



Behind the Mask

Carolyn Crane

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Behind the Mask Carolyn Crane
To save her twin sister she must switch places with her...

When her long lost sister—a prostitute—is won in a card game by a brutal drug cartel, Zelda knows what she has to do: take her place. Save her. Focus on infiltrating the shadowy group on behalf of the Associates, and try not to think about why she left the spying game years ago. She’s slept with dangerous criminals before; she can do it again.

Hugo Martinez is one of South America’s most lethal and wanted men, a legendary mercenary living on a windswept mountain. Even at the height of the war he wasn’t in the habit of taking women captive, but the American whore has seen his face. And he and the orphan boy need a cook. He shouldn’t want this woman, but there’s something so unusual about her...

Little by little, Zelda finds herself falling for her captor...but is he the killer she’s been hunting all these years?

Behind the Mask Details

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From Reader Review Behind the Mask for online ebook

Suzanne (Under the Covers Book blog) says

Zelda hasn't been an active agent for years – ever since she broke under torture, resulting in the agent she was working with being killed. But, with her twin sister in danger Zelda once again enters the field, posing as her twin to fool a drug lord. But the destruction of a small village and the re-emergence of a legendary mercenary, Kabakas, Zelda's mission takes a turn...especially when she starts to fall for the savage and beautiful man behind the legend.

I always look forward to a Carolyn Crane book! I know I am bound to get something packed with unusual and fascinating characters and a romance that will keep me hooked to my kindle. I wasn't disappointed, Behind the Mask was fantastic full of dark twists and turns, action and a smoking hot romance that will get you squirming in your seat.

Zelda is one of the leaders of the Associates and a shadowy presence in the previous books and I loved seeing her come to life in Behind the Mask. Crane has delivered us an interesting heroine; strong but a little bit broken and I enjoyed seeing the book from her POV. It gave you insight into not only her mind, but the mysterious and ruthless leader of the Associates, Dax. Kabakas aka Hugo; remote, dark, mysterious, rough and damaged; so basically catnip to anyone of the female persuasion, we can't help but fall in love with him. But, rather than being your typical cookie cutter 'broody damaged daddy-didn't-love-me hero' type, Hugo really came alive on the page his intensity and personality shining through.

The story mainly focuses on Zelda and Hugo, but there is enough action and excitement to keep Behind the Mask going at a fast pace and keep the pages turning. I am really enjoying this series, it's got action, romance and that little something dark, twisted and original that Carolyn Crane adds to her books making them memorable. I can't wait to read what she brings out next!

Saly says

3.5-4 stars

If I had to ever categorize this series, I would call it edgy and different. These books are raw, the romance too is not all roses and lilies but for some reason they work for me. The hero in this one is quite atypical, he's crass, rude, violent but also has a soft heart and the heroine too is no shrinking violet. She was a field operative with the CIA and has done and seen things. You know, her books have some shades of Anne Stuart (I couldn't get into her Ice books) but tamer. All in all not my favorite of the series but I enjoyed it.

Maria Rose says

This suspenseful, nail biting, romantic thriller is the story of Zelda and Hugo. Zelda is a partner in the shadowy Association group that deals behind the scenes in places even the CIA won't go. When she goes undercover to help her prostitute twin sister Liza, she's both excited and terrified to be back in the field again. But it seems pretty cut and dried - replace her sister in the trade her drug dealing boyfriend made when

he lost her in a bet to a Mexican drug lord, get some inside secrets of his realm, and get out. Only she doesn't expect that she's going to be traded down to another drug lord, El Gorrion, in South America, this one meaner, tougher and undoubtedly lethal for her. When she arrives at her destination, her situation is compounded by Hugo, a man who has come for vengeance against El Gorrion for attacking his mountainside village and gets it, including her - a man who resembles a nearly mythical assassin thought dead for the last 9 years. Though captive and captor, they recognize in each other kindred spirits and even while Zelda is making plans for her escape, she can't fight her increasing attraction to him. But if Zelda has secrets, so does Hugo and as those come barreling to the surface, choices must soon be made, choices that will either end in them becoming true partners, or betrayal and death.

When I'm not reading romances, I have a real thing for espionage type thrillers. Tom Clancy (The Hunt for Red October), Robert Ludlum (The Bourne Identity), Daniel Silva (The Kill Artist) - these are some of my go-to authors when I want a total escape to a world of spies and tension and edge of your seat thrills. So when I started this story, I knew it was in the romantic suspense genre which I enjoy but I'd never read Carolyn Crane before so I didn't know what to expect. Wow. Seriously, wow. From the very first page this story was a nail biter, twisting and turning, going one place then careening off to the next, completely absorbing such that I couldn't put it down until I got to the very last page. So absorbing in fact that I totally forgot to highlight any quotes while I was reading and had to go back to pick some for this review. In my opinion, this story ranks easily alongside classic thriller authors with its intensity, story depth and edge of your seat action.

The setting of the story was quite interesting, taking place for the most part in a fictional mountainous remote area of South America. (At least, according to Wikipedia it's fictional as I tried to research it and found it didn't exist). You get a very real sense of the harsh mountain isolation, the local villagers who tend to their fragile savinca verde crops and the life of a subsistence farmer. The plant in question is also fictional but was written about skillfully enough as to be totally believable.

'The mountaintop was the first real home Hugo ever had, and the isolation of it suited him right down to the steel blades he still kept in his boots. The harshness suited him. The windswept barrenness suited him. Even the savinca crop that grew in gnarled rows upon the terraced mountainside suited him. The plant calmed his mind, dulled his pain.

