

Glass Ceilings

By Alicia Hope

Chapter One

RCL Alumina's senior staff and partners filled the elaborate ballroom of Bunbury's Royal Jarrah Hotel. Outside, the cool Western Australian spring night had women pulling soft wraps around exposed shoulders and men glad of their suit coats. Inside, the overhead lights shone down on executives helping the night along at the bar, while others worked the crowd, always on the look-out for opportunities to schmooze with Clyde Galloway, RCL's chief executive officer.

Although it was generally accepted that the outgoing chief wasn't worthy of too much attention any more, it was also thought a good word from Clyde might sway the new bloke's thinking. And it was hard to know just what that bloke *was* thinking most of the time....

Royce James' sardonic gaze swept over the crowd of executives and their partners like he was assessing thoroughbreds before the Golden Slipper race. He turned towards the bar, smirking a promise to himself that these senior staff dinners would be more exciting in future, once he was CEO. His left eyebrow arched lazily.

A soft hand on his arm interrupted his thoughts. Kerry Stowe, the CEO's executive assistant, was standing close beside him. He noted that as usual, Kerry was the most glamorous woman in the room. As he bent his head to speak to her, her tantalising fragrance rose to meet him, and he observed once again how enticing she was.

'Having fun, Royce?' Her voice was low and throaty, and beneath the words lurked another, more primal question.

'I am now.' His nonchalant smile and deep voice gave nothing away, although close inspection would have revealed faint traces of mockery in his eyes.

But it wasn't his eyes that most interested her.

She watched as he raised his wine glass and sipped the chilled Margaret River chardonnay. His firm lips rested against the glass's rim as he savoured the wine's crisp woodiness. Thick lashes cast small shadows on his tanned cheek and veiled his intense, dark eyes briefly. For a fleeting moment, his face lost its usual stern and often arrogant expression, and then his calculating gaze fell on her again.

With a dazzling smile, she moved her hand from where it had been discreetly caressing his arm to press it against his chest, and felt the strong, regular thud of his heart under her fingers. Her own heart was racing as she leaned closer to him, her thigh brushing his gently. His tall frame, accentuated by the charcoal grey, double-breasted Armani suit, towered over her.

Royce always makes a startling contrast to the usual assortment of podgy executives at these 'doos', she thought smugly to herself.

As though knowing it was expected, he allowed his eyes to take in her firm, curvaceous body, in a

tight burgundy gown with a plunging neckline she was using to full advantage. On their way back up, his eyes took in the smooth skin of her exposed cleavage, and the points of her ample breasts pushing against the silky fabric barely containing them. His mocking glance flicked to her face. 'Where's Jim?'

Kerry squirmed. Was it contempt she saw deep in the deliberately nonchalant darkness of his eyes? 'You know how to spoil a mood, don't you Royce?' Her mouth, tinted the same luscious colour as her gown, grew petulant.

He gave a deep laugh and raised a scornful eyebrow, once again lifting his glass to his lips. This time he took a good mouthful of wine and let it linger on his tongue while he thought about Kerry's husband. Jim Stowe was one of RCL's senior executives and a genuinely nice guy in Royce's estimation. He wondered why their marriage lasted. But as he looked down at Kerry, stunning in her expensive finery and oozing sexuality like a ripe plum longing to be picked, he could hazard a guess. And he was sure she'd be very unwilling to part with the pampered lifestyle her marriage offered.

'Jim's feeling anti-social again, or should I say still, so I'm here on my own,' she said, with an affected sigh.

The throaty purr on the lower registers of her voice seemed to resonate along his spine, and he conceded, cynically, that she had a talent for seduction. 'And of course you'd never consider staying home and playing the dutiful wife, would you, Kerry?'

'If Jim wants to shut himself away with his laptop, that's up to him,' she mewed. 'It doesn't mean I have to be boring too. I can make my own fun.'

Royce felt her press even closer against him. 'Oh, I'm sure you will. But you'll have to excuse me, I see a lady I want to talk to.' With a dismissive bow of his dark head and a smirk in his eyes, Royce drew away from her and strode across the room, leaving Kerry drifting rudderless in the social sea like a piece of abandoned flotsam.

She looked on as Royce took a seat beside Mrs Galloway, the aging CEO's wife, and as she watched, bitterness rose to fill Kerry's throat. How she hated herself for wanting him ... and how she hated him for not wanting her.

Damn that man, she thought bitterly, look how easily he charms old Ma Galloway, even at her age. But what woman could resist that undercurrent of power, and the charisma he can pour on when he chooses to?

