

Tender Offers: Book One: Building an Empire

Crystal Russell

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This dark and dishy novel exposes the sordid underbelly of the Hollywood glitterati.

Marlon Brando once said, “Most of the successful people in Hollywood are failures as human beings.” Nowhere is that truer than the characters at the center of author Crystal Russell’s book, *Tender Offers: Book One: Building an Empire*.

Stanford Wentz is a handsome but volatile B-movie actor from a wealthy family. While Stanford isn’t smart enough to deliver lines, his agent, Aaron Rose, feels he’s bound to go far. When the death of a Hollywood director creates a scandal that threatens Stanford’s career, Rose shifts gears, eventually creating a cosmetic company built around Stanford’s image. While the company is wildly successful, the two men live in constant fear as LAPD detectives come around asking more questions about the dead director, and a beautiful but troubled model named Kimberly catches Stanford’s eye.

Stanford, Rose, and their compatriots may be beautiful people, but author Russell knows how to show her characters’ ugly sides in a compelling manner. Stanford is a modern-day Dorian Gray—beautiful but cruel, as evidenced when he later beats Kimberly. Rose is calculating and Machiavellian, but something about how he sticks with Stanford is reminiscent of affection. Russell’s well-drawn characters are despicable, handling business by lying, cheating, doing backhanded deals, and tricking others and each other, yet it’s hard to stop reading about what they’re going to do next.

That’s because Russell is able to craft dramatic scenes well for her characters. For instance, when Kimberly, one of the world’s top swimsuit models, is introduced, she’s sitting in a lawyer’s office and wondering about the earnings that her domineering stage mother was supposed to “manage” for her. Her lawyer, Klein, seems nurturing and fatherly toward her at first. But Russell can’t resist tweaking the expectations of the scene as Klein watches Kimberly leave and then, when she’s out of earshot, comments on her body.

More scenes such as this would add to the strength of the book. Often, action is condensed into exposition in order to quickly move on to the next plot point. A line like, “although Stanford Wentz detested going to formal events, once he was there he lit up with energy” isn’t as enthralling as other scenes that Russell crafts. Particularly in a book that’s focused on Hollywood glitterati, the author could serve delicious scenes centered on the fabulous parties, swank restaurants, and sleek offices.

This reliance on exposition could stem from the many story threads and character arcs being balanced. Almost every character seems to have his or her own lawyer, who also plays a significant role. This can be overwhelming, particularly when characters are introduced close to the end. But as this is the first in a potential series of books, it’s clear that Russell is simply setting the stage for the next installment.

While Russell's characters are surely positioning themselves for a fall, one can only hope that by the end of this series, they will find a way to at least learn how to be human beings. *Tender Offers* is a dark but dishy novel that is ideal for anyone who enjoys tales of the rich, powerful, and wicked.

KATERIE PRIOR (April 17, 2014)

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