replied to the perplexed guard, and added, “*Hogs like us don’t know what a pen’s for....*”

Had the guard been proficient in English, they would have noticed Archer working feverishly to loosen his chains further. Or they would have found the metal spoon he’d stolen.

Thanks to some very shoddy Southwest Asian masonry work, Archer successfully freed himself late that night, and climbed through the basement window under the cover of darkness. During the harrowing three hours before the sun came up over Peshawar, he plunged through alleyways and even over rooftops at one point, stealing clothes that were left air-drying at night enroute to the Austrian Consulate—the closest western diplomatic outpost he could find. After an extended, emotional conversation with the security guards at the consulate gates, he was admitted and returned to U.S. control.

Because Omar Shah was so elusive, he’d become known in CIA circles as “The Ghost.” Archer was the only Westerner who could conclusively identify him. Understanding his vulnerability in the aftermath of Archer’s escape, Shah remained very much a “ghost” in every sense of the word, evading numerous direct action raids, ambushes and assassination attempts through the years by constantly changing his



appearance, disappearing for extended periods, allowing rumors of his death to persist, and never following a set routine.

Archer provided Langley with a detailed physical description of Shah; but the truth was, The Ghost was as nondescript as any other ordinary forty-something male in the Southwest Asia. From Shah's experience in fighting the Soviets as a young man in Afghanistan, he'd learned how to seamlessly blend in with any crowd no matter where he was—whether in Islamabad, Kabul, Berlin, or London.

Archer wondered if he would be able to still identify Omar Shah—it had been nearly fifteen years since he'd seen him. But he knew that he would instantly recognize Shah's calm, deceptively soothing voice if he heard it; and his broad, smile that widened before he laughed...if he saw it. Both the smile and laugh were unmistakable, and were indelibly imprinted into the recesses of Archer's memory.

Landing at an airfield in Portland, a business jet awaited Stockman and Archer, engines running.

Less than two hours later, they landed at Reagan International Airport, and were met by a security detail in a black Denali that drove them down the George Washington Parkway to Langley.

Turning around enroute, one of the men handed Archer a color-coded CIA visitor's badge with his old official photo and orange stripe designating his authorization, security clearance and level of access. "This is for you, Sir," the man said. "It's good for today, and can be extended if needed. The security protective officers will be waving us through the external security facility and main gate, onto the compound."

Parking in the executive parking garage under the Old Headquarters Building, commonly referred to simply as the "OHB," Archer looked up at the camera overhead and smiled, recognizing it as the same location where a very senior Agency officer was once captured on a security video in the front seat of his car in a compromising position with a young female employee. With Archer's intervention on his behalf, the official, fearing termination, received only a gentle reprimand, and the story soon faded away.

"Archer, this way," Stockman called out, directing him to the Director's private elevator.



The CIA's Operations Center is on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the OHB, in close proximity to the offices of the CIA's senior leadership so seniors and watch officers can quickly assemble when needed. After signing several documents reading him on to a Top Secret Special Access Program (SAP) codenamed "GHOSTLINE," Chris Stockman led him through a series of thick doors and a battery of guards inspecting IDs prior to entry.

From his prior experience, Archer knew the CIA Operations Center was far from the elaborate "Star Chamber" described by many authors and screenwriters. Instead, the Center consisted mostly of a "cubicle farm" that was divided into activities that encompassed everything from geographic operational regions to functional issue areas ranging from global economies and uranium production to compiling the President's Daily Brief, commonly referred to as the "PDB." Archer had spent hundreds of hours with intelligence analysts who lived in the Ops Center and he'd come to rely upon the handful of those who were assigned to his own programs.

Returning here, Archer felt the familiar surge of adrenaline return, along with the full awareness that he'd left it all behind for a reason.

Chris Stockman guided Archer to another glass doorway leading to a back room where only specially cleared people were permitted entry. Inside, the computer screens beyond all the glass walls glowed and flared. Archer saw two others he recognized in the room—Laura Chicone and Dan Thorne—viewing a large-screen Predator feed. Archer knew both of them well from a long past, working on countless operations together. The recognition and expressions of surprise between all three friends was instantaneous.

"I honestly never expected to see you back here again," Laura said, stepping back from their hug, smiling with white teeth and bright translucent red lips. Her face was as finely formed as he'd recalled, and her intellect was matched only by her quick wit.

“Neither did I,” Archer replied. Looking around he realized he stood out in his work jeans and red flannel shirt, amidst all others who were in business attire.

“They say once you step into all of this, you can never really leave,” Dan said, shaking his hand.

