

Favors Captured

Belinda Brolo

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With two main characters who transcend their romance-genre roles, Brolo has crafted an exciting story with a wellspring of emotion.

Against a background of late 1980's political upheaval, strong silent Navy SEAL Marco, thirty, and virginal art student Jojo, twenty, spark a mutual attraction during a chance meeting at an airport bar. Marco's dangerous career simultaneously facilitates and hinders their love. Using his military connections, he can track Jojo and her friends, enabling him to appear for spur-of-the-moment dates or nick-of-time rescues. Yet, the nature of his missions means the couple must endure agonizing times apart when Marco goes off to fight terrorists. Will their love survive? Themes of self-discovery, love, and violence run through *Favors Captured* by Belinda Brolo.

Brolo certainly has the tried-and-true elements of a certain type of romance down pat: the wounded, womanizing alpha male made faithful by the grace of a beautiful, talented ingenue. Yet, Brolo's characters transcend these tropes through self-awareness.

As he initially pursues Jojo, love-em-and-leave-em Marco becomes angry and confused that she has such a hold on him. Determined to gain control of the situation, he tries to treat their love affair like something he knows, e. g. a military target he stalks from a long range, occasionally popping in for quick torrid meetings. While this technique allows him to discover data about her, being face to face with Jojo throws his emotions into a tizzy. He can no longer "compartmentalize everything so efficiently;" he finds himself caring. Indeed, "You take care now," become his endearing final words to Jojo whenever he signs off one of his phone calls to her. Even keeping a military detail assigned to her, which may come off as creepy when he doesn't know Jojo well, becomes protective once it's shown Marco feels guilty for failing to guard his mom and sisters from paternal abuse years ago.

Jojo, for her part, excels at art, makes friends easily, comes from money, and overcomes the stereotype of perfect heroine with the depth of grief she feels for her dead mother and her relationship with her father, DB. The author implies an unfathomable wellspring of sorrow in one so young, a sorrow that propels Jojo to find success in art, as a way to connect herself with her artistically-talented long-gone mom. In relation to her father, their rapport represents an endearing combination of dad trying to cling to his daughter while simultaneously releasing her enough to attend college. Jojo makes sure he doesn't drink too much, while he worries about her not eating enough. Their relationship, coupled with the phonetic spelling of DB's Louisiana accent, makes this patriarch a likable character.

Unlike its main romance, the thriller aspect of the novel is less successful. It is high-octane in scenes where Jojo and her friends are endangered, but it fails to maintain the same momentum when describing Marco's anti-terror exploits. Marco fights nameless enemies who commit general crimes. If the enemies had been named and their villainy described in more detail, perhaps these forays would feel more intrinsic to the story. That they do not is a shame, because it glosses over the potent themes of how war damages soldiers, and how warriors fight on many fronts, "one physical, one emotional, and one political." Equally distracting is how the book switches points of view from Jojo to Marco between paragraphs, with no prior warning of this change.

Romance lovers will adore this book, whose ending leaves room for a much-needed sequel.

JILL ALLEN (June 29, 2015)

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