The savinca farmers down in the village never allowed the crop to flower; the savinca verde was only valuable to the wholesale florists when the flowers were in bud form. In fact, a tract of open flowers always meant tragedy - no farmer would let the precious flower open unless he was injured or dead. You never wanted to see the bloodred heart of the savinca.

In this way, it was the perfect metaphor for him.'

The story is told from Hugo and Zelda's points of view (with the occasional chapter by a secondary character). Zelda is a conflicted woman. Since a disastrous previous field experience that resulted in the death of her partner, she has experienced shame, guilt, and self-loathing such that she stayed out of the field for a long time, only coming back now to rescue her sister. But we see in her something different than how she sees herself - a strong, competent woman who can make quick decisions, who does what is necessary to survive, using her body and her mind to her advantage. Her attraction to Hugo is visceral, on a gut deep level, scary yet impossible to ignore. Hugo's POV was fascinating, totally believable as a hard ruthless man, haunted by his past but not regretful of it. He too does what is necessary to survive, willing to go to any lengths to for those he has placed under his protection. He has the care and keeping of a young boy whom he rescued from a killing field, a boy he is determined to give a chance at a life with meaning. Though he comes across as cold and indifferent, it is indeed a mask that keeps his true emotions from coming to the surface, emotions that Zelda can see glittering in his eyes. When the two of them are together, the heat between them

sizzles and though Hugo could do anything he wants with Zelda who is his captive, he sees the truth of the matter - that the harder he is the more closed off she is as she puts on her own mask , steeling herself for her body to be used, as it has in the past. But when he is gentle with her, she breaks.

She pushed her hips against his and his breath hitched. God, yes, he wanted her.

"Please," she said. He believed her now. "Do it, baby" had been a lie, but this please was not.

He slid up her skirt again, but differently this time. Slowly, making it about her. His hands slid along the warm, smooth flesh of her thighs. He let her feel his desire for her, let her hear the beautiful slide of her skin, down and up, down and up. The sound filled the space around them. Just the sound and the feel of her skin under his skin was more erotic than anything he'd ever done with all the women he's ever fucked.

And then, slowly, he slid one hand around her hips and gripped her buttock under the panties. Her breath sped. The other hand he slid between her legs, touching her over her panties, almost chastely.

She gasped.

He took the gasp in a kiss. She was his again.'

Their love scenes are steamy and emotionally intense as words they cannot say are given truth in their actions, weaving an invisible tie around them that only tightens as outside forces work to pull them apart. As their passion heats up, so too does the action around them and just when you think you know where the story is going it takes an unexpected turn as Zelda and Hugo fight with all they have to maintain their fragile trust.

This story is gritty and harsh, a romance where love is an emotion that can bring you power or destroy you. Don't expect to be able to put the book down by the time you get to the second half - you'll be fully invested in this unconventional couple as they fight to have a future together. 5 riveting stars.

Note: a copy of this story was provided by the author for review.

Note 2: This review also appears as a blog post at Straight Shootin' Book Reviews:
<http://straightshootinbookreviews.com...>

Jen (That's What I'm Talking About) says

As a former CIA agent and co-founder of The Associates, Zelda knows she has no choice but to step in on behalf of her twin sister Liza, who is going to be "loaned to" a Mexican drug cartel for the weekend. Although she hasn't been undercover in six years, since the mission that broke her, she understands that getting into Brujos' territory would save countless lives. However, when things go horribly wrong and Zelda is further traded to the dangerous El Gorron cartel, she realizes that she may have to break cover and escape.

Hugo is a loaner, but enjoys his isolated life outside of Buena Vista, Valencia. However, when El Gorron's men threaten the town and its rare savincas crop, Hugo knows he must resurrect a dangerous ghost from his past. When he finds an American prostitute among the men he goes after, he decides to take her captive to help him around the house, seeing something more in her eyes that the woman she claims to be.

I absolutely love The Associates series, and think Behind the Mask may be my favorite title of the series. I love how the author parcels out clues and information, while the reader waits to see how it will all play out. The suspenseful storyline is intelligent and exciting. And Ms. Crane's story makes me feel. There were parts when I was afraid to read the book because I knew it would have to get bad before it got good. Bringing me into the world and keeping me so emotionally and mentally engaged made for a very rewarding read.

Additionally, there are some intense scenes between Zelda and her co-founder, Dax, that are all the more powerful for those who've read the series from the beginning.

I completely adored both main characters. Even though she's one of the Associates' founders, we've never really known anything about Zelda, so she felt like a fresh, new character to me. She is haunted, and this journey is very cathartic. Since part of the story is shared from her POV, the reader is privy to the wide array of emotions and steps she must go through to begin to heal. Her passion and inner-fire were a complete joy to read.

Likewise, Hugo had his own path of self-discovery, realizing that the ghosts he'd laid to rest are still under the surface. His attraction to Zelda is so strong when he knows her as Liza, that both Zelda and this reader realize that when he finds out her secrets, things will get ugly. And they do. But the key to what makes *Behind the Mask* such a successful story and romance is that the author doesn't cheapen the emotional reactions, rather she allows the characters to work through the rough patches and get to the other side. And together - **WOW!!!** This pair is so full of explosive chemistry, it made the proverbial pages catch fire. And although this could have been written as a huge case of Stockholm syndrome, Ms. Crane builds the romance around an equality; one that is a bit unconventional, but both characters are on equal standing.