Archer shook his head. “Well then, we’ll have to pretend I’m not really here, because after this, I’m leaving. Again.” He looked up at the Predator feed on display. “What’ve we got?”

Chris Stockman flipped a switch and the “smart” glass walls instantaneously switched from clear to opaque, providing additional privacy inside the room.

“We have a Predator on station over the funeral for Tahir Shah, Chief Surgeon of the Frontier Children’s Academy in Peshawar. Tahir was the cousin to Omar Mehsud Shah, and in the late ‘80s supported him and his *Mujahidin* fighters during the Afghan War against the Soviets, earning him an immense amount of prestige. His reputation and achievements are expected to bring dozens of former *Mujahidin* and current Taliban to his funeral. We’ve heard from his family doctor that Omar Mehsud Shah is attending.”

“All the buzzards come to the mule’s funeral,” Archer commented absently, then pointed to the screen. “Is this the best view we’ve got?”

Laura shook her head. “No, we have ISR eyes-on—two unarmed Predators with enhanced optics.”

She switched the monitor to a close-up image of the funeral prayers being led by an elderly man wearing a white cap and a gray embroidered jacket, leading the funeral prayers over a simple wooden casket that was covered in red flowers. The digital image was so close and so clear that the pores of the man’s skin were visible.

“That’s Sirajul Haq, head of the Islamic political party, ‘Jamat-e-Islami,’” Laura commented.

“Quite a close-up,” Archer replied.

Laura nodded. “Canon built three of these lenses. We bought two for these Predators and *Sports Illustrated* got the other.”

“There are a hundred or more people there, and it looks like more are joining them,” Archer said. “Can we zoom out to the crowd?”

Dan Thorne drew Archer’s attention to another screen in front of them.

“That’s ISR too?” Archer asked.

Stockman looked directly at Archer. “That’s from a sniper scope.”

“Who’s behind it?”

Both Laura and Dan looked over at Stockman, deferring to him to answer, or not. “One of your old teammates—Machla Peretz.”

“*Max*?” Archer exclaimed incredulously, using Machla’s acquired masculine nickname.

Machla “Max” Peretz was a former Israeli Mossad member whom he had personally recruited to the CIA just seven years ago—at first as a reports officer in order to take advantage of her fluency in Hebrew, Urdu, Farsi and Arabic and her immersion on important operational areas. With every operation, it became clear that she possessed a unique set of additional operational skills that were exceedingly rare to find in any operative or analyst.

Stockman nodded. “That’s her.”

Archer shook his head, visibly angry. He turned to Stockman. “You put her out there alone? An Israeli woman in the middle of Peshawar? What the hell were you thinking?”

Stockman held out his hand to placate Archer. “She’s got a whole network over there supporting her behind the scenes, probably even has access to assets from her former employer... Vehicles, Predator coverage, a full QRF and we have folks in position all around her, standing by to assist, if needed...” He paused. “And she volunteered for this.”

Archer continued to shake his head. “She’s as talented as they come. But why risk her life for this? With all that gear she’s carrying, she’ll be lucky to get out alive—you know that.”

“It’s too late to change anything now,” Stockman said evenly. “You’re coming into this midstream. She’s going to be fine.”

“It’s never too late to abort when the risk is unacceptable,” Archer countered. “Now I remember why I left this outfit.”

Laura Chicone turned around in her seat and pointed at the screen. “Can I interrupt?” She asked impatiently. “Max wouldn’t be very happy we’re having this conversation right now—if there’s one thing we

all know about her it's that she'd want us to focus on the target in front of us."

Archer nodded slightly, looked up at the screen and stared intently at the gathering prayer assembly 7000 miles away. "Pan out to view the men in the front row."

Laura typed a message to Max, and after a few seconds the image drew back. Archer studied the image of each male visible on the screen—all were wearing traditional Pakistani attire, standing behind Sirajul Haq, bowing and appearing to chant a series of prayers.

Archer stepped closer to the screen, and studied one middle-aged man dressed completely in white. During his capture, Archer had only seen Omar Mehsud Shah with a moustache. This man in white had a long, full beard—but the resemblance to Shah was unmistakable. He pointed at the man. "That's him—can we zoom in on his face?"

After a flurry of typing from Laura, the view of the man became so close, it surprised all four assembled around the screen. After a few minutes of waiting, the man began to take part in one of the funeral prayers and Archer could see the wide gap between his front teeth. "Now his hands," he directed.

