



Belinda

Mark Zvonkovic

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A daring spy longs for a new beginning in Belinda, an entertaining romantic thriller.

In Mark Zvonkovic's romantic thriller *Belinda*, a lawyer and an ex-spy reunite, risking the unknown.

Lyn is a Houston lawyer who is stalling on her own retirement. Jay, a former CIA agent whose cover involved working at Lyn's firm, now splits his time between his ranch and Baja California. Hoping to rekindle their relationship, Jay contacts Lyn. But his duplicitous lifestyle prevents him from disclosing why he left in the first place: he was busy seeking vengeance for his mentor's murder.

The novel toggles between Jay's painful memories and Lyn's present legal negotiations. It also includes digressions into the work of other lawyers and repetitive, closed door legal conversations. People try to extract information from others, evading ethical musings; others deflect people's dishonest overtures. The fates of people from previous installments in the series are revealed; Lyn negotiates the sale of an oil company. In the process, Lyn and Jay's shared history is only alluded to. Although the busy work environment that underlies the book is used to hint at Lyn's conflicted feelings, these factors distract from the gradual build of the couple's relationship, whose initial hesitations give way to mutual acceptance.

The book's settings are atmospheric, from Jay's Baja California neighborhood, where references to the sea and to pelicans result in subtle calm, to Lyn's Houston, whose landmarks and social events are captured in vibrant terms. Jay's backstory also holds attention. He is stoic, dedicated, and passionate, and he works to balance the partial truths that he can share with Lyn with the secrets that he's obliged to preserve. His past bleeds into the present in the form of new dangers, which result in some late suspense—and in a potential threat to Lyn, who has been wondering about her future as a lawyer. Her doubts about her future are juxtaposed with the professional confidence she exudes, resulting in compelling moments.

But the book's women—Lyn included—are too often viewed in terms of men's sexual fantasies about them, or in terms of how men assess their looks. Their thoughts, too, rest in what the men around them are imagining of them. Such characterizations are reductive—and at odds with the women's stated competence. The book includes a gratuitous rape scene, too. Further, its finale is rushed through to leave room for future series developments.

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KAREN RIGBY (April 19, 2022)

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