Overall, I really enjoyed *Behind the Mask*, and it is one of my favorite books of 2015. Ms. Crane pens a darkly twisted, yet heartbreakingly beautiful romance. The intensity between Zelda and Hugo is off the charts because they are two people with everything to lose and willing to give up their lives to protect it. The suspenseful story is riveting and well-played, with an ideal balance between action, torture, mind games, and love. I strongly encourage you to pick up *The Associates* series!

My Rating: A+, Loved It - Personal Favorite

Review copy provided by author

Originally posted at [That's What I'm Talking About](#)

Anita says

The first half of this book is awful. I was soooo close to chucking it in the DNF file, but for some reason, I stayed with it. I'm stubborn like that sometimes. The second half really, really picked up the tempo and ended up being a really good, edge of your seat ending.

Zelda and Dax are the brains behind *The Associates*. She left the CIA after a horrible experience that resulted in the death of an agent, something that still haunts her. Her twin sister's life has been checkered, to say the least. She is in a bind and Zelda can use her problem to help resolve an international standoff. All she has to do is play the part of her party girl sister.

Nothing goes as planned and Zelda ends up with Hugo Martinez, high on his mountaintop estate in the middle of a drug war. Everyone in Hugo's small village thinks he is a rich American, dappling in the exotic flower this South American village is famous for. They have no idea he is an infamous, lethal wanted man, but Zelda isn't fooled. Even as she is irresistibly drawn to the mysterious Hugo and the orphaned boy he cares for, she must decide if this man is capable of the atrocities attributed to him or if he has been set up.

Sunny says

ARC Review.

This review originally posted at Love Affair with an E-Reader

Behind the Mask is a rich, complicated story with Carolyn Crane's most memorable characters yet. Mind you, this is the author who brought us a heroine whose strength is based on her hypochondria (Justine Jones, *Mind Games*) and a man whose super power is linguistics (Peter Macmillan, *Off the Edge*).

This story is a study in contrasts. It is earthy and fanciful, primal and elegant, and raw and sophisticated.

Earthy – Savinca flowers are featured. They flourish in this particular place, a special piece of earth. They become almost a physical part of the village and our characters.

Fanciful - Yet, these flowers are fanciful. They come from Carolyn Crane's imagination. They are unusual. They have to be harvested and treated just so, otherwise, the crop is useless.

Primal – the author says that Hugo may be the most “caveman” of all her characters. I couldn't agree more. Hugo is a caveman, but not kind that grunts and drags his knuckles. This caveman distills everything down to the essentials where emotions are on the top, right on the surface, primal.

Elegant – Hugo has an elegant way of fighting. He doesn't use a mundane, blunt instrument such as a gun, but prefers blades and swords.

Raw – Zelda is raw. She is a passionate woman. She loved being a CIA operative until a tragedy took her out of the field. She is mired in the guilt and it impacts almost every area of her life; it drives her. The wounds are still raw. She has lost her joie de vive.

Sophisticated – Zelda studies botany, a sophisticated natural science. It's taught her to seek balance. Plants thrive through the balance of elements.

In this complex tapestry is a story of two lost souls finding each other. Hugo is a retired and renown mercenary known as Kabakas, a near-mythical assassin, and the object of Zelda's obsession when she was in the CIA. After years of terrorizing the enemy and being wrongly accused of a terrible massacre, Hugo retires with his adopted son to the mountain top house in his deceased mother's village.

Zelda is one of the founders of The Associates. She left the CIA after being tortured and forced to make a horrific decision. She has to live with the guilt and consequences ever since. She closes herself off so tightly that she is almost a machine. When Hugo and Zelda finally find one another, their coupling is essential. It is as if they need each other to breathe. They learn to open up and feel again. After being wound so tight throughout the book, even I felt their relief coming off the pages.

I must admit that I am a little unsettled by the Epilogue. I want my HEA, and things between Hugo and Zelda were not completely resolved. Is Zelda going to go back to The Associates? If so, in what capacity? Will Hugo be fully satisfied being a savinca farmer? Is Kabakas really laid to rest? Then I decided that this ambiguity was a good thing because it leaves the door open for Zelda and Hugo to come back in another book, right?

IN A NUTSHELL:

If you are looking for a straightforward romantic suspense, this may not be the book for you. If you are searching for something twisty and curvy, something truly unique and interesting, you are going to want to get this book pronto.

Julie says

Behind the Mask by Carolyn Crane is a 2015 publication. I was provided a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

I confess this is my first book by this author... but it will certainly not be my last!

This dark, and I do mean dark, romantic suspense novel centers around, Zelda, a woman once involved in the spy game with the CIA but is now a member of a smaller, more focused group - "The Associates", but is botanist at heart. She is haunted by horrible mistake she made once that is slowly eating away at her soul.

When her twin sister, a prostitute, finds herself in a bind, Zelda uses her skills to take her sister's place and infiltrate a dangerous group of criminals.... but, she never thought she would find herself rescued and more or less held hostage by the shadowy Kabakas- someone she thought was dead.

Hugo is a lethal mercenary, but has rescued a young boy, and his now trying to do the right thing by him. Zelda comes along at just the right time, since a string of housekeepers and governesses have quit on him. Zelda/Liza can cook and teach the boy lessons, and he will let her live since she has seen his face now.

What neither of them are prepared for is the bond they forge with one another. Can these two hardened and ruthless souls actually be falling in love?

This is a very tense story, character driven, dark and brooding, action packed and filled with all manner of dangerous people and dangerous feelings. Trust issues, regrets, scars, duty, all weigh heavily on the main characters, but love slowly chisels away at the armor Zelda and Hugo have built around themselves. If you like deeply flawed characters or an unconventional love story, you will really like this one. I was riveted from start to finish and this one of the most interesting romantic suspense stories I have read in awhile. Very imaginative, descriptive, with well drawn characters worked together to create an atmospheric tension that is simply captivating.

