

ATRIA BOOKS
PROUDLY PRESENTS

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

The next thrilling novel
by Brad Thor

Turn the page for a preview of
Foreign Influence...



He who does not punish evil, commands it to be done.
—Leonardo DaVinci



PROLOGUE

INNER MONGOLIA

The strategic military outpost was such a closely guarded secret it didn't even have a name, only a number—site 243.



It sat in a rugged, wind-swept valley far away from cities and centers of industry. Its architecture was minimalist, a cross between a high-end refugee camp and a low-rent university. Tents, trailers, and a handful of cheap concrete buildings made up its “campus.” The only outward signs of modernity were the Pizza Hut, Burger King, and Subway mobile restaurant trailers that made up the outpost’s “food court.”

It was just after three a.m. when the attack began. Lightweight Predator SRAW missile systems took out the fortified entry control point along with the watch-towers. Mortar rounds blanketed the campus, obliterating key infrastructure and force protection targets. When the four heavily armed fire teams breached the perimeter, the outpost was in complete chaos.

The well-trained soldiers tasked with 243's security were no match for the men who now overran their positions.

Dressed in black, with hardened night vision goggles and suppressed weapons, the professional combatants appeared only long enough to engage each soldier with an economy of surgically placed rounds before slipping back into the darkness, often before their victims' lifeless bodies even hit the ground.

At the main concrete structure, one of the fire teams used a shape charge to blow open the fortified door. As they rushed in, they heard a high-pitched whine followed by the thump of a limited EMP device being detonated. It was part of 243's emergency protocol in order to destroy the facility's data. The men in black, though, didn't care. Their superiors already had a copy.

Their night vision goggles impervious to electromagnetic pulse, the team swept through the rest of the building, making sure they killed every occupant. From there, they moved on and cleared two more buildings while their teammates took care of the other tents, trailers, and concrete structures.

Fifteen minutes later, two helicopters landed and the teams were extracted. As they lifted off and disappeared back into the ink-black sky, not a single member of military outpost 243 had been left alive.

LONDON

A man in a blue linen blazer pushed away the hand of his subordinate. "I know how it works," he said, placing the tiny bud into his ear and activating the video on the smart phone.

His liver-spotted hands cradled the chrome device in his lap as he watched the scenes from Mongolia. It had been the most expensive and dangerous undertaking of his life. Though his club was actually a haven for members of the espionage community, he also sensed the

presence of some of history's greatest sociopolitical figures around him at this moment. Had he looked up to see the smiling ghosts of Lenin, Stalin, Marx, or Mao, he wouldn't have been surprised. Great men who change the world shared a bond that transcended time, and he was on the verge of becoming just that, a great man who would change the world.

Though they were alone in the club's library, he kept his voice low. "We're confident that all of their data was destroyed?"

The subordinate nodded. "We have the only copy that remains."

"And the personnel?"

"Everyone associated with the program has been terminated." The Chinese have gone beserk trying to figure out what happened. They have no idea who hit them.

"Excellent," said the man in the linen blazer. "Let's keep it that way. Now, what about our network?"

"The network is fully intact and ready to go operational."

This was an incredible moment, the man thought as he plucked the bud from his ear. This was a watershed, a history-changing moment.

He removed the SIM card from the phone and handed the device back to the subordinate. "I want you to initiate stage one as soon as possible."

"So I have your permission to activate tight control then?"

"You do. And whatever happens, don't lose sight of the bigger picture."

CHICAGO

Alison Taylor hadn't planned on going out drinking after work, but it was a gorgeous summer night, the project

was pretty much complete, and everybody else in her department was going.

It was only supposed to be one drink at RL. As things often go, one drink led to another. The party worked its way south, hitting Pops, Shaw's, the Roof bar atop the Wit Hotel, and finally some seedy dive bar just west of the Loop. Before any of them knew it, it was four a.m. and their presentation was in less than five hours.

To counteract the heavy volume of alcohol they had consumed, someone had suggested the nearby 24/7 pharmacy for charcoal tablets and caffeinated beverages, but the idea was put on the back burner when they noticed that the tiny burger joint across the street was still serving. "There's nothing like grease to absorb the alcohol molecules in your system," one of them said.



After cheeseburgers and fries, they conducted an unsuccessful search of the pharmacy for charcoal pills, loaded up on energy drinks, and then headed for the subway.

Since two of the women lived in the suburbs, Alison invited them to stay at her apartment where they could borrow clothes and head into work with her in a few hours. The fact that one of the women was five inches shorter and the other seventy-five pounds heavier was lost on all of them in their drunken state.

They spent the subway ride cursing the bright lights of the train compartment, downing Red Bull and Monster, and wondering how much sleep they could grab at Alison's before having to leave for the office.

At Division Street, they stumbled up the steps from the Blue Line platform and out onto the sidewalk where they began to head east. It was in the crosswalk at Milwaukee Avenue that the unthinkable happened.

A taxicab came flying around the corner and slammed



into Alison. Her friends watched in horror as she was tossed into the air like a rag doll and then landed, head-first, fifteen feet away from where she had been struck.

