



The Betrayal

John Kalkowski

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The second of John Kalkowski's Red Cell novels, *The Betrayal* features a fifteen-year-old government operative as a protagonist, and is written with cross-generational appeal. Sharp prose and a fast, surprising pace make this a thrilling read.

The Betrayal begins at a terrorist's execution. Right before he is hung in Baghdad, a criminal screams out Will Conlan's name, creating immediate tension and intrigue. Still, the book doesn't catch up with Will until months after this harrowing event, and finds, surprisingly, that he seems to be a normal teenager. He lives in Illinois, goes to school, hangs out with friends, and even dates.

But all is not as it seems. Strange events at Will's school are detailed alongside dangerous happenings elsewhere, and it soon becomes clear that a shadowy group of terrorists is hunting Will. The teen is the youngest operative of the Red Cell, a mysterious government agency that tries to predict and stop possible terrorist plots against the United States before they happen. After a scary home invasion, Will and his parents are forced to move to a top-secret facility for safety, but this proves ineffective: his girlfriend is kidnapped, and a Nebraska Huskers football game falls under a terrorist threat.

The story is intelligently plotted and deftly trades between expected developments and shocking surprises. Terse chapters end with suspenseful cliff-hangers. The novel becomes engrossing, progressing quickly, and when Will finally arrives at the stadium, it is almost impossible to put down. The titular betrayal (the betrayer still remains nameless at the end of the novel) does not play in until very late in the book, suggesting follow-up Red Cell books.

The appeal for such continuation is built into *The Betrayal*. Its characters are well-developed and hook interest. Will's unique situation as a teenage government agent might strain credulity in less capable hands, but as Kalkowski writes him, Will is highly intelligent, possesses strong reasoning skills, and has a penchant for uniquely creative thinking. This is especially true of the scenes right before he tries to save the people at the football game from a terrorist attack. His top priority is ensuring the safety of the spectators and his girlfriend; how he does that has all the makings of a top-notch thriller, and as the hero of this particular series, he is a natural.

The Betrayal reads like a large-scale chess match, full of carefully plotted moves and tense moments. Whether Will or the terrorists get to call checkmate remains to be seen, but *The Betrayal* certainly earns interest for coming developments.

KELLY THUNSTROM (December 11, 2015)

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