I'm on board for the next book and in the meantime I hope to locate the first three books in the series and get up to speed. However, it should be noted, this book can be read as a stand alone. I highly recommend this one!

RachelW (BamaGal) says

Interesting story, good RS. This particular story reminded me of Anne Stuart and her gamma bad boys. Nice to see calm, collected, 'Big Boss' Zelda back in the field. With this series, Crane pulls no punches about the kinds of things an undercover operative (Associate) really has to do to get the job done.

This is not the book/series for those who like fluffy, romance-heavy RS; or for those who just don't 'get' Carolyn Crane. Lots of action here, and a little on the darker, edgier side.

Behind the Mask can actually be read standalone to get a taste of the series. Now I'm ready for the other 'Big Boss' Dax to get his story. As shown here, he is more intriguing than ever, and has a dark side the reader hasn't seen yet.

Amanda says

4.5 'Say more' stars

This is my 7th Carolyn Crane books. I can hardly believe myself, after all these years I'm still stalking her release like a crazy fan. As for Behind the Mask, the #4 of The Associates series, this book can work as a standalone. I read #1 and #2 and miss out #3. It had been so long and I hardly remember much of what went down. But once I started on this, I'm totally immersed into Zelda and Hugo's story.

Zelda, 38, an experienced field agent, ex-CIA and co-leader of the Associates. During her recent mission, her plan went awry and she ended up in the middle of a shoot out and being captured by the elusive, lethal and legendary mercenary Kabakas.

Hugo is the infamous Kabakas that many thought was dead in a fire. Now he's leading a quiet life with Paolo, the boy he found and tending to his *savinca verde* bush. He never thought he will don his mask again after all this time, but when El Gorron decided to attack his town in order to pressure the farmer to give up their land, Hugo decided to instill justice and seek revenge.

Assuming that Zelda is just a dime a dozen American whore, Hugo decided she will be their cook and Paolo's tutor. Zelda was all out of sort, suspecting Hugo might or might not be Kabakas, the man she was fascinated with and wanted to hunt down all these years. I've got to say Zelda's admiration and fascination with Kabakas ran deep and make her questioned her judgement. Once she confirmed his identity, will she give him up to the Associates?

Zelda was self declared master at coldfucking. What a term, definitely a first for me. Too bad we didn't get to see her coldfucking in action because went she fuck Hugo, it was undeniably super hot! Zelda was living with a ton of guilt and shame for years when she gave up crucial information after being tortured. Though I did find her repeated inner self chastising monologue a tad too much.

Hugo is one stoic and brooding hero. I'm such a sucker for these lethal ass kicker who really know how to brood impressively. Hugo used to be larger than life and feared by everyone, but after a tragedy that strike him, he left all behind and decided to live out the rest of his life in peace. He is a man afraid to hope or love. The way he was reluctant to call Paolo by his name even though we knew how much he love the boy make me want to cry out for him. This man who lived such a hard life deserved to have happiness too.

The presence of Zelda spark something Hugo and we can see how these supposed enemy had so much common right down to their guilt and their scars both physically and emotionally.

"It's worse, isn't it? It's not what is done to you, but what you do to others that can hurt the most."
"Guilt makes you small."

There are so much sexual tension and wariness between these two individual who trust no one. Their motto is leave no prisoner. I spent the entire read worrying something bad is going to happen and someone is going to get hurt because I knew these highly trained people always tend to make the logical choice, but not what I think the right choice.

"I know your heart. You may be something of an enemy, but I do know your heart."

Behind the Mask had all the ingredients for a perfect romantic suspense. The romantic element and the suspense was balance perfectly. I am very invested in the budding love and also the thing that went on with the the crops, El Gorron and the Associates. I devoured every single page effortlessly and there isn't a lull moment at all.

Though Carolyn Crane did mentioned that the technologies and facts that were mentioned in her books are mostly made up, it felt very convincing to me. At least until I decided to google it. Hugo loves his *savinca* plant, so I went to google the shit out of *savinca verde*, only to find out that Carolyn Crane make up that name. Oh well.

The reason that I didn't give a full 5 stars was because Zelda did something, which I find out of character for an experience field agent. It didn't affect my overall love for the book, but since her action was the catalyst for the climatic ending, I felt like it should have been pointed out. Carolyn should have think of a better way to make it work without using that unbelievable ploy. (view spoiler)

Recommended for those who enjoy romantic suspense with stoic lethal hero and kickass heroine. It can work as a standalone, reading the previous books is not require to get yourself immerse into the story.

She pressed her forehead to his chest, felt the strong, steady heartbeat of this killer who trusted her heart. Hugo, the killer who liked to carry her, trying so valiantly to help contain her darkness.

WhiskeyintheJar/Kyraryker says

4.5 stars

I received a copy of this book from the author in exchange for an unbiased and honest review.

Pack your bags because you're about to kiss Kansas goodbye.....

