



# RULES OF BETRAYAL

**'A SUPERSTAR WRITER' LEE CHILD**

# CHRISTOPHER REICH

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## ***About the Book***

In 1980, a secret American B-52 crashes high in a remote mountain range on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. Nearly thirty years later, and spanning locales from those peaks to New York City, a terrible truth will be revealed.

Jonathan Ransom returns as the resourceful doctor thrown into a shadowy world of double and triple agents where absolutely no one can be trusted. To stay alive, Ransom must unravel the mystery surrounding his wife—an enigmatic and lethal spy who plays by her own rules—and discover where her loyalties truly lie.

## ***About the Author***

CHRISTOPHER REICH is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Numbered Account*, *The Runner*, *The First Billion*, *The Devil's Banker* and the highly acclaimed Jonathan Ransom series which includes *Rules of Deception*, *Rules of Vengeance* and *Rules of Betrayal*. His novel *The Patriots Club* won the International Thriller Writers award for Best Novel in 2006. He lives in Encinitas, California, with his wife and two daughters.

*Also available by Christopher Reich*

JONATHAN RANSOM SERIES

Rules of Deception  
Rules of Vengeance

NOVELS

Numbered Account  
The Runner  
The First Billion  
The Devil's Banker  
The Patriots' Club

**RULES OF  
BETRAYAL**  
CHRISTOPHER  
**REICH**



arrow books

*For my father, Willy Wolfgang Reich,  
In Memory.*

# ***PROLOGUE***

*Above Camp 4  
Tirich Mir  
Northwestern Pakistan  
May 30, 1984*

## ***“Did you hear that?”***

The climber dug his ice ax into the snow and cocked his head, listening.

“What?” asked his partner, perched a few feet below on the near-vertical face.

“A scream.” The climber squinted, trying to locate the shrill sound hiding inside the untiring wind. His name was Claude Brunner. He was twenty-two years old and considered France’s finest alpinist. Suddenly he caught the high-pitched wail again. It seemed to come from far away, and for a moment he was certain that it was approaching. “There!”

“A scream?” asked Castillo, a Spaniard ten years his senior. “You mean like a person shouting?”

“Yes,” said Brunner. “But not a man. Something else. Something bigger.”

“Bigger? Up here?” Castillo shook his head, and chunks of snow fell from his beard. “I don’t hear anything. You’re tired and imagining things.”

The wind calmed and Brunner listened intently. This time he heard nothing but the pounding of his heart. Still, the sound stayed with him, and he felt a stab of fear between his shoulder blades.

“How many hours’ sleep did you get last night?” asked Castillo.

“None.”

“It’s your mind playing tricks on you. The only thing you can hear this high is the jet stream. It makes you crazy.”

Brunner hammered a screw into the snow and affixed his rope. Castillo was right. He was tired. Bone tired. They’d left Camp 4 at 24,000 feet at two in the morning. It had taken eight hours of steady climbing to make it past the shoulder. Not bad, but not as fast as he would have liked. Not as fast as the American, who’d left their side two hours earlier to break trail.

Brunner looked down the precipitous incline. A string of six climbers approached from the ridge. In their brightly colored parkas, they resembled a Nepalese prayer flag. Red was Bertucci from Italy. Blue was Evans from England. Yellow was Hamada from Japan. And the others were from Germany, Austria, and Denmark.

The expedition was a UN-sponsored “Climb for World Peace,” though the idea had been the brainchild of the Reagan White House and seconded by Margaret Thatcher. Over the next mountain range, barely 160 kilometers away, a force of some 100,000 Russian troops had overthrown the government of Afghanistan and installed their own puppet, a wily dictator named Babrak Karmal.

Brunner gazed up. High above, emerging from the shadows of the great ice serac, was the final member of their team. The American.

“He’s moving too fast,” said Castillo with concern. “The snow up there is bad. We lost two men on my last attempt.”

“I think he’s trying to set some kind of record,” said Brunner.

“The only record that counts is getting to the top and back down alive.”

Overhead, an untrammelled blue canopy stretched to all points of the horizon. The peaks of the Hindu Kush rose in a

saw-toothed crescent. The wind, though blowing at a constant fifty kilometers an hour, was calmer than at any time in the two weeks they'd camped on the mountain. It was as fine a day as a climber could ask for to summit.

