

Pursuit of Innocence

Bethany Rosa

Jolene Morice, Designer

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Erotic desire clouds a couple's minds even as a kidnapping complicates their potential future in the suspenseful novel Pursuit of Innocence.

In Bethany Rosa's surprising novel *Pursuit of Innocence*, a billionaire and a student form an intense relationship.

Lily has been on her own since she was fifteen, and she's been in love with her best friend's brother for years. She doesn't believe that she has the time or the inclination to date, though. But then she meets Sebastian, an attractive billionaire with an attitude. He decides that Lily will be his, whether she wants to be or not. Further, somebody else is willing to go to great lengths to have Lily too.

The book begins in media res. Lily wakes up tied to a bed with no recollection of how she got there. She recognizes her kidnapper but doesn't say his name. Though his identity is intended as a source of ongoing suspense, he's easy to unmask via the process of elimination; there's little real mystery in that regard.

Further, though Lily is presented as an independent woman in pursuit of professional success, her behavior undermines this empowered characterization. Indeed, she spends most of her time obsessing over the men in her life, and she is prone to folding to Sebastian's desires, even at the expense of her own intentions. At her opposite, Sebastian is an unappealing romantic hero who behaves tyrannically at work (for example, moving to fire a good employee for being attracted to Lily) and who refuses to speak to women, proclaiming that his only interest in them is sexual. This places him at odds with Lily's romantic standards, which are shaped by her personal struggles, including sexual harassment at work, stalking, and kidnapping.

Sebastian is an unconvincing ally in such matters: though he calls Lily's boss's unprofessional behavior out, he also forces Lily to work under him instead—and invades her privacy in that capacity. He proclaims that her fear turns him on. Further, once their relationship begins, he becomes a controlling partner, dictating who she can talk to, what she can wear, and how they physically connect. Indeed, their first sexual encounter is nonconsensual and disturbing. Further, what Lily and Sebastian like about each other is kept vague; indeed, they spend so much time fighting that the overall impression is one of general dislike. For this reason and others, the book's ostensible "happy" ending is underwhelming, even disappointing.

Disturbing eroticism directs the novel *Pursuit of Innocence*, in which two people are consumed by odds-defying desire for one another.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (March 20, 2024)

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