If you have been following along with this series you know all about Zelda and Dax (this particular book would actually work as a standalone if you started here, you just wouldn't start off with a strong foundation for how Zelda and Dax run the show). They are the leaders of the shady covert good guys (can get a bit subjective at times) group called The Associates. Zelda is more of a silent leader but also the heart as she advises Dax when Associates need a break or who would work best with whom. Dax is the Machiavellian leader who sees twenty steps ahead of anyone else and will sacrifice anyone, ANYONE for what he considers the greater good. However, when Zelda's twin sister Liza finds herself traded in a card game to a South American drug lord and Zelda states she is going to go in Liza's place, Dax has a moment of weakness

and doesn't want to let her go. Zelda reminds him that her background as a former forensic botanist for the CIA who was placed in the field several times, makes her qualified to complete the dual mission of saving her sister and retrieving some files from the drug lord and also reminding him their motto is for the greater good. Dax relents but can't help wondering if Zelda has some kind of death wish because of the incident that caused her to retire from the CIA. Oh yeah, did I mention that Zelda was captured and tortured until she gave up the name of an undercover agent who was then killed? Thus, we have our strongly vulnerable damaged heroine.

Now, the part of the story where Zelda's mission was to retrieve files from the drug lord so The Associates could trade information to put to end a standoff on an oil tanker was the weakest part of the story. It was vague and never really flushed out and with everything else going on it felt like a very forced reason to get Zelda with that drug lord. Especially, when Zelda arrives at said drug lord's place and is packed off to be given to another drug lord. This time she is to be given to El Gorrion, who is the worst of the worst but she is also about to meet up with our hero.

Hugo grew up traveling the world but in the unglamorous situation of being not his mother's husband's child but the child of her employer. With everyone being aware of this he took mental and physical mistreatment from his "father", ignored by his father, and watched his mother fight more and more with her husband while being powerless to refuse her boss. When he was in his teens he decided to take off on his own and began a life of training with highly skilled elite fighting groups and tribes around the world. He became a mercenary for wars around the world and the legend of Kabakas was born. Kabakas ultimately found himself on the side of right doing unseemly things, his trademark kill of a dagger through the right eye, chopping up the last victim as they were still alive, and leaving only one survivor to tell the tale. Villages under his protection were left alone but after a berserker killing incident where women and children were killed, his name became tarnished and he was later reported to have died in a fire. So when a man living with his son in Buena Vista, a village attacked by El Gorrion, claims the drug lord won't be back after rumors start that Kabakas who died twelve years ago killed a bunch of El Gorrion's men, no one pays him much attention. Thus, we have our strongly vulnerable damaged hero.

You might be asking, why did you tell me to pack my bags? This all sounds like romantic suspense, highly detailed suspense but romantic none the less. Zelda and Hugo's relationship is what makes this book so much more and more in a way that won't always make you feel comfortable. Their meet cute involves Zelda in skimpy lingerie tied to a jeep while Hugo slaughters a battlefield of men, their first sexual encounter features opium, and the term hate sex has never been truer (or hotter). Hugo thinks Zelda is truly Liza, a former druggie and current high priced prostitute. Zelda spent a lot of her time hunting Kabakas while in the CIA and has to find out if Hugo is an imposter or the real deal. Their relationship is incredibly raw in action and emotion; this is not for the faint of heart. Zelda is tough, competent, and hurting, Hugo is very emotionally damaged from his childhood, a warrior, and has a heart just waiting to be freed from its encasement; this is Anne Stuart for the 21st century. Their journey from mistrust, wariness, shyly reaching out, connection, back to mistrust, to full blazing loving will reach out and grab you by the throat.

I honestly couldn't tell you if this is romantic suspense or suspense with romance, sometimes the other dominates and I could see fans of either genre liking this. The beginning is more suspense as Zelda's travels lead her to Hugo and we have the plot points of Hugo kidnapping Zelda to be a pseudo governess to the boy he adopted, El Gorrion poisoning the flower crops Hugo's town survives off, and Dax and the Associates developing their own agenda regarding Kabakas. Sometimes all the puzzle pieces don't quite jive or seem stretched out but I think the emotional aspects carried them through. The middle and right before the end where everyone meets up, has all these suspense plots swirling but the core of the story becomes Hugo and Zelda. Their rawness that I mentioned is so powerful and definitely what you are going to remember and take

away from this.

If you're still with me after this long review, I just want to say, you don't read this to be comforted, entertained, or to escape reality. Behind the Mask will do all that for you but you're going to read this because you want more. More in a pearl clutching ragged emotional way. There is so much to this story that I didn't even touch on everything; there's moves and countermoves, betrayal, action, suspense, emotional upheaval, growth, hurting, healing, and hard loving. With plenty of Associates who look to be in the wings, if you're willing to jump into the deep end of the pool read this book and get involved with this series.

Mara says

Really good compared to both other RS books I read and her own books of this series. I can't say I overwhelmed tough. Nor that I'm interested in any other story, particularly Dax.

I felt the resolution was weak. Plus, I stopped reading for a couple of days, and realised I wasn't that interested in picking it up again.

Jae says

I didn't love this as much as the other 3 books.

I loved the first 40% of the story where Zelda was made as tool to get cartel's secret informations. She was later on traded to another bad guys. It was intense and brilliant. I was ecstatic.

But it went flat after that. Things just ran too easy and smoothly. I expected more twist of sorts in the whole entanglement with the coca lord.

My world wasn't rocked much, so **4STARS** only. And Thorne (of book #3) is still my mostest favorite Associate.

saxe says

My rating on this book is more a reflection of the series than just the book. I probably would've enjoyed them all more, including this, if I'd read them with months in between, but I didn't. I hate the sexist double standards, which became more and more apparent as I read, and that's too bad because I really rather like Carolyn Crane's writing. That's the reason I was able to continue with the series as I did, despite the sexism I saw throughout the series. I also rather liked Hugo and thought he was pretty bad ass. And that sucks because Zelda and the Associates were such a mess of double standards (which the author excuses by saying Zelda is "out of practice").