Kerry sipped her shiraz and pulled a face.

Bloody wine, why do they insist on serving it at these stupid functions? Isn't this supposed to be 'pre-dinner cocktails'? Not that I want a cocktail either. Give me a scotch over all their fancy shmancy drinks any day.

She almost threw the hardly touched glass at a passing waiter and hissed an order for a scotch on the rocks.

'What sort—'

'*Anything*. Just make it fast.' She was breathing hard.

The waiter hurried back with her drink and she snatched it from his tray, downing it quickly in one

gulp. He frowned and was about to move away, intending to avoid her for the rest of the evening despite her obvious attractions, when she signalled to him.

‘Another one.’

It took him longer to return this time, so Kerry went back to covertly watching Royce through narrowed eyes. She pondered on how his arrogant confidence had seen him overtake many of his less successful contemporaries on the climb up the corporate ladder. Turning her back to the room, she allowed herself a derisive scowl. Even Jim, her husband, seemed happy to stay on his little rung, which exposed him to an imminent squashing beneath ascending boots.

Her face twisted as images from the night before flitted across her mind. She’d tried once more to convince Jim to apply for the CEO position, but without success. He was adamant he would stay where he was, arguing that he was happiest there. This mulish stance put him squarely in her ‘less successful’ category. *Well, less ambitious anyway*, she conceded.

Most nights now, Kerry found herself imagining Royce in her arms instead of Jim. She squeezed her eyes shut for a brief instant. It was too easy to visualise being made love to by Royce, she’d dreamt of it so many times since he’d first joined RCL. But she was certain the real thing would be even more sensual than she imagined. She felt a familiar shiver run through her body as she turned to look across at him again.

It seemed every time she heard his deep voice, that same thrill went through her. Whenever they met, she could feel his powerful presence engulfing her, stirring her emotions to fever pitch. His masculine charm was like a magnet, drawing her inexorably towards him, stripping her of self respect and reducing her to some sort of pathetic, willing slave....

‘Your drink ... madam?’

With a start, Kerry became aware she’d been staring over at Royce as though transfixed. She dropped her gaze and bit her highly glossed bottom lip. Holding her breath, she glanced around quickly from under her lashes to see if anyone had noticed. But no curious faces looked her way. She pursed her lips and blew a small sigh of relief. She was standing a little away from the crowd, who were all too busy with their false smiles, small talk and gratuitous socialising to notice her indiscretion.

She grabbed the glass from the waiter’s tray without looking at him and waved him away with an impatient hand. This time she took longer to finish the drink, lingering over it and making an effort to put the disturbing thoughts of Royce out of her mind. But she couldn’t resist a casual glance at the group surrounding him. She watched him pouring a glass of wine for Mrs Galloway and laughing at some comment she made. His coat sleeve outlined the muscular arm beneath, and the front of his jacket opened a little to expose his shirt. She noted the contrast its brilliant whiteness made against the tan skin of his smooth throat.

Although his sex appeal might be lost on the old matriarch, no woman could be totally unaffected by that wide smile, or his habit of throwing back his head when he laughs, she decided.

Although his manly face was not strictly handsome, he had an engaging smile—when he chose to employ it—and even white teeth. And the intensity of his gaze and the aura of strength and vitality about him drew female attention wherever he went.

How often have I pictured his face on a pillow beside me, and those dark eyes gazing at me as

though I'm the gateau and he's the cake fork? Too damn often, Kerry acknowledged bitterly. No matter what I do, it seems Royce James laughs at my efforts to seduce him, when most men would jump at the chance.

Scowling at the thought and forcing herself to look away, she rested her perfect teeth on the rim of her scotch glass for a second. When she lifted them off, anyone watching would have sworn she was snarling as she breathed the words, 'Well, you're running out of chances, Royce. One day you'll realise I'm not someone to be toyed with....'

* * *

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It had to be HIM, didn't it diary. The most arrogant colt in RCL's stable of mostly long-in-the-tooth executives. I hardly know the man—haven't ever seen him at the bauxite mine—but already I despise him. From what I hear, he's always traipsing around overseas, doing who-knows-what, under the convenient 'company business' umbrella. Which is probably a blessing for the rest of us!

