

**ATRIA BOOKS  
PROUDLY PRESENTS**

# **TAKEDOWN**

**The next thrilling novel  
by Brad Thor**

**Turn the page for a preview  
of *Takedown*. . . .**



# ONE

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SOMALI COAST  
15 KILOMETERS SOUTH OF MOGADISHU  
MAY 22

**M**ohammed bin Mohammed tucked a handful of local currency into the front of the boy's pants note by note and then sent him on his way back to the madrassa. The eleven-year-old had been exquisite. Maybe not as exquisite as the European or Arab boys he was accustomed to, but one made do with what one had at hand.

Once Mohammed had finished bathing, he

brewed himself another glass of tea and stepped out onto the terrace. It was darker than normal for this time of evening—the clouds of an approaching storm having hidden the stars overhead. A bit fatigued from his illness and his recent trip to Morocco, Mohammed leaned against one of the stone balustrades and listened to the roar of the Indian Ocean crashing against the beach below.

After a few more minutes of salt air against his skin, Mohammed returned inside. There was no telling how much havoc the storm might wreak on satellite communications, and he had a few last elements to put in place. The transaction was nearly complete.

Because of his particular predilections, Mohammed preferred to live at the beachside villa alone, but that didn't mean he was lax when it came to security. Not only did he have his own men posted on the roads in both directions, but he also enjoyed the protection of several local warlords. In addition, the beach had been mined with antipersonnel devices and the entire house had been constructed with reinforced concrete and steel to protect against any of the remote-controlled Predator Drone attacks the cowardly Americans were so fond of.

With no central government and no outside

forces meddling in local affairs, men like Mohammed bin Mohammed were free to do as they wished in Somalia. In just three years, al-Qaeda had opened dozens of covert training camps throughout the country and had significantly added to the organization's numbers, shipping them off to Iraq to gain valuable, real-world combat experience. What's more, after their humiliating defeat at the hands of local militias, the United States wanted nothing to do with this part of the world. It was the perfect base of operations. Everything in Mohammed's world seemed to be improving, even his health.

In one of the villa's small bedrooms, Mohammed carefully unlocked a specially fabricated titanium briefcase and booted up his encrypted Macintosh PowerBook.

As he worked, his mind drifted to the little boy who had left only twenty minutes ago, and he started becoming aroused again. With the arousal, though, came something else—a dull throbbing in his back, just below the rib cage, complemented by an overwhelming urge to urinate. *Too much tea and too much sex*, Mohammed thought to himself as he rose to go to the toilet. When he approached the bedroom door, his heart caught in his throat.

“Hands on top of your head,” said one of sev-

eral black-clad figures armed with very nasty-looking assault rifles.

Mohammed was stunned. *How could the house have been breached?*

The man in black told him once more to put his hands on top of his head, this time in Arabic.

Ignoring the order, Mohammed lunged back into the bedroom toward the PowerBook. As he did, a pair of barbed probes from a TASER X26 ripped through his cotton robe and embedded themselves in the flesh of his back. When the electricity raced through his body, his muscles locked up and he fell like a dead tree trunk, face-first onto the stone floor.

His hands and feet were Flexicuffed, and the last thing he saw before being dragged from the room was two of the men going for his laptop.

Had they been paying attention, they might have seen Mohammed smile.

Seconds later an explosion rocked the small bedroom and the hallway was showered with titanium shrapnel, chunks of plaster, and pieces of charred human flesh.

# TWO

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SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

MAY 29

**E**ileanaigas House was a twelve-bedroom estate located on the northern end of a private, wooded island in the middle of the River Beauly. In addition to its majestic silver birch, Douglas fir, spruce, and pine trees, the estate also boasted a dramatic gorge, a heated outdoor swimming pool, small formal gardens, an extensive wine cellar, and a security system that rivaled that of any leading head of state.

The security was a very necessary precaution as the man who lived on the island had many powerful enemies—many of whom were his clients.