In the first book, I made a lot of excuses for why things were the way they'd been -- from the icky situation surrounding their more intimate scenes, to the betrayal Angel felt at Cole's hands. Angel was celibate while Cole wasn't. Okay. Part of the job and I found how the author had set it up to be believable. Damsel in distress situations. Okay, fine. I can believe why Angel had gotten herself into the situation and why Cole had had to come save her. However, once I got further into the series, it became obvious that it was less

situational and more sexism and double standards. Once in an anomaly; twice...hmm, not so much a coincidence, but I'll run with it. But then three times? Four? With the sexism and double standards doubling and tripling, it became obvious that there was a problem.

I wanted to enjoy the book for what it was, but I couldn't. I kept getting caught up in all the previous double standards in the series. I thought that now, because the Associate is a woman, things would be flipped. But nope. It was just more of the same. This review is more of a study and contrast of the entire series rather than just of this single book.

First of all, I want to talk about how the sexual aspects of the characters are dealt with. Several years ago, Zelda was undercover with another agent (I believe it was a cult they were investigating?). She got caught and was then tortured for hours before finally giving up the name of said agent, which then got him killed. If Zelda had been a guy, she'd have been fucking everything that moves as a result. Instead, she's remained celibate for the last six years. It's not that I want her to go around having indiscriminate sex, it's just that the double standard pisses me off.

And it *is* a double standard when contrasted with Dax, her fellow co-head at the Associates organization. In the beginning of the book, when she's headed to the airport and leaves Dax behind, she has a passing thought that Dax would now "head back into that hotel and find a stranger to fuck within ten minutes." She elaborates on this later on, noting that Dax has a "sex addiction" because of his inner demons.

Near the end of the book, (view spoiler), Zelda mockingly asks him "How many people did you have to fuck to blot this one out," to which he promptly responds with "Three so far." He sleeps around to blot out his tough decisions and inner demons. Yet, at this point, this decision of his hasn't gotten anyone killed. Zelda, on the other hand, is still haunted through nightmares and stray thoughts of her hours of torture and Agent Randall's death. Yet she hasn't tried to fuck it all away.

The author is perpetuating double standards because you can contrast Zelda's celibacy to Dax's sex addiction due to their similar situations. They're both co-heads of The Associates. They both have demons that haunt them. And yet he's the big manwhore, while she's celibate.

Zelda's celibacy aside, it should also be noted that she didn't have an enjoyable sex life even before that. She says that "all her life she's fucked men without emotion." She's "coldfucked" for the sake of the job, sleeping with targets and other men while on the job in order to get information.

Hugo, on the other hand, doesn't have a sex life that's lacking.

Some of the eligible women had tried for him when he'd first taken over the crumbling mountaintop villa, but he'd made it clear he was not interested. When he wanted to enjoy a woman, he went into the city and enjoyed one. He liked women, but only in small doses.

He mentions more than once that he goes into the city when he wants to "enjoy a woman." Contrast that to Zelda, who has "fucked men without emotion," and is now six years celibate. Zelda's situation is a mix of both Angel and Laney, with Angel's long-term celibacy and Laney's lack of pleasure with a sexual partner until Macmillan.

Next are the damsel in distress situations. I was curious about whether Zelda would be put into situations in which she needed saving because not only is she an ex-CIA field agent, but she's also co-leader of The

Associates, the organization that this entire series is about. And yet, the author still managed to have her need rescuing at the hands of Hugo.

In the beginning, she takes Liza's place in order to infiltrate Brujos's cartel. Things go wrong right from the beginning because, within hours, she's traded to a different group, which is El Gorrion's gang. At first when she's sold, she considers running into the forest to escape them, she even considers taking the leader captive and escaping, but she hesitates and is then restrained. The author throwing it in there that she *can* defend herself doesn't change things in my eyes. It's like when someone does something horrible, yet has moments of self-acknowledgement. The thoughts of it don't change the action (or *inaction*, in this case).

When she's loaded into the plane, she *does* manage to take control and hold all the men hostage for hours...only to lose it just before they land. I was so disappointed because I thought that *finally* we'd get a woman saving herself! When they finally make their landing, she's tied up against a car. During this time, Hugo comes to the rescue. Yes, of course...because the secret agent spy and the co-head of the fucking Associates organization needs to be thrown into a damsel in distress situation, too, huh? She couldn't even manage to free herself from being tied up against the car while Hugo is killing all of El Gorrion's men, having to finally be freed by Hugo!

Even at the end of the book, (view spoiler) She's the co-head of The Associates and an ex-CIA agent, for God's sake. Unfuckingbelievable.

And then it comes to the Associates straddling the line of good and bad, and having to do what's best for the greater good. In the first book, I was willing to forgive Cole for struggling with his decision of handing Angel over. I understood that, if it came down to it, a bunch of kids being exploited and suffering horrible deaths, along with putting a stop to Borgola's entire operation, takes precedence over the life of a single person he believed to be a selfish career criminal.

In this book, there's a clear distinction to the thinking earlier in the series. Even before she knows Hugo, she hesitates in handing him over as Kabakas to Dax. She stalls, tells half-truths, begs for more days; she even outright lies to Dax at one point. While Cole dealt with indecision over Angel, a mere jewel thief, Zelda's dealing with a mass murderer, and possibly killer of innocent women and children. She hesitates. Cole is a lowly agent working in the Associates organization, while Zelda, is head of said organization. What's with this double standard in dealings and decisions?