Today he treated me like a piece of office equipment. There I was, blissfully convinced I was an important human element of the company's success. But now, after only a few words from HIM, I feel like an asset on the company register, like a fax machine or a photocopier. And you know what the worst part was? I just STOOD there, exactly like some dumb machine on stand-by. Oh sure, my mouth was poised to deliver a cutting retort, but did it come? Of course not! The words log-jammed in my numbed brain, and the few that made it through got stuck between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. So instead of putting the insensitive bastard back in his place, I ended up taking his high-handed treatment on the chin.

Ooh, when I think how I must have looked, for all the world like yet another empty-headed, lusting female, swooning at having Royce-bloody-James' attention for a millisecond. Cringe worthy! But let's get this straight, my silence was from outrage—outrage I say!—and that's all.

DAMN that man for making me feel so pitiful. Oh, I'm SO angry, and not just at him. How TRULY pathetic am I? Despite what I said about being outraged (and I stand by that, BTW), while he was belittling me, I couldn't help staring at those intense brown eyes of his, and noticing how his dark hair curled onto his white shirt collar. Worse still, I caught myself wondering what it would feel like to be held in his strong arms. Can you believe it?

Of course that little transgression is just between you and me diary, and I'll deny to the death I ever even THOUGHT it! And it's the furnace for you if you ever spill the beans!

I wonder what news I'll be sharing with you next, my stationary stationery :-). I very much doubt I'll be reporting that Royce James is afraid Verity Parker might be a serious rival for the CEO job. But give me half a chance, pal, and I might give you a run for your money!

Oh diary, I know applying for the CEO job is optimistic, even considering my qualifications and experience, but I have to believe in my abilities and myself, especially if no one else does.

Well, tomorrow is another day and who knows what it will bring, apart from a few hangovers for the senior execs attending tonight's dinner party—yet another little soirée I wasn't invited to....

Chapter Two

Verity was a little later than usual getting in to work. The friendly greeting in the staff room from her best friend and co-worker, Claire Vincent, was tinged with concern.

‘Hey, what happened to you? “Always-early-Verity” is only just on time for a change!’

A little out of breath, Verity threw her belongings into a corner before hurrying to the coffee vending machine, and punching in a double-shot flat white. As the machine whirred, bubbled, and sent delicious aromas into the air, she could feel the tension in her neck and shoulders easing. She yawned, and Claire could just make out the words ‘I overslept’.

The machine finished brewing and beeped. Verity collected the cardboard cup with its precious caffeinated contents, and explained between generous sips, ‘I stayed up late last night ... working on my application.’

Claire took in her friend’s damp hair and freshly scrubbed, makeup-free face, and wondered if Verity ever looked plain or ordinary. *Like I would if I’d had a late night*, she thought enviously.

With no rouge or eyeliner to accentuate her fine bone structure and dark eyes, Verity looked, if anything, more youthful and vibrant than ever. The smooth skin of her face had a translucent peaches-and-cream quality, and her naturally sweeping brows made a perfect foil for her brown eyes; eyes that held great warmth and laughter, but which could also be disarmingly direct and unnervingly shrewd. Her choice of fitted linen suit emphasised her slim waist and trim figure, and a pair of classic patent leather courts fine-tuned the outfit.

Claire took a quick peek down and frowned at her own slightly lumpy proportions, clothed in practical but unspectacular corporate wear. She glanced back at her friend and acknowledged that Verity certainly did look like executive material.

I’d bet my bottom dollar some of the ‘powers that be’ have noticed it, too, she thought. *But still, isn’t it presumptuous for her to try for the company’s top management position, ‘la grande fromage’? Everyone knows Royce James has dibs on that title.*

Verity took another grateful gulp of coffee before bending to collect her belongings. Claire waited for her by the door so they could walk to their offices together.

‘So, you’re actually going ahead and applying for the CEO position?’

Verity felt a rush of irritation at the incredulous tone in Claire’s voice. She was about to snap a response but realised her annoyance was more to do with her own insecurities than with Claire’s doubts, which were only reasonable in the circumstances. The question irked her because it touched a sore point, her own misgivings about applying for a position everyone regarded as already filled.

Her voice was sharper than she intended when she answered, ‘Yes I am, and they’d better take me seriously. I’m sick of being an “executive-in-waiting”. I’m as capable as any one of them. After all, I’ve worked my way up through the industry ranks—’

‘I know. From refinery line manager to production manager at Nimbus Alumina, then to bauxite

mine associate manager for RCL—’

‘That’s right,’ Verity barked, ‘*and* I have the qualifications to back up my industry experience. I bet that’s more than other members of RCL’s so-called executive team can say.’

