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Grains of Truth

Lydia Crichton
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Unique characters and high drama combine in this well-written, action-packed story of counterterrorism and espionage.

In Lydia Crichton's *Grains of Truth*, set in present day, post-9/11 America and Egypt, Julia Grant, a middle-aged woman from San Francisco, is unexpectedly recruited to carry out a counterterrorism mission in Egypt.

Following recovery from an illness caused by a parasite she picked up while on her last visit to Egypt, Julia is also getting over the disappointment of a stalled romance from that same trip. While there, she fell in love with her married tour guide, Mohamed Zahar. Now back in San Francisco, she's volunteering for a peace organization, but is at a crossroads, trying to determine what she wants to do with the rest of her life. When she is suddenly approached by U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism agent Brad Caldwell, who asks her to carry out a "simple" mission by going to Egypt to complete a communication transfer that a U.S. operative was supposed to handle before she disappeared, she reluctantly agrees.

To her tourist group in Egypt, led by Zahar, she is posing as a writer traveling in the country to research a book. When she meets fellow tourist Alexander Bryant, a retired four-star general now working as an arms dealer, her situation becomes even more complicated—because she is instantly attracted to him. Throughout the mission, she is distracted by thoughts of her two love interests, Zahar and Bryant. And while she partially views the entire experience as an adventure—and through the eyes of a liberal, pacifist, and feminist—her continued interest in a married man, her new attraction to a military man, and her involvement in counterterrorism activities cause her much internal turmoil. She feels she is betraying her deepest values and everything she thought she believed.

After a little confusion early in the storytelling—particularly in the first chapter, which starts with a character other than the protagonist, and includes a lot of description that slows the pace—the narrative becomes clearer with the introduction of Julia in Chapter Two. A well-written story unfolds in a compelling way as Crichton weaves together an intricate and complex narrative that includes, at the core, a love story, along with an intriguing tale of international espionage, terrorist factions, exotic travel, and competing religious and political beliefs. The result is an action-packed and suspenseful story that will keep readers guessing about each character's true nature and identity throughout.

Aspects that may seem a bit far-fetched (such as the selection of a civilian for the potentially dangerous mission) are addressed directly by characters in the story, making them more plausible than if they were ignored. The unusual nature of Julia's situation ultimately makes it more engaging, mostly because Julia is such a likable character. In Julia, Crichton creates a character who remains feisty and determined, even in the face of fear and under dire circumstances.

The novel is rich with high drama, but is interspersed with sweet moments between Julia and her love interests, too. It's a good mix that draws readers into the unique characters' lives.

MARIA SIANO (April 24, 2013)

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