All of it had happened so suddenly. Everyone was in shock. As the taxicab sped away into the night, neither of Alison's friends had even gotten its number. The only thing they would be able to remember was the color of the vehicle, and that its driver appeared to be Middle Eastern.






CHAPTER 1

BASQUE PYRENEES
SPAIN
SIX DAYS LATER


In a sixteenth-century farmhouse, a dwarf known to intelligence agencies across the globe only as “The Troll” lay bleeding to death while his house burned down around him.



He had made a very serious mistake, but it wasn’t until he had pulled his hands away from his throat and had seen the blood that he had realized just how serious. There was no excuse for it. He *should* have known better.

The woman had been too attractive, too perfect, *too much* his type. She had described herself as an “erotic gourmand,” with predilections ranging from troilism to chrematistophilia. But it was her fetish for peculiar body shapes, particularly dwarfism—known as morphophilia—that had convinced him they were perfect for each other and that he had to have her.

Precisely because she had seemed too good to be true, he had checked her out thoroughly. When satisfied that she was legitimate (and after having admonished the director of the Academy, as it was referred to, for not having brought her to his attention sooner), he arranged for her to be flown first class to Bilbao. There, he had a



car meet her at the airport and take her to the train station where she traveled southeast into the Pyrenees. From the moment her feet first touched the ground in Spain, he had had her watched. The nature of his business demanded that he be extremely cautious.

She had been advised to bring nothing but her passport and the clothes upon her back. He had requested her sizes in advance and assured the Academy that he would provide everything that she might need.

When her train arrived in the sleepy mountain village, another car was waiting. The driver was professional and kept to himself as he made his way to the next transit point. Occasionally, though, the driver's eyes did wander to the rearview for stolen glimpses of her incredible beauty.

After dropping her off at a nondescript trailhead, the car retreated down the rutted, dirt road and disappeared. Two large men on horseback appeared from the thick forest of trees leading another horse behind them. They each carried knives in their boots and sawed-off shotguns in short, leather scabbards forward of their saddles.

After checking the woman for weapons, they helped her atop her mount and led her up into the mountains.

The party rode for almost two hours and not much was said. The men had been instructed not to make small talk with their charge. Finally, they arrived at the farmhouse.

The men galloped off with the horses, and she was left alone outside the little stone structure. Pushing the front door open, she saw a long wooden table covered with a fine linen tablecloth. Upon it was set a myriad of gourmet dishes. Champagne sat in a sterling silver bucket, a riot of exotic flowers exploded from a large

crystal vase and sitting at the head of the table was the Troll.

He was flanked by his two ever-present companions—a pair of white Caucasian Ovcharkas named Argos and Draco. Standing over forty-one inches at the shoulder and weighing over two hundred pounds each, the giant animals had been the dogs of choice for the Russian military and former East German border patrol. They were exceedingly fast, possessed a powerful urge to defend, and could be absolutely vicious when the situation called for it. They made perfect guardians for a man who stood just under three feet tall and had very powerful enemies—many of whom were also his clients.

What the man lacked in height, though, he more than made up for in grace, charm, and intelligence. He had a sweet face and deep, warm eyes. He proved to be a perfect gentleman, and his guest was more than happy to provide him with what he was paying for.

Through intense carnal rituals such as the *Etruscan Butterfly* and *Erotic Entrainment*, she took him to new heights of ecstasy.

They engaged in acts of sexual pursuit forbidden by even the most permissive of ancient societies. For the two of them, nothing was off limits. In fact, the more bizarre or dangerous the act, the more willing she was to indulge in it.

She surrendered herself completely, infusing him with the greatest aphrodisiac of all (and the antidote to his greatest insecurity), power. A devotee of erotophobia, he twice pushed her right up to the very brink of death itself, only to bring her back at the last possible second. Holding her life in his hands was an incredible feeling. It made him feel like a god. Little did he know that she was slowly beginning to disarm him.

When they weren't having sex, they engaged in conversations of such intellectual depth and breadth that he felt he had finally met his equal. Though he knew he shouldn't, he fantasized that their relationship might hold the promise of something more. He knew it was foolish, but no woman had ever stirred such deep emotions inside him.

While he tried to remind himself that this was nothing more than a business relationship, in his heart he still hoped. Gradually, his voice of reason was overruled. When he realized that there was little, if anything at all, this woman could ask of him that he wouldn't do, he knew she had him. And she knew it as well.

Her first request concerned his dogs, the same two dogs that were never away from his side, not even when he took her to his bed.

There was no need for her to make up excuses as to why she wanted the dogs removed. The more rough their sex, the more agitated the dogs became. Even the dwarf had to admit that his dogs were ruining the mood, so into the hallway they went.

With the dogs safely at bay, the woman didn't attack; not right away. She was an artist and true artists never rush their craft. For her masterpiece to be complete she needed his complete trust, and so she led him on a bit longer.

After two nights of making love without the dogs in the room, the time was finally right and the woman was ready. She had saved her most erotic, sexually charged game for last.