Claire narrowed her eyes and stared at Verity. ‘Hang on, is all this angst just ’cos I asked about your application? Or are you still cheesed off about what Royce James did the other day?’

The spots of colour in Verity’s cheeks deepened a little. ‘That was the proverbial straw, Claire. When he thrust that report at me with orders to “see this is faxed today and copied to ...”—who was it again? Oh yes—“... Joe Goodfornaught, Bert Backstabber, and Larry Loser, blah blah”,’ at which Claire couldn’t help a snigger, ‘and without a “could you” or a “thank you”, he made me feel like a junior office clerk, or worse still, an inanimate piece of machinery.’

‘Hey,’ Claire soothed, putting a hand on Verity’s arm for a moment to calm her friend, who looked about to pop, ‘I was there, remember? And I thought he was just in a hurry and preoccupied when he got you to help him. It didn’t come across as a deliberate put-down to me. He’s probably typical of most male execs and doesn’t know one end of a fax machine from the other. I reckon he just grabbed the nearest available person to help. I was talking on my mobile at the time, making you the obvious choice.’

‘Oh that’s right, I’m talking to “Lets-be-fair-Claire”.’ Verity raised an eyebrow and gave a lop-sided grin.

Claire chuckled. ‘And don’t you forget it! But getting back to your application, I thought ... the operations manager job, once Royce vacates it?’

‘Oh, sure, there’s always that. But why should I settle for second best when I’m quite entitled to try for the top job? Would Royce settle? *As if!*’ She spat the last words.

‘Ouch! We’re feeling especially tetchy today, aren’t we?’

Verity pulled a face at Claire as they paused in the corridor to nod acknowledgement to a passing colleague. When she spoke again she made sure to lower her voice. ‘Well, can you blame me? Let’s face it, Claire, there’ve been suitable openings alright, but all “done deals” before I could get a look in. I wish someone had the guts to tell me the truth.’

‘Which is?’

‘That they can’t see past my age and gender to acknowledge I’m as qualified as most of the other candidates—and more qualified than some.’

‘Ah...’

‘But this time might be different, if Brenda Sharpe comes to the party like she said she would ... then again, I don’t blame her if she doesn’t. I’m sure our “friend”, Mr James, wouldn’t thank her for trying to sideline him, and he’ll have some pull once he’s CEO. Oh!’ Verity gasped and stopped abruptly. She threw an agitated hand in the air. ‘Crap! Will you listen to me? Even *I* have to remind myself it’s not written in stone he’ll get the job!’

She shook her head and sighed before catching up with Claire again. ‘Well, if he does get it, someone will need to replace him, and that someone had better be me. Otherwise I’ll be calling in the anti-discrimination dogs.’

‘Are you fair dinkum?’

‘You bet! I’ve had enough of being treated like a poor cousin. Look, back-filling Royce’s position might not be a huge jump as far as careers go, but it would be heading in the right direction. And almost any move is better than stagnating.’

‘If you say so. Some of us are quite happy little bacteria, living here in the stinking ooze of “stagnopond”.’

Verity gave a half smile at Claire’s attempt at humour, but her focus remained firmly fixed on the subject closest to her heart. ‘I have plans for this company, Claire. Big plans. I’ve managed to excite Brenda Sharpe with them, enough for her to consider coming on board. All I need is the chance to put them into play.’

Her voice grew pensive. ‘But I feel as though my career’s in danger of stalling. And it’s all I have left since the divorce.’

The two women stopped at the door to Claire’s office.

‘Well, you know what I think?’ and Claire chuckled, ‘I reckon you need to find a distraction and fast, Verity. Hopefully one of the male persuasion, ’cos your frustration’s showing!’

‘Oh!’ Verity sucked in a breath and glared, but a grin hovered around her lips.

Claire giggled and found herself hurriedly ducking a crumpled-up coffee cup, pitched at her like a well-aimed missile. ‘How long has it been?’ she chortled, ‘And when are you going to start living again? You’ve been divorced over a year and separated for ages before that.’

‘Who says I’m not living now, Claire?’

Claire grew still and her face became serious again. ‘There’s lots more to life than work, Verity.’

Verity noticed the concern in her friend’s eyes. ‘Yes, you’re right. But for now, work is what I need to focus on.’ She sighed. ‘Though I must admit, I still hate being on my own at night. And when I see other happy couples out and about ... well, there are times when the loneliness almost chokes me.’ She rubbed a hand across her forehead.