Brunner cut another step out of the hard ice, stopping as a cry cut the air. It wasn't the shrill sound he'd heard before. It was something else entirely. Something he knew all too well.

Looking toward the crest, he spotted the American's dark form, shrouded by snow, hurtling pell-mell down the incline and making a beeline for them.

"Put in another screw," said Brunner. "Hook me in. I've got to stop him."

"It's suicide," said Castillo. "If the impact doesn't kill you, he'll take both of us with him."

Brunner motioned toward the climbers below. "If I don't try, he could kill all of the others. They won't see him coming until it's too late. Just make sure the screw holds."

Castillo hammered a screw into the snow while Brunner two-pointed across the face in an effort to position himself in the American's path. "Is it in?"

"Another second!"

The American bounded closer, desperately clawing at the mountainside. Brunner could see that his eyes were open and hear him grunting with every rock he hit. Amazingly, he was conscious. Brunner moved a few feet to his left and dug in his crampons. The American struck an outcropping and lifted off the ice entirely, spinning until his head was below his feet.

Brunner shouted his name. "Michael!"

The American stretched out an arm. Brunner threw himself at the hurtling figure. The impact knocked him off the mountainside, and he plummeted headfirst down the face. But even as he fell, he was able to wrap his arms around the American's waist.

The rope caught, halting Brunner's descent. The American slipped from his grasp, his body beginning to slide across the ice. Brunner flung an arm at his leg, mitten curling around a boot, the force wrenching his shoulder clear of its socket. Brunner screamed, but maintained his grip.

The two men hung that way, suspended head below heels, until Castillo down-climbed to their position and fashioned a bivouac. A gash on the American's forehead was bleeding heavily, and one of his pupils was dilated.

"Can you hear me?" asked Brunner.

The American grunted and forced an ugly smile. "Thanks, bro. You really hung it out there for me."

Brunner said nothing.

"Why did you take yourself off the rope?" demanded Castillo.

"Had to," said the American.

"Why?" asked Brunner.

"Had to get everything set up."

"What do you mean, get everything set up?" asked Castillo angrily.

The American mumbled a few unintelligible words.

"Tell us," said Castillo. "What were you setting up?"

"Orders, man. Orders." The American's eyes rolled up in their sockets, and he lost consciousness.

"Orders? What does he mean by that?" Castillo grabbed the American's pack and freed the straps that held it closed. "What the hell?"

"Find something?" asked Brunner.

Castillo pulled out a large cardboard box. On its side were the words "Property of United States Department of Defense." He shared a look with Brunner, then said, "It must weigh twenty kilos. And still he beat us up the mountain. You know anything about this?"

Brunner shook his head. He was no longer looking at the box or the American. His gaze shot up to the serac hanging

above them, and past it to the sky. This time he didn't need to ask if Castillo heard the sound. It was no longer faint or shrill. It was the full-throated, earsplitting roar of a jet engine in the throes of mechanical failure.

A shadow passed in front of the sun, and then he saw it, and his breath left him.

Claude Brunner knew that they were all going to die very soon.

The aircraft passed directly overhead, its wing coming so close to the mountain that it appeared to slice a sliver of ice from the crest and launch a million snowflakes into the air. One of its engines was on fire, and as he stood rooted, watching, it exploded, causing the aircraft to tilt wildly to the left and assume a downward trajectory. He recognized it as a B-52 Stratofortress, and the large white star painted on the underside of the wing identified it as American.

For a moment the pilot righted the aircraft. Its nose lifted, and the engines no longer whined so angrily. And then the right wing snapped from the fuselage. It separated so cleanly, and so rapidly, that the action appeared to be a normal occurrence, and for another moment the plane continued to carve a perfect trajectory, framed by the brilliant blue sky. Abruptly, the bomber lost all airworthiness. The nose dropped and the jet began to spin, heading directly at the far mountainside. Debris tumbled from the aircraft. Several large cylindrical objects hurtled through space. The jet's engines howled like a dying beast.

Five interminable seconds passed before the jet struck the face of the neighboring peak, three kilometers distant. Brunner saw the fireball before he heard the explosion. The sound came seconds later, buffeting him like a gale-force wind.