The little man wore a neatly kept beard. He was fastidious about it and trimmed it with a pair of scissors daily. To maintain the beard at his neck and cheeks, he used an ancient old-fashioned straight razor.

It was highly polished, with an ivory handle. She en-

joyed watching him use it. It reminded her of being a little girl and watching her father, and she told him so. It was the only truth about herself that she ever shared.

This time, she held out her hand for the razor. He was hesitant. It only lasted a fraction of a second, but it was long enough for her to notice.

“I want you to shave me,” she purred, opening the razor and handing it back to him as she stroked herself. “From my chin all the way down. Every hair on my body.”

There are few sexual pleasures known to man as intensely erotic as having one’s body hair delicately shaved.

As the dwarf obliged her, the woman writhed in ecstasy atop his crisp, white sheets. Despite the size of his hands, they were surprisingly strong, as was the rest of him. He performed the delicate act with surgical precision.

When it became his turn, he propped two pillows against the headboard and leaned back. Unlike some of the more unusual games she had instigated, he had heard of this one before, but had never trusted anyone enough to do it. Of course the game could be played with a disposable razor, but that would have defeated the purpose. The excitement came from the danger.

Withdrawing the polished blade from the bowl of warm water, she struck a coy smile as she began to hum the “Largo al factotum” aria from *The Barber of Seville* and ran the razor back and forth along a towel as if it were a strop.

Sweeping her long, chestnut hair behind her neck, she bent down and kissed him on the mouth, allowing her heavy, bare breasts to briefly brush against his chest. Then she began to shave his body.

The pleasure was indescribable. His senses were on fire as waves of sexual electricity pulsed through his body.

He licked his lips as he closed his eyes and arched his back. That was when she struck.



CHAPTER 2

ROME, ITALY

TWO DAYS LATER

Professor Tony Carafano smiled as the last of his students, two sophomores from the University of Texas, shuffled into the breakfast room of the two-star Hotel Romano and sat down.

“Good morning, ladies,” he said as he removed his glasses and placed them next to his cappuccino.

Carafano was a charming man in his early fifties. He had gray hair and a large, aquiline nose, a feature, he enjoyed pointing out, which was not only the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of male beauty, but which also placed him above the other summer-abroad professors because he really had been born with a nose for art.

From Assisi, Perugia, and Cortona to Orvieto, Siena, and the hilltop town of Coricano, Tony Carafano had used his sense of humor to baptize his students in Italian art history. He had always found that when they were having a good time, they learned more. He had also found that if you were traveling throughout the country by bus with twenty strangers for six weeks, the quicker you could get them all laughing the more enjoyable the trip would be.

He only had one rule: no matter how late the students stayed out the night before, they all had to be back by breakfast. They were good kids, sweet kids—the kind of kids that parents had a right to be proud of. None of them had broken his one and only rule. The fact that they hadn't, showed respect, and it was mutual. This was the best summer group he had ever had the pleasure of teaching. As much as his colleagues complained about the “future of America,” these young men and women proved that America's future was bright, quite bright, actually.

Checking his watch, Carafano addressed the students. “I can see that some of you are moving a bit slower than normal this morning and I'm not going to inquire as to the reason. I think I know why.”

A wave of polite laughter swept the breakfast room. When it died down, he continued. “You've got ten minutes to load up on caffeine, aspirin, whatever it is that helps make you human, and then I want to see everyone in the lobby, checked out, with their bags ready to go. Okay?”

Heads nodded and with the scrape of chair legs across the tile floor, the students rose to get more coffee and return to their rooms to finish packing.

Depending on traffic, the professor knew that the drive south from Rome to Pompei would take a little over two and a half hours. Halfway there was a church with amazing mosaics that he wanted the students to have plenty of time to study and sketch. After that, they had reservations for lunch at one of his favorite trattorias overlooking the Bay of Naples.

Half an hour later, the tiny hotel lobby was awash in a sea of suitcases and backpacks. As a handful of students made one last dash to the breakfast room for coffee, others helped the program's bus driver, Angelo, load the bags into the belly of the bright yellow motor coach. In

the chaos as everyone checked out, none of them noticed that one of the bags didn't belong to them.

After a final head count to make sure everyone was on board, Tony Carafano gave Angelo the okay to depart.

As the Italian maneuvered the coach through Roman traffic, the professor distributed the day's itinerary. Walking down the aisle, he found his students engaged in their morning ritual of texting friends back home, checking email, and listening to their iPods. Few were bothering to take in their last glimpses of one of the most beautiful and historically significant cities in the world.

With one of Rome's most popular landmarks drawing near, Carafano called his students' attention to it. "If anyone's interested, we're about to pass the Coliseum on our left."

Some of them looked up. Many, though, were too busy. It was a shame that even though they had all seen it before, a thing of such wondrous beauty should go ignored. Especially considering what was about to happen.

As the bus pulled even with the ancient arena, a spotter on a rooftop half a mile away removed a cell phone from his pocket and dialed the number he had been given.

Six seconds later, an enormous explosion rocked the city as the motor coach erupted in a billowing fireball.