If Zelda had been a man dealing with a female mass murderer, she probably wouldn't have hesitated like the author makes the female character do when dealing with a man she's attracted to and doesn't even know ((view spoiler)). It feeds into the sexist notion that women are rash in their decisions, allows emotions to cloud them, while men are more level-headed and don't get emotional, which is contrasted with how different Cole dealt with Angel, a mere jewel thief, and the way Zelda deals with Hugo, a mass murderer.

Next, we have Macmillan. In his book, he need info from Laney and he callously slept her with that end goal in mind. He even knew it was her birthday, but that didn't stop him from going through with it and sleeping with her anyway. He didn't sit around for days, humming and hawing on if he will or won't; five minutes, and he was decided. Zelda, on the other hand, figures she can open a locked cabinet in Hugo's house to find out if he really is Kabakas. She doesn't though, despite having ample time and opportunity to do so. She hesitates for five days before *he's* the one who finally shows her what's inside! Again, just like Cole, Macmillan is simply working for the agency that she co-heads.

And then we get to their "secret" status as Associates. The men in the previous books didn't mention who

they worked for until very, very late into the book (like, eleventh-hour late). Zelda, on the other hand, (view spoiler) And she's the CO-HEAD of this secret organization! If Zelda had been a man, she'd have done the same as Cole, Macmillan and Thorne.

Another difference is how betrayal is dealt with. In Cole and Macmillan's books, they use and betray their female love interests, but are forgiven soon after. In this, when Kabakas finds out that Zelda betrayed him, he holds it against her for ages (relative to the number of days the book takes place in). Afterwards, he makes little barbs about it all the time, with Zelda constantly replying that he can trust her. Even Zelda feels guilty about it, feeling that she destroyed his trust. When the men in the previous books betrayed their leads, they didn't suffer as much as Zelda does in this book...and she hadn't even been actively traitorous like Cole and Macmillan had been.

So why didn't Cole and Macmillan have to suffer like Zelda did in the face of betrayal? The women in their books didn't hold grudges (at least not for long). They were so quick to forgive and forget in their books. I wonder why that is...oh, wait. I remember. That brings me back to damsels in distress situations.

In the first book, Cole comes to the rescue of Angel, which leads to her forgiving him. In the second book, Macmillan has to rescue her more than once. In Macmillan's case, while it can be argued that Laney rescues him when he's a prisoner, I don't really believe that's the case. If you really think about it, Macmillan was never really a prisoner. He could've escaped if he wanted to. And even if he couldn't, Rio, other Associates, and Macmillan's mission leader all know where he is. They all knew exactly where Macmillan was if they need to move in and extract him.

Now, in Zelda's book, she was sent from one cartel to another and wasn't able to inform Dax of the move. No one in the Association knew where she was. She could've died if it weren't for Kabakas, who saved her, there's no doubt there. There was no rescue or extraction in the wings, or even a body recovery, if it came to that, if it weren't for Kabakas having shown up and saving her when he did.

Now, because it's Hugo doing the rescuing and not Zelda, that's where the difference in the forgiveness comes in. Cole and Macmillan did the women wrong...but were forgiven because of the damsels in distress situations. Zelda, on the other hand, is the one who betrayed and is also the one in the damsels in distress situations, which is why she suffers the consequences of her betrayal while the men in the earlier books didn't.

Anyway. Another difference is past emotional trauma. When telling her story to Hugo, she breaks down and starts crying. She talks about her torture and how she had Agent Randall killed because of her inability to last through the torture. When Macmillan and Thorne tell their stories, they don't break down and start sobbing. Why this difference? They both work for the Association like Zelda, and Zelda even caused the death of someone she knew. Thorne had caused his sister's death, and even had to watch as she was murdered in front of him. Again, it feeds into the sexist notion that men are less emotional than women.

And while I'm on the topic of their pasts, I want to mention that Macmillan and Zelda both suffer from survivor's guilt, but their arcs run differently when it comes to sex. Mac, although he fucked for the job, he never calls it "coldfucking." Zelda calls it that, noting that she coldfucks for the job. When Macmillan slept with Laney for the job, the scene was anything but "coldfucking." So that means that he slept with every other woman he did for the job like he did with Laney. Why the difference in how Zelda slept with men for the job and how Macmillan did with women? They both slept around for the job, yet their techniques are clearly noted to be different. Macmillan decides immediately to sleep with Laney for the job, while Zelda hesitates when it comes to Hugo. I felt this difference was because Macmillan's a man and Zelda's a woman, which only feeds further into sexist notions and double standards.

For anyone familiar with the series, it may be curious as to why I left out Thorne in some of the above. In comparison to the other books, Thorne's book is an outlier in many aspects. Unlike books one, two, and four, the couple in three aren't strangers and it's a second chance romance (so that's why I didn't mention his celibacy or that either of their sexual pasts aren't mentioned other than when it concerns the both of them, as well as betrayal). That's a completely different dynamic compared to two strangers. And two, Thorne isn't a real associate. He's undercover, but he's not really an Associate, not like Cole or Macmillan or any of the other Associates mentioned in the series. That makes the handling of the situations and the involvement of the Associates much different. And last, Thorne's story was more about him reuniting with Nadia and Nadia's co-op pirate business, not Associate business, as is that case with the other three books.

That's all I can think of for the moment. There are probably other things I missed, but I don't even know if I should add more to it. The evidence of the double standard is clearly there, so it's not like I'm making it up or seeing it in merely a situation or two. But why this disparity in how the Associate men go about their business and how the lone Associate woman does? This sexist double standard is bullshit.