Brunner looked over his shoulder at the giant lip of snow and ice hanging above him. *The serac*. The mountain shuddered. The overhang began to tremble.

The serac broke free. Two million tons of snow separated from the mountain and fell.

The last thing the Frenchman saw was a wall of infinite white plummeting toward him.

In the morning sun, the snow sparkled like diamonds.

*Zabul Province, Afghanistan*  
*Present day*

***They formed on the plain*** at dawn.

Man and beast and machine spread across the hard brown dirt in a line one hundred meters across. There were horses and jeeps and pickup trucks with heavy machine guns mounted on the flatbeds. They numbered only fifty men, and the villagers counted one hundred times that, but they were committed men. Warriors united under the banner of heaven. Sons of Tamerlane.

The commander stood in the rear of his Hilux pickup, binoculars to his eyes, surveying his target. He was tall and formidable, and he wore his black wool turban piled high on his head, the trailing folds wrapped tightly around his face to guard against the bitter cold. His name was Sultan Haq. He was thirty years old. He had been imprisoned for six years, twenty-three hours a day, in a small, clean cage in a hot place far, far away. In deference to his name, and to his habit of growing his fingernails long and keeping them as sharp as a bird of prey's talons, his jailers had called him "the Hawk."

The Hawk studied the cluster of low-slung mud buildings situated among the foothills two kilometers away. Through the mist, he could make out the town bazaar. Already shopkeepers were at work setting out their wares. Vendors cooked meat over brazier fires. Children and dogs ran up and down alleyways.

He lowered his binoculars and looked at his men. Arrayed on either side of him were six vehicles identical to

his own, battered Toyota four-by-fours with mounted .30 caliber machine guns. His men crouched at the base of the armament, Kalashnikovs clutched and ready, spare clips tucked into the leather bandoliers strung across their chests. Several among them carried old Soviet-era RPGs. In between the trucks, twenty or more horses moved anxiously, steam issuing from their nostrils, hooves pawing the ground. Their riders held their mounts at bay, waiting for the signal.

The men wore no common uniform. Their clothes were ragged and dirty. But they were an army all the same. They had trained and drilled together. They had fought and been blooded. They were without mercy.

Sultan Haq raised a hand into the air. As one, the gunners cocked the machine guns. The sound of metal striking metal reverberated across the barren landscape. The horses whinnied madly. He closed his fist, and his men rose to their feet and let out a fierce cry. Throwing back his head, Haq joined them, feeling the spirit of his ancestors rise within him. Closing his eyes, he envisioned the rampaging horde. He saw thundering hooves and flashing swords and smelled acrid smoke filling the air. He heard the screams of the vanquished and tasted death on his tongue.

He opened his eyes and returned to the present. Once more he was at home on the flatlands of eastern Afghanistan. He pounded his fist on the roof of the cab, and the pickup roared to life and accelerated across the fallow fields. In a few short months, these same fields would come to life as the poppy awoke, grew, and bloomed. Last year these fields had yielded three thousand kilos of raw opium, earning its farmers millions of U.S. dollars—more than enough to purchase stores and weapons to equip a thousand of his men.

The village must be brought under the Taliban's white flag. It was a question of economics, not religion.

A bullet cut the air above Haq's head, and a split second later the crack of the gunshot reached his ear. Dispassionately, he watched as the villagers armed themselves and formed a hasty skirmish line. Still he held back from giving the order to fire.

Seconds passed, and the air was alive with gunfire, lead whizzing past like a swarm of angry bees. A shot splintered the windshield of the pickup next to him. He glimpsed a spray of blood, and the vehicle peeled off.

"Commence firing," he said into his two-way radio.

The first mortar landed in the center of the village bazaar. A geyser of dirt shot into the air. A second mortar exploded, followed by a third. Confused, and unsure of where to direct their fire, the skirmish line broke.

The Hawk looked on with satisfaction. He had positioned two squads on the higher ground south of the village to deliver fire from the rear while he attacked from the front. It was a classic hammer-and-anvil maneuver as taught by the United States Army *Handbook of Infantry Tactics*. Remarkably, he had found the handbook in the prison library. He had committed every page and illustration to memory.