Within seconds, the camera panned in on the man's right hand, and that was all Archer needed to see. The man was missing part of his right index finger. Shah had told Archer that it had been amputated after he was shot in the hand in a gunfight with Pakistan's Special Services Group—a raid that he'd narrowly escaped.

"That's him," Archer said decisively, and looked over at Stockman.

"Okay, got it," Stockman said. Laura Chicone typed furiously. "We'll track him with an armed Predator, and strike his vehicle when he's in transit."

"Watch him closely then," Archer said quietly. "He's slicker'n goose grease."

At once the image of Omar Mehsud Shah changed as the crowd stepped back in noticeable shock and surprise. Suddenly a blotch of red bloomed in the center of the chest of Shah's white *shalwar kameez*, a stain that quickly grew in circumference as he crumpled to the ground.

"What just happened?" Stockman asked Laura insistently.

"Max just messaged that she's leaving her hide-spot, and—" Laura stopped mid-sentence.

"And what?" Archer asked.

Laura turned to Archer. "She said, 'Tell Archer that was for him.'" Laura said. "She fired the shot."

"Goddamn it!" Stockman frowned. "This wasn't the plan!"

"Can you get her out of there?" Archer asked calmly. Insistently.

"She's in a taxi, headed to the Pearl Continental Hotel, Laura reported directly, reading her monitor.

"Okay. Activating her E&E plan now," Dan Thorne said calmly, using the universal abbreviation for "Evasion and Escape." "We have her joining a scheduled British Airways flight as one of their flight attendants."

"What other support do we have on the ground for her?" Archer asked.

"Our team at the consulate in Peshawar will keep a look out for her—there's really nothing else we can do until she checks back in. Next contact will be in four hours when she's at the airport."

Archer walked over to Stockman. "Chris, the price of me helping you identify and eliminate Shah is that you take care of Max—understand?"

Stockman didn't say a word, visibly incensed that he'd lost control of the entire operation so unexpectedly, to his own team on the ground. It was clear that he held not only Max Peretz, but also Archer, responsible for the sudden turn in events because of his past working relationship with her in Israel and throughout the Middle East.

Archer walked out of the room. He turned to see another former SMU Operator and CIA colleague approaching him down the hall who he recognized as Jack Condon, from his hunched-forward, lumbering gait.

Condon always had a bearlike face with the freckled skin of an Irishman. That hadn't changed. What had changed were his thick horn-rimmed glasses that covered eyes Archer always knew were wide, alert and discerning.

“Jack?” Archer exclaimed. “Is that you?”

“In the flesh, Lucas!” Jack answered smiling. “Older, wiser, and a bit wider.”

Archer nodded, smiling. He’d known Jack Condon for decades. They had followed one another from assignment to assignment in both the United States Special Operations Command, and in the CIA. Archer always admired his grit and intellect, and regarded him as one of the true good guys. He’d always carried more than most ever could on his wide, round shoulders. “Were you involved in this op, Jack?”

Condon nodded. “On the periphery. I found out about the funeral and recommended they find you to identify Shah.”

Archer smiled slightly. “So I have you to thank for the 3AM wake-up?”

Condon laughed. “Yeah, I guess you do.”

“Should’ve known an Irishman was behind this,” Archer replied lightheartedly. “You doing well?”

Condon shrugged. “Divorced, kids out of the house, broken down. Borderline diabetic. But I still have the dogs.”

Archer nodded and looked around them, down the hall. “What about this place?”

“Yeah, that’s a different story altogether. And a longer one,” Condon replied. “Let’s grab a beer sometime, and we can talk.”

“I’d like that,” Archer said. “Listen, will you make sure they take care of Max?”

Condon nodded back in Stockman’s direction. “He’s pretty furious right now, but I’ll make sure, and let you know.” He paused, and his tone noticeable changed. “Did you hear about John Lee?”

Archer inhaled. John Lee was his senior weapons sergeant on his Army Special Forces “A-Team” three decades ago when he was a young Captain—an African American with the charm and good looks of Denzel Washington, and the quiet courage and grit of any John Wayne character. “What about John? I just talked to him a several weeks ago.” Archer asked. “Is he okay?”

Condon shook his head. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you—he’s dying of bone cancer. A rare form, from what I understand. They’ve

got him in the UNC-Chapel Hill Cancer Center. They’re only giving him a few days to live.”

Archer’s smile disappeared and he pursed his lips. His heart sank. John hadn’t told him about his cancer. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll go down to see him,” he said solemnly. Looking up at his old friend and shaking his hand, Archer said, “Keep me informed about Max, okay?”