Known simply as “the Troll,” the lord of Eileanaigas House lived by the motto that knowledge didn’t equal power, it was the proper application of knowledge that equaled power. And when applied in a very precise manner, knowledge also equaled incredible wealth.

It was in following this mantra that the Troll had made a substantial living for himself dealing in the purchase, sale, and trade of highly classified information. Both his cutthroat business acumen and his gluttonous appetite for the very best of everything stood in sharp contrast to his height. At just under three feet tall, he could barely reach anything in his home without some sort of assistance, normally in the form of miniature step-ladders made from ornately carved exotic hardwoods. The house’s size was a reflection of how the Troll saw himself, and only its most private areas had been retrofitted to accommodate his size.

Another reflection of how the Troll saw himself were the two enormous, snow-white Caucasian Ovcharkas, Argus and Drako, who never left his side. Weighing close to two hundred pounds

each and standing over forty-one inches at the shoulder, these giants were the dogs of choice for the Russian military and the former East German border patrol. They were extremely athletic and absolutely vicious when it came to strangers intruding on their territory. They made perfect guardians for the Troll's island domain. And most important for a man who made his livelihood dealing in the art of duplicity and blackmail—the dogs could never be turned against him.

Tonight, Argus and Drako sat warily near the fire as a powerful summer storm raged outside. Despite the fire's warmth and its siren's call to sleep, their eyes were glued to the man who had just arrived at the castle.

"Whisky?" asked the Troll, offering his guest a drink.

"I don't drink," replied the man, his dark, narrow eyes bracketing a once prominent Bedouin nose. "I'm surprised. I thought you would have known more about me."

The Troll smiled as he poured himself two fingers of Germain-Robin Brandy. "Abdul Ali, aka Ahmed Ali, Imad Hasan, and Ibrahim Rahman. Date of birth unknown. Place of birth also unknown, though Western intelligence speculates somewhere in North Africa—most likely Algeria

or Morocco—hence the CIA’s cognomen of ‘the Berber.’

“Even though no Western intelligence agency has been able to obtain a photo of you, it is speculated that you have undergone multiple plastic surgeries to change your appearance. You speak more than five languages and are at home in at least a dozen countries worldwide, more than half of them in the West. For all intents and purposes, you’re a ghost—a man who travels wherever he wants, whenever he wants, with no one ever knowing if he was really there or not.

“It is believed you have both prior special operations and military intelligence training, though with whom no one can, or will, say. You have been suspected in more than thirty-six terrorist attacks on Western targets and have been directly implicated in eleven high-profile assassinations—two of which were MI6 agents, three Mossad, and four more who were deep-cover operatives for the CIA.

“Your height has been listed as anywhere from five-foot-eight to six-foot-five, you have a spear-shaped birthmark on the back of your left shoulder, and are, in short, one of the highest-priority targets for every organized intelligence agency in the Western world.”

Ali was impressed. "That's very good. Everything except for the birthmark. I do not have one."

"You do now," replied the Troll. "I had it inserted in your file and cross-confirmed by three separate sources. It may come in handy someday. Consider it a bonus. Al-Qaeda has given me a considerable amount of business over the years." The Troll then climbed up into his desk chair and said, "Let's talk about why you're here."

"You know why I'm here."

"Of course I do. Your man in Somalia, Mohammed bin Mohammed."

Ali nodded his head.

"Everything I was able to uncover is in the file I forwarded to your superiors. I don't understand your need to see me in person."

"I have learned that even in our delicate line of work, there is no substitute for meeting face-to-face."

"Be that as it may, this is still highly unusual," replied the Troll as he cradled the snifter in his diminutive hands.

"So are the circumstances surrounding Mohammed's disappearance."

"Mr. Ali, the only reason I have agreed to meet with you is because of my long-standing

business relationship with your superiors. If you have something to ask me, please do so.”

Ali studied the Troll for several moments before responding. “I’d like you to tell me what you uncovered.”

“Like I said, it’s all in the file. I am very meticulous about my work.”

“As am I, but sometimes small details have a way of getting left out.”

“I don’t leave out details—small or otherwise,” said the Troll.