The truck climbed a rise and the village came into full view. It was a scene of chaos, with men, women, and children scrambling in every direction, seeking cover where none was to be had. Turning, he tapped the gunner on the shoulder. The machine gun roared to life, spraying the square in disciplined bursts as gunners from the other pickups opened fire. Bodies dropped to the ground. Entire walls of shops and offices disintegrated and collapsed. A house caught fire.

In his free hand, Sultan Haq clutched a Remington long-barrel sniper rifle pried from the fingers of the enemy. It was a fine and accurate weapon with a polished maple stock and the words "Barnes" and "USMC" carved into the butt. It fired only a single round, but a single round was

enough. As a boy, he'd hunted bighorn sheep in the rugged mountains of Kunar Province in the north. He knew how to shoot.

He signaled for his truck to slow and, raising the rifle to his eye, found a target, a young man running up the hillside clutching a woman's hand. He closed his finger around the trigger. The rifle kicked pleasantly. The young man fell to the ground. Pleased, Haq shouted for the driver to accelerate. The truck mounted a final hillock and barreled into the village.

An elderly mullah ran in front of the truck, waving his arms furiously. "Stop!" he shouted.

Haq halted alongside the man and jumped to the ground. "This village is now under my control," he said. "You will follow the dictates of Abdul Haq and the Haq clan."

The elder nodded abjectly, tears rolling down his wrinkled cheeks. "I surrender."

Haq raised an arm. "Cease fire!"

He waited as his soldiers shepherded the townsfolk toward a water fountain at the center of the bazaar. When they arrived, he ordered the elder to his knees. The old man complied. Haq put the barrel of his rifle to his head and shot him.

Stepping away from the body, he removed a list of names from his pocket. "Where is Abdullah Masri?" he called.

There was no answer. He aimed his rifle at a weak man with an insufficient growth of facial hair and shot him dead. Then he repeated the question. A stout man emerged from a store that had been selling DVDs of Western movies and Japanese television sets.

"You are Masri?" asked Haq.

The man nodded.

Haq took his time slipping a bullet into the rifle, then shot the man in the head.

“Where is Muhammad Fawzi?”

One by one, Sultan Haq called out the names of the village’s leaders. He executed the schoolteacher and the grocer. He executed a homosexual and a woman suspected of adultery. For months he had been spying on the town, readying for this moment.

There was one last thing to do.

Climbing into the cab of his pickup, he pointed to a large whitewashed building that housed the village school. Like most of the buildings in the region, it was built with stone and mud. The driver positioned the truck’s tail at the front of the school. A second truck came alongside. Moving backward, then forward, then backward again, the trucks battered the wall until it collapsed. Then they moved to the next wall and did the same, until the school was no more.

Afterward, his men walked among the rubble, gathering books, maps, and any learning materials they could find and dumping them into a pile. When they finished, he hauled a jerrican from his truck and doused the pile with gasoline.

As he was about to light it, a boy ran forward. “Stop,” he pleaded. “We have nowhere else to learn.”

Haq eyed the brave child. He was interested not in the boy’s words but in the fiberglass cast on his left arm. To the best of Haq’s knowledge, there was only a rudimentary clinic in the village. In his country, broken limbs were set in plaster, not fiberglass. He had seen this advanced medical treatment only once before. “Where did you get this?” he asked, touching the cast.

“The healer,” said the boy.

Haq’s ears perked up. He hadn’t heard about a healer in these parts. “Who is this healer?”

The boy looked away.

Haq grabbed the child’s jaw in his immense hand, the sharpened nails raising welts on his cheek. “Who?”

“A crusader,” someone shouted.

Haq spun. "A crusader? Here? Alone?"

"He's traveling with an assistant. A Hazara who carries medicine for him in a bag."

"Is the healer American?" asked Haq.

"A Westerner," came an answer. "He speaks English and some Pashto. We didn't ask if he was American. He cured many people. He fixed the khan's stomach and repaired my cousin's knee."

Haq released the boy, shoving him backward. His heart was racing, but he hid his anticipation beneath a veil of anger. "Where did he go?"

An elder pointed toward the mountains. "There."

Haq looked at the foothills that rose and eventually formed the massive mountain range known as the Hindu Kush. Tossing the lighter onto the pile of books, he walked back to his truck, paying scant attention as the flames climbed into the sky.

