



*Crystal's
Crucible*

a Phoebe Braddock Romance

L. STARLA

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CRYSTAL'S CRUCIBLE

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Note from the Author

Trigger Warning: This book contains situations where consent is dubious, along with graphic depictions of violence, sexual assault, and drug use.

While this book contains scenes with dubious consent and depictions of sexual violence, I do not condone such behaviour. If you are a victim of sexual assault, please consider reporting the crime immediately by ringing emergency services.

For post assault support, I recommend reaching out to a professional, confidential counselling service such as:

1800RESPECT in Australia (Ph 1800 737 732)

RAINN in the United States (Ph 800 656 4673)

SUPPORTLINE in the United Kingdom (Ph 01708 765 200)

And, if you or someone you care about is struggling with substance abuse, please consider reaching out to your local Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous support group.

Chapter One

Crystal

Crystal grabbed the employment section and paused when a headline caught her attention: 'Gang Violence on the Rise in Melbourne's Nightclub District.' With a sigh, she wondered if she should warn Jade. Imparting words of wisdom to her older sister had always been a futile endeavour, so she dismissed the idea and returned to the sanctity of her home office. It was nearly time for the moment of truth.

She ran the comb through her red locks one last time and brushed away the dandruff from her favourite rose-gold blouse. Using a tissue, she dabbed at the perspiration forming on her brow. Summer was just around the corner and, if the last few November days were anything to go by, they were in for a hot one. After smoothing down the creases in her black skirt, she clicked CONNECT on the video conference and forced a smile out of her tense jaw. 'Hello, I'm Crystal Buchanan. Thank you so much for meeting with me online.'

Three pristine businessmen gave her haughty grins. The man on the left – who was wearing a navy suit – shifted forward in his seat. 'It

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is no problem at all Crystal; we get lots of interstate applicants. I am Nigel Weatherby, the laboratory manager. With me, I have Peter Salisbury, our division manager, and Ethan Van de Brock from HR.' He pointed to the men next to him sequentially. 'Why don't we start with your reasons for wanting this position?'

'Of course.' Crystal caught herself twirling a strand of hair between her fingers. Releasing it, she took a deep breath. 'I have recently graduated from Melbourne University with a PhD in organic chemistry, a field of science I am passionate about, and I believe my expertise would be of value to your research program.'

'What was your thesis focussed on?' Nigel asked.

'Stereoisomer separation techniques.'

'That's great,' remarked Peter. 'Here, at Highgate Industries, you will be expected to work as part of a large team. Can you give us an example of how you have worked well with other group members?'

Crystal's mother, Judy, chose that moment to burst through the door, hiccupping. 'Crissy, darlll, I need a (hiccup) lift to the shop.' She swayed in the doorway and staggered across the room.

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'No!' Crystal snapped as she looked up from her computer. 'I told you I'm busy right now.'

Reeking of brandy and stale cigarette smoke, Judy collapsed into Crystal's lap, providing a closeup view of her wrinkled skin and drooping jowls. No one would have guessed the woman was only fifty-two. 'Please, pretty please? I need more ciggies and you never buy 'em for me!' The sound of a throat clearing drew her attention to Crystal's laptop. 'Ooh, aren't you a bunch of handsome fellas? Is my gorgeous girl doin' a strip show for ya?' Giggles erupted from her crude gob.

'Mum!' Every muscle in Crystal's body stiffened as she suppressed her rage. *Great, now I've lost control of the situation.*

Ignoring her, Judy leaned forward, tugging her singlet down to offer the men a view of her bare breasts. 'I'll give ya a two-for-one. My tits are bigger anyway.'

Two large, saggy sacks of crinkled flesh jiggled in front of Crystal, obscuring her view of the interviewers' faces. But she could hear their gasps, picturing the abject horror on their faces as bile ascended her oesophagus. Ducking her head around Judy's side, she glimpsed the screen as the

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Highgate men disconnected. Her blood reached boiling point.

'Hey, where did they go?' Judy started punching the keyboard and yelling, 'Come back, sexy strangers! We haven't gotten—'

'*Stop it!*' Crystal screeched as she pulled Judy back from the computer and shoved her onto the floor. Wide eyes stared back at Crystal, who jumped to her feet. '*What the hell is wrong with you? That was my only job interview in four months! You ruined my best chance at decent employment.*' Her throat constricted as she fought back the tears swelling in her eyes.

Rolling onto her side, Judy groaned. 'I thought you were fooling 'round on some dating site or something. You should've said you had an interview!'

'I did! Several times in fact. Don't you recall me telling you this morning?'

'Yeah, but I thought you was goin' out to it like a proper interview. What sort of place does 'em on the inta-net?'

'The sort of place that is interstate and would have paid me loads of money,' Crystal snapped.

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Judy wheezed. 'You were planning to leave me all alone? First your dad abandons us, then your sister. You're all I have left!'

'It's not like dad planned on dropping dead.' Crystal let out a sigh of exasperation. 'You need to stop blaming him for everything. If I had been successful in getting that job, I would have paid for someone to look after you.'

Sitting up, Judy crossed her legs and grunted. 'What's Jade's excuse, huh?'

'She grew up, Mum. It's *normal* for children to leave home when they reach adulthood.' Sarcasm dripped from her voice like acid from a pipette.

'I know that!' Her mother glared at her. 'I'm not an imbecile! Would be nice if your sister dropped in to see *me* sometimes.'

'She *does* visit,' Crystal said in Jade's defence.

'Bah!' Judy waved her hand dismissively. 'She only comes for you.'

Crystal shrugged. 'I'm going to run a bath for you, Mum. You need to wash before going out in public.'

Judy's eyes lit up like the neighbour's house at Christmas. 'You'll take me to the store?'

'I may as well. Besides, the fridge could use a restock. But no more booze! I want you to try going

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sober for a night. And when we get back, I need to focus on job searching.'

Pouting, wisps of ginger hair fell around Judy's face as she rose. 'You're no fun! Why don't we go to the pub for dinner? It's Friday after all, and you could use a night off from your dull life. Maybe even hook up for once.'

Striding out of the office with a huff, Crystal reached the bathroom, turned on the taps, and waited for her mother to catch up. 'My personal life is none of your business, Mum. I'm quite content with my book boyfriends, *thank you very much.*' She spat the response in a defensive tone.

Judy sat on the closed toilet seat and snorted. 'Yeah, right! There's no way that vibrator fulfills all your needs.'

Crystal's cheeks flushed as her mouth gaped open. 'H-how do you know about *that?*'

'I wasn't born in the last shower, darl. I know what it means when a buzzing noise comes from your room at night.'

'Well, it's a lot safer than the multitude of men you bring home. No chance of heartbreak or an S.T.I. Now get in the bath.' Pressing her back to the wall, Crystal crossed her arms and closed her eyes. Water splashed all over the room a few minutes

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later, spraying her and flooding the floor. 'Are you okay, Mum?' She pried her right eye open a crack to check her mother was still conscious.

'Yeah, I'm all good.'

Reassured by visual and verbal confirmation, Crystal took the seat Judy had vacated, despairing over the rut she had fallen into. *Will I ever escape this hell?*

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