



Heartstrings in B-flat Minor

Scott Johnson

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Scott Johnson's erotic thriller *Heartstrings in B-flat Minor* focuses on a charismatic doctor as he ensnares his latest target.

Sheryl Taylor, a down-on-her-luck tour guide, ushers a group out of Cairo, barely escaping violent riots. She returns home in desperation. Her finances are circling the drain, her future prospects with them. The cause? Sinister Dr. Sterling Jackson, who frequently forces desperate people toward irreversible ends and is never caught for his deeds.

Jackson is a master con man, adept at hypnotic suggestion and subtle persuasion. He has several women on his hook, but he focuses his attention primarily on Sheryl. Her life collapses around her as Jackson pushes her to a malicious conclusion.

Heartstrings in B-flat Minor is a grimy gem, a story whose progressions are upsetting to digest, especially as it follows its troubled lead, who does her best to avoid veering onto a dark path. As Taylor attempts to break free of Jackson, her movements alternate between being bitterly hopeful and disastrous.

Taylor is aware of her missteps; despite glimpsing Jackson's true nature, she falls deeper and deeper under his spell. She is a thoroughly written character, and emotional investment is likely; it is painful to watch her struggle.

Jackson is a chilling antagonist. Examples of his tightening grasp around Taylor result in visceral reactions. The text breathes life into his character, and he is all too convincing as he sets himself upon unsuspecting women. His methods are meticulous, and his destructive progression holds attention.

The underlying story is straightforward. Slow and methodical pacing, punctuated by flashbacks into both leads' intertwined histories, bring its eeriness forth. Though the book's action is light, its conclusion is surprising, tense, and taut with suspense.

Dialogue hampers the flow. Characters' voices are not individualized, and it is often difficult to discern who is talking, despite frequent identifiers. Out-of-place accents further interrupt the work. Conversations become bland and blur together.

The novel may require a trigger warning for some in its audience, especially as one of Jackson's trademark moves involves coercing his targets into suicide. In the text, suicide methods are detailed, and while this supports the villain's characterization, it results in some gratuitous darkness; the acts might have been left in secrecy and still maintained their sinister edge.

Heartstrings in B-flat Minor is a tautly paced, shudder-inducing dark thriller.

JOHN M. MURRAY (January 4, 2018)

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