"Go," he said to the driver. "To the mountains."

***Jonathan Ransom woke and knew*** that something was wrong.

Bolting upright, he pulled his sleeping bag to his waist and listened. Across the room, Hamid, his assistant, slept on the ground, snoring. Beyond the shuttered windows, a camel brayed. Outside, a pushcart rolled past, its arthritic axles in need of oil, followed by a trio of voices raised in conversation. The cart, he had learned during his week in the village of Khos-al-Fari, belonged to the butcher, who was presently transporting his daily supply of freshly slaughtered goats to the town bazaar to be displayed hanging from tenterhooks in the front of his stall.

The cart continued down the hill. The voices died away. All was silent but for the ghostly roar of the Gar River churning through the nearby gorge.

Jonathan remained stock-still, the frigid air stinging his cheeks. It was only mid-November, yet in the steep, inhospitable foothills of eastern Afghanistan, winter had arrived with a vengeance.

A minute passed. Still he heard nothing.

And then the crack of a rifle. A single shot—high-caliber, judging by its report. He waited, expecting more gunfire, but none came, and he wondered if a hunter had taken one of the big-horned Marco Polo sheep that roamed the mountainside.

It was almost five a.m. Time to begin the day. With a grunt, he unzipped the sleeping bag to his feet and stood on the dirt floor. Shivering, he lit the kerosene lamp, then hurried to pull on a second pair of woolen socks and a beat-up pair of flannel-lined cargo pants.

A camp table in one corner held a washbasin, a jug of water, a cup with his toothbrush and toothpaste, and a washcloth. Jonathan poured water into the basin. The water had partially frozen overnight, and islands of ice floated on the surface. He washed his hands and face, then ran the washcloth over his body, scrubbing vigorously to stop his teeth from chattering. Finished, he dried himself, brushed his teeth, and put on his shirt and jacket. His hair was too long and tangled to tame with a brush, so he combed it with his fingers for a few moments before giving up on it.

“Hamid,” he said. “Wake up.”

To combat the cold, Hamid had disappeared inside his sleeping bag. Jonathan crossed the room and kicked him. “Move it.”

A head of unruly black hair popped out of the sleeping bag. Hamid peered angrily around the room. In the dim light, the circles under his eyes gained depth and he looked older than his nineteen years. “That hurt.”

“Get your butt out of the sack. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Just a sec—”

“Now.”

Hamid sat up slowly, pulling his cell phone out of the bag and checking it for messages.

Jonathan observed him, wondering for the hundredth time how a village could not have electricity but manage to have cellular phone service. “Your mom call?”

Hamid didn’t look up from the phone. “Not funny.”

“Yeah, well, put that thing away and get moving. I’ll see you at the clinic.”

Jonathan picked up the duffel that held his equipment and swung it over his shoulder. Pulling on his pakol hat, he opened the door and sniffed the air. Wood smoke, damp foliage, and peat: the smells of the world away from civilization. It was a scent he knew well.

For eight years he had traveled the world as a physician with Doctors Without Borders. He had worked from the top of Africa to the bottom. He had spent time in Kosovo, Beirut, and Iraq, too. Wherever he was located, his mission was to bring medical care to those who needed it most. Politics was not a factor. There were no good guys or bad guys. There were only patients.

He'd arrived in Afghanistan two months before, but he no longer worked for Doctors Without Borders. Events in the recent past prevented him from working in an official capacity as a physician or surgeon for them or anyone else. The man at the American embassy had told him he was crazy to venture into the Red Zone—the Red Zone being anywhere outside Kabul. When Jonathan said he was traveling alone, without bodyguards or weapons or any personal security whatsoever, so that he might offer medical care to people in the remotest villages, the man called him "suicidal." Jonathan didn't think so. He had calculated the risks, weighed them against his responsibilities, and found the balance equal, more or less.

Now, standing outside his one-room shelter in the predawn darkness, his boots sinking into the icy muck, he listened again. It wasn't noise that unsettled him, but the lack of it.

"One hour," he said to Hamid, then shut the door.