Another part of the book I didn't like was the usage of Spanish. I had the same issue with Laura Florand's The Chocolate Thief and the usage of French. I found the usage of it annoying, particularly when a translation didn't follow afterwards. I like knowing what I'm reading, so it gets a little annoying have to halt reading in order to Google translate words mid-scene, sometimes more than once. After a while, I did get irritated and just started skipping over them, not even bothering to try and understand.

Another thing that bothered me is that I felt the sexual parts of the book had very violet undertones, which I'm not a fan of. There's a scene after Hugo finds out that she's Zelda, ex-CIA agent. (view spoiler) I wasn't fond of that revelation.

This is a contrast to Cole. Cole said that, although he kept telling himself he'd hand her over, he knew all along that he never would've. Hugo, on the other hand, (view spoiler) He also likes to grab her hair and manipulate her head while doing so. I fucking hated that. She even tells him at one point to let go, which he does immediately and apologizes...only to do so again soon after. Fucking hands off, man.

Another thing that bothered me about the betrayal was that (view spoiler)

The book also repeats elements of instalust (sexual happenings with a day between them) and instalove (within a week), and other things.

Lastly, while I'm glad that the two leads and POC, I feel the author could've gone a step further with Zelda and Liza. With Hugo, it's obvious from his name that he's Latino. With Zelda and Liza, other than a small throwaway line about their Japanese mother and a mention of Okinawa in the epilogue, it's not obvious that they're anything but white. In fact, after the line in the beginning about their mother, I completely forgot that she was even half-Japanese until the end. Zelda spends most of the book with dyed blonde hair and green contacts. Even when she's not in her Liza disguise, she has brown hair and blue eyes. Yes, there are white-passing POC, and Liza and Zelda are half-white, but I feel the author should've committed more strongly to her characters being Japanese. I feel the author could've gone a step further with making their Japanese heritage obvious by at least giving them Japanese names.

Cristina says

There are some good reviews for this book and I respect these but I just don't find it memorable. I'll give it 2 stars because at least I finished it, (more than I can say for some books) which is about the best I can say about this.

The story I found stupid and poorly developed. Sorry just not for me.

Mandi Schreiner says

I love, love, love this action-packed romantic suspense series. This one is a little darker and I liked it a lot.

Zelda is a former CIA agent who now helps run The Associates, another secret organization who takes down bad guys. When she learns her identical twin sister (who is involved in drugs and prostitution) is going to be loaned to a cartel group, Zelda decides it's time to re-enter the field as an agent and pose as her sister. Six years ago, she was captured and tortured and broke – giving up a name of her colleague who was then killed. Zelda has carried this guilt with her and can't let it go. She now prefers working behind a desk, but she will do anything to keep her sister safe. But once Zelda gets to the bad guy's house, she is traded to a different bad guy (omg so many bad guys!) and things go south very quickly.

But don't fear Zelda! Besides being a super bad ass yourself, help is on the way. Sorta kinda. Hugo lives on the top of a remote mountain overlooking fields of the precious Savinca crop. The farmers in his town grow this rare crop, but the cartel wants their fields to grow drugs. (ugh! say no to drugs!) Hugo live like a recluse now along with a twelve year old boy who he rescued after being orphaned in a horrible drug war, but Hugo is not who he seems to be. He is a legend known as Kabakas. A man who wears a mask and is feared by many.

Kabakas was a near-mythical assassin who'd burst out of nowhere at the height of the Valencian Civil War, though assassin was barely even accurate; Kabakas had been more like a super-mercenary, capable of taking on armies singlehandedly. He'd become famous across Valencia in a matter of months, the subject of tales large and tall.

And Kabakas is mighty pissed the drug cartel is threatening his town and his people.

Because this was his goddamn village. Nobody fucked with his village.

You tell 'em Hugo.

So Hugo goes out and slaughters the bad guys holding Zelda (it's an awesome scene), and then he decides to be a bit cave-man and keep Zelda as his employee to cook, clean and tutor the boy. Zelda THINKS Hugo is Kabakas, as she has hunted him and investigated him for years – but she also is pretty sure he died some time ago so she isn't sure if he is the real Kabakas. A dark and deep romance develops between these two as they figure out if they can trust the other and if they are on the same side of the fight.

While it may seem on the surface that Hugo and Zelda are very different people, deep down they have a lot of similarities. They are both very loyal, stubborn people. Zelda is loyal to the Associates and was loyal to her CIA team. So loyal, she can barely survive with the guilt of giving up the name of her fellow agent. Hugo is loyal to the people in his town and keeping the innocent safe. He kills – he kills a lot – but Carolyn Crane can write a killer-hero and make him work. She doesn't sugar coat his actions. She doesn't try to redeem him or make him someone he isn't. He kills, and Zelda falls in love with him. I love that she doesn't

shy away from his true nature. I like how the author compares the instincts of a killer with those of a lover too:

Sometimes his instincts as a killer doubled as instincts as a lover, like the instinct to chase down pretty when it darted away. He did that now. He went after her. They'd connected for a moment, and he couldn't stand to lose that. He could not let her go.

Besides the running from bad guys, and not trusting each other and the really hot sex (verra dirty/intense sex) Zelda teaches Hugo how to be a better caregiver to the boy he has taken in. She teaches him how to be a little more gentle, and kind. Hugo is so set on not making the boy a cold-blooded killer like himself, that he forgets he is just a boy. This storyline is a big one, but doesn't overpower the action and romance.

We also get some small glimpses into Dax, the founder of the Associates and a man who intrigues me more every time I read one of these books.

This series is so much fun. Each one so far has been different but consistent with great action and dirty sex. Highly recommend this series.

Rating: B+
