Clarion Review ★★★★★   THRILLER

Beyond Top Secret

Rob Lubitz
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This stupendous thriller challenges both the heart rate and the moral compass.

Trouble has a knack for finding the characters in Rob Lubitz's *Beyond Top Secret*, a complicated, entertaining thriller that explores the themes of love and ethics.

In 2000, Ryan tries unsuccessfully to forget momentous events of 1986. But he can't forget that he accidentally uncovered a mission in which the CIA used mind-control drugs, nor that he had a fling with his best friend's wife, Alana, whom he still loves. Alana still pines for Ryan, despite being married to Steve. After 9/11, a group of rogue politicians work with the ex-deputy director of the CIA, Wilhelm Kronig, to recreate the elixir Ryan stumbled upon in 1986, and soon a covert attempt to assassinate Osama bin Laden commences.

Alana and Ryan end up in the CIA's crosshairs again when Alana is charged with murdering Steve. A reporter, Connie, and a district attorney, Carle, both looking to further their careers, also get caught in this web. Will Ryan, Alana, Wilhelm, Connie, and Carle get out of this debacle alive, or will they become victims of the dastardly political cabal?

Although it takes a while for the scope of the story's plot to emerge, this is fitting, because it underscores nagging feelings that Ryan and Connie have, a hunch that something is too fishy to be coincidence, a notion that often gets people in over their heads. The tendency for each discovery to lead to more questions keeps the pages turning at a steady clip.

Thanks to brilliant use of third-person limited omniscient narration, Alana's deepening helplessness becomes apparent. The book also reveals the plans of the band of politicians bit by bit, compelling further reading as the cover-ups and counter-cover-ups needed to pull off the assassination pile up.

Ryan, Alana, Wilhelm, Connie, and Carle are all relatable. Despite their different drives, keeping people safe and doing the right thing motivates them. Ryan and Alana don't want their love for one another to put them at risk. Despite their love for the story or the office, respectively, Connie and Carle refuse to risk the lives of many to achieve their dreams. Wilhelm's patriotism initially motivates him to recreate the drug whose formula he destroyed when he saw the harm it could do. As Wilhelm tells the group, "'I guarantee that we'll get some real intelligence, not the bogus crap that I'm sure you've been getting with your torture techniques … I propose that we take one of our high-level captives. … After getting all of the intelligence we can out of him with the hypnosis drug, we turn him into a missile to assassinate bin Laden.'"

The drug works by enhancing the effect of hypnosis, so that subjects can carry orders they receive while mesmerized months or years after their initial trance. Given the current debate over what constitutes torture, and recent government reports acknowledging the limited usefulness of such techniques, this book prompts the timely questions: Would use of this drug constitute torturing the subject? Is it ethically permissible to essentially rob someone of free will

if bending him to another's will would save many?

Unlike the heroes, the ruthless politicians do not ponder these dilemmas, but poor Wilhelm finds his ethics changing. This stupendous thriller challenges both the heart rate and the moral compass.

JILL ALLEN (March 18, 2015)

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