A soft rain fell as he walked along the path zigzagging down the hillside. Below, shrouded in clouds on a spit of flat terrain tucked between steeply descending mountains, lay the village. All the structures looked the same: low-slung, rectangular slurries of rock, timber, and mud that seemed to have grown out of the earth itself. A thousand people lived in Khos-al-Fari. Many times that number visited from the surrounding valley to trade at the bazaar, sell crops and timber, and conduct a rudimentary social life.

Hands thrust into his pockets, Jonathan made his way through town. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and he

walked purposefully, leaning forward as if to combat a rising wind. To look at him, one would think he was a native. He wore the baggy trousers and untucked shirt known as a shalwar kameez. To protect against the cold, he wore a herder's sheep-fleece vest. His beard was coarse and long, black cut through with gray. But a closer look revealed his European ancestry. His nose was prominent and well shaped. His teeth were straight and white and, most tellingly, in complete order. His skin was smooth, and except for the crow's feet at his eyes, youthful for a man of thirty-eight. His eyes were the color of tar and, even at this time of day, lit with resolve. Nowhere in his face was there a hint of Mongol blood, or of the tireless suspicion born of millennia spent repelling invaders. There was only competence, tenacity, and hope.

Jonathan Ransom was an American.

The patients were lined up outside the clinic when Jonathan arrived. He counted fifteen in all, including several children in the company of their fathers. Some had visible infirmities: badly healed burns, gliomas, cleft palates. Several were amputees, the victims of the land mines and bomblets left behind by the Russians. Others simply looked wan and tired, and were most likely suffering from the flu. Jonathan greeted them with respect, taking care to shake every man's hand while ushering them inside and explaining that they must wait an hour until he could see them.

One father stood apart from the others. His daughter leaned against him, a scarf covering the lower half of her face. Seeing the tall foreign doctor, she turned away. Jonathan knelt in front of her. "I'm happy to see you," he said softly. "We're going to make you better. You won't have

to wear this scarf anymore. You'll be able to play with the other children again."

"You are really going to do this?" the girl's father asked in halting English. "Today?"

Jonathan stood. "Yes."

He entered the building, lowering his head so that he didn't strike the lintel. He had divided the clinic into five rooms: a waiting room, two consultation rooms, an office, and an operating theater. The conditions were dismal, even by local standards. Hard-packed dirt floors. Low ceilings. No electricity. No running water.

Upon arriving, he had discovered a battered wooden desk inside with the words "Médecins Sans Frontières: où les autres ne vont pas" carved into it. Roughly translated, it said, "Doctors Without Borders: Where Others Dare Not Venture." And below it, also in French, "The Doctor Is Always Right," and the year "1988." His colleagues had preceded him to this remote village more than twenty years earlier. To Jonathan, it was confirmation that he had made the right decision in coming.

He walked into his office and dropped the duffel onto the ground. Inside was everything he needed. Scalpel, forceps, and Metzenbaum scissors for surgery. Cipro and Ancef for antibiotics, Pepcid for ulcers, iron supplements for the women, and multivitamins for the children. Lidocaine in 30cc bottles for use as a local anesthetic and Ketamine for putting a patient under. There was prednisone, Zyrtec, norepinephrine, and a host of pharmaceuticals to treat a gamut of ailments beyond most doctors' imagination. And sutures, syringes, Band-Aids, ace bandages, and lots and lots of alcohol swabs.

Jonathan spent an hour equipping the clinic for the coming day. He started a fire, boiled water, and sterilized his instruments. He swept the floor of the operating room and laid a clean plastic sheet over it. He arranged his supplies and inventoried his medicines.

At seven a.m. he saw his first patient, a boy of ten missing the lower half of his right leg and walking with the help of an ungainly wooden prosthesis. Three years earlier he'd stepped on a Russian mine while playing in the fields. The amputation had been badly done. Over time the flesh had withered because of a lack of circulation and become infected. The skin needed to be debrided and cleansed and the boy put on a course of antibiotics.

"You'll just feel a little pinch," said Jonathan, preparing a syringe of lidocaine. "It won't hurt at—"

Hamid burst into the room. "We have to go," he said, gasping for breath.

Jonathan regarded him impassively. "You're late."