“You never know. Something that may have seemed inconsequential at the time might turn out to be quite important to us now. Please. Humor me.”

The Troll took a long sip of brandy. He knew that lying to the man could prove to be a very bad mistake. There was no telling if al Qaeda had a piece of the puzzle he was not aware of. All he could do was stick to his plan. It was inevitable that they would come to interrogate him. He was one of the few people who knew where Mohammed bin Mohammed had been hiding. “Your man in Somalia was targeted by an American covert action team.”

“*American*,” repeated Ali, “not Israeli? You’re sure of that?”

“As the file I sent your superiors clearly states, he was taken by a private vessel to waters off the eastern seaboard of the United States and then flown by helicopter to somewhere in New York City.”

“And he is still alive?”

“From what I understand, but he wasn’t in very good health to begin with. Apparently he has a serious—”

“Kidney problem,” interjected Ali, finishing the Troll’s sentence for him. “We know.”

“To his credit, it seems to be making his interrogation quite difficult for his captors.”

“This is where I get confused. If it was the Americans, why would they bring him to America straightaway? Why not take him to a cooperative country for interrogation first?”

“I don’t interpret intelligence, Mr. Ali. I simply facilitate its transfer. Now, if there’s nothing else?”

“Actually, there is,” said the assassin. As his hand moved toward the inside of his sport coat, the Ovcharkas began to growl.

The Troll placed his finger on the tiny trigger of a special customized weapon recessed beneath his desk and with his other hand signaled the dogs to be silent.

Well aware that there was a weapon trained on his stomach, Ali slowly removed a piece of paper from his jacket, leaned forward, and slid it across the desk.

The Troll took his time in reading it. Now the al-Qaeda operative's real reason for wanting to meet face-to-face was out in the open. "Your organization doesn't pay me for advice, but I'm going to give you some anyway. No charge. Cut your losses and move on. Even if I could pinpoint his exact location, what you are suggesting is suicide. It can't be done."

"That's not your concern. All we want to know is if you can put a team and equipment in place by the specified date?" said Ali.

"With enough money anything is possible, but—"

"Twenty million dollars, on top of which you'll be paid twice your normal fee and a bonus of five million once the operation has been successfully completed."

"Meaning once you have recovered your colleague."

Ali nodded his head. "Think of it as an added incentive."

The Troll was silent for several moments as he pretended to reflect upon the offer. They had

played right into his hands. Finally, he said, “The biggest problem I see you facing, Mr. Ali, is time. If you can allow for more, it might help increase your probability of success.”

“No, there is no more time. Mohammed is scheduled to complete a very sensitive transaction for us in the very near future.”

“Then I would suggest you get somebody else to do it.”

“There is nobody else. The man Mohammed has been negotiating with will only deal with him. If Mohammed fails to appear, we forfeit our place in line and the man will simply contact the next prospective buyer. If that happens, we will end up losing much more than just a highly valued member of our organization.”

“What is it you are buying, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“It is none of your concern,” responded Ali.

The Troll smiled. He knew exactly what they were buying. There were very few things al-Qaeda would be willing to pay so much to get their lead negotiator back for. “If you’re successful, the Americans will throw open the gates of hell itself to find you—all of you.”

Abdul Ali wasn’t quite sure if the dwarf was referring to their rescue of Mohammed bin

Mohammed, or what they intended to do once Mohammed's transaction was complete. Either way, it didn't matter. "You have our offer. Take it or leave it."

Considering that the Troll had dreamed about this exact opportunity for years, how could he do anything other than accept?

As Abdul Ali left the manor house, he couldn't help smiling. That the Troll would accept the assignment and help them in their task was a foregone conclusion. What amused the assassin more was that the little man had no idea that al-Qaeda knew that it was he who had betrayed Mohammed bin Mohammed to the Americans. Their network of contacts might not have been as vast, but it could be incredibly efficient.

Soon, the Troll's usefulness would run its course, and when it did, Abdul Ali would take particular pleasure in bringing the man's parasitic existence to an extremely painful end.