"Did you hear me?" Hamid was short and skinny, twenty pounds underweight, with narrow shoulders and an eager, bobbing head. Jonathan had found him outside the offices of a medical aid organization in Kabul shortly after his arrival. Or rather, Hamid had found Jonathan. A second-year medical student, he'd offered his services as a translator, guide, and doctor's assistant for \$50 U.S. a week. Jonathan offered him \$40 if Hamid would find him a decent four-by-four and accompany him into the Red Zone. Hamid agreed, and a deal was struck.

"Yeah, I heard you," said Jonathan.

"They're coming."

"They" meant the Taliban, the orthodox Islamic fighters locked in a struggle with the American and Afghan forces to retake control of the government and the country and reassert Islamic law over its population.

"It's Sultan Haq. He took a town sixty-five kilometers from here yesterday and massacred the village elders."

Jonathan considered this. He'd heard of Haq, a particularly vicious Taliban drug lord who captained his own militia in Lashkar to the south, but he was confused by his presence. Khos-al-Fari was a poor village far from the

poppy belt, with no apparent strategic value. "What does he want?"

"I don't know," answered Hamid wildly. "Does it matter?"

The father took his son by the shoulder and hurried him out of the room.

"Tell the others to come back tomorrow," said Jonathan. "All except Amina. She can't wait. Set out a standard tray in the operating room. Make sure I have some extra anesthetic."

Hamid eyed Jonathan as if he were mad. "You're going to operate on her?"

"It's her turn."

"That's a four-hour procedure."

"Longer. You never know with reconstruction."

"Just give her medicine for the infection. You can come back and take care of her another time."

"She's waited long enough."

The blast of a distant explosion caused the room to tremble.

"Mortars," said Hamid, rushing to the window. "Sultan Haq's men killed eighteen people yesterday. He executed ten of them himself. An American will be at the top of his list."

"What about Pashtunwali?" asked Jonathan. "The villagers will watch out for us."

"Pashtunwali" referred to the Afghans' code of honor and hospitality, which demanded that they protect a visitor taken into their home or village.

"It doesn't stand up very long in the face of superior firepower. We have to get out of here."

"Set up the tray, Hamid."

Hamid retreated from the window and came closer to Jonathan. "Leave, or you will die."

"I'll take my chances."

"And me?"

“You said you wanted to learn. I respected that. Now’s your chance. You’ve never seen me perform this procedure. Think of it as an opportunity.”

There was another explosion, closer this time. An exchange of automatic-weapons fire, then silence.

“They’ll kill me, too,” said Hamid. “I helped you. Besides, I’m Hazara.”

Jonathan dug in his pockets for the keys to the truck and tossed them to Hamid. “Go. I understand. You’ve been a great help. I owe you.”

“But you won’t be able to operate on Amina without me.”

“It’ll be harder, but not impossible.”

Hamid studied the keys in his palm, then put his head against the wall and moaned. “Damn you,” he said after a minute.

“Set up the tray,” said Jonathan.

***It was snowing in the*** resort of Les Grandes Alpes. Large, fluffy flakes tumbled from a curiously clear sky onto the mountainside. Translated, the resort's name meant "the Big Alps," but the slope was nowhere near Switzerland, nor any other mountain range in Europe, and its runs were anything but grand. The entire skiing area consisted of a single well-groomed piste that descended in three sections, like flights of a staircase, steep, then flat, and finally a gentle decline to the bottom.

The woman named Lara Antonova attacked the hill expertly, skis pressed together, hands at her waist. It was just past three and the slope was crowded with skiers. Most were novices. The snowplow was the rule, and the majority had difficulty mastering even that. Dressed in white stretch pants and a turquoise down parka, her auburn hair pulled into a ponytail that hung past her shoulder, she carved a sleek line among the other skiers, her eyes casting about for a familiar face.

Lara Antonova had not come to Les Grandes Alpes for the skiing. Born in Siberia and raised a ward of the state, she was a highly ranked operative assigned to Directorate S of the FSB, the Russian Federal Security Service. Directorate S was responsible for foreign clandestine operations: intelligence-gathering, blackmail, extortion, and in the rare case assassination. Lara Antonova had come to Les Grandes Alpes on assignment to meet the most powerful arms dealer in southwestern Asia.

Reaching the halfway point, she came to a crisp parallel stop. She removed her goggles and surveyed the slope. Despite their lack of skill, most of the skiers were dressed