Claire gave her a quick, one-armed hug, before going over to her desk and putting her bag down. Verity followed her in and Claire could see the emotions running across her face.

Friends since their school days, the two women had remained close over the years. Claire had been Verity’s bridesmaid, and afterwards helped her through the divorce proceedings when it all went pear-shaped. She’d always secretly doubted that David was worthy of Verity, so she hadn’t been shocked or devastated when their marriage failed, although she never said as much to her friend. But she was saddened to know Verity was willing to share the blame for the break-up, despite all her efforts to fix their problems, and all her sacrifices.

Claire clucked her tongue in frustration. *For cryin’ out loud, she even passed up the great promotion that started all the hullabaloo! Not that it changed anything. The wheels had fallen off by then, and had already rolled into another garage.* She sighed. *What more could Verity have done? Everyone who knows them could see it was David’s insecurity, and pathetic jealousy of her hard-won success, that kicked off their downhill slide. And of course, his adultery was a bitter side-dish to the unpalatable main course.*

She'd seen what the marriage breakdown had done to her friend, and knew it would take a long time for the emotional scars to heal ... if ever. She also knew Verity was smart enough to learn from the experience—too smart for her own good perhaps. It seemed like she'd erected permanent barriers to shield herself from being hurt like that again, and was determined to remain behind them.

Verity's voice had regained some of its usual strength. 'All the same, I don't actually miss David any more, in fact I rarely think of him now. He's just a memory, a face from the past that's gradually blurring away. I guess I should thank him for the painful lesson, one I clearly needed to learn.'

'Verity—'

'So enough of that.' Verity gave a brave smile. 'At least I won't have to wait long to hear about this job. The board wants a decision lickety-split so Clyde's replacement can have some time with him before he goes.'

'Oh, yeah. If ever a job needed a handover period, it's that one.'

'So, shall we do lunch today? I'm free if you are. No midday production meeting for a change, but I'm not going back to the mine until this 'arvo.'

After agreeing on their lunch arrangements, Verity went on towards the shared office she used whenever at the refinery. But her mind lingered on the lesson she'd mentioned to Claire; the one she'd learned at great personal expense, the one that had led her to make a sworn promise. A promise she was adamant she would keep for the rest of her life.

To never again sacrifice my own identity and all that matters to me, for the sake of what commonly passes for love.

Chapter Three

In the outer office of the CEO's chambers, Kerry Stowe greeted Royce with a cool inclination of her head, before announcing grandly, 'Clyde has someone with him, so please take a seat. You'll be asked to join them shortly.'

Her aloof manner didn't disturb Royce. He knew it would evaporate completely at one word of encouragement from him. He lifted a lazy eyebrow in her direction as he turned to sit in one of the tub chairs outside Clyde's door.

Kerry remained behind her desk staring at him, willing him to look at her again. Her lips stretched into a tight line when he ignored her, casually flicking through a brochure he'd selected from the stack on a nearby table.

At the buzz of her intercom, Kerry announced with exaggerated formality, 'Mr Galloway will see you now.'

When Royce rose and nodded at her, he saw a triumphant gleam in her eyes.

What's that all about? he wondered, with a flash of irritation. *Having someone like Kerry privy to so many confidential matters is a bad idea ... another little problem I'll fix as CEO. I wonder how she'd like a 'promotion' to the powerhouse control office.*

His lips tilted upwards in one corner at the thought of Kerry having to share the often crowded administration centre beside RCL's powerhouse. No plush office or private en suite there for a snooty little piece like her.

No doubt that self-important, slimy bastard Reardon would want to get in on it, as he does with every employee 'realignment'.

His mouth tightened into a serious line again.

But I know how to fix his little red wagon too.

With a satisfied glint in his eyes, Royce opened the door and strode into the CEO's office. He was surprised to see the chairman of RCL's board of directors, Travis Hunter, sitting next to Clyde and making no move to leave.

'Morning Royce, have a seat.'

'Gents.' Royce nodded the greeting at them both.

They watched as he lowered himself into a chair, opening his tailored suit coat as he did so. Sitting back, he stretched one arm along the back of the vacant seat beside his. The cuffs of his crisp business shirt peeked out from below his dark coat sleeve, and a stylish cufflink twinkled under the overhead light. A few strands of his slicked-back hair curled onto his collar, below his clean-shaven face. As usual, Royce looked every inch the successful young exec.

Although it was obvious Travis was sitting in on the meeting, he didn't speak, and leaned back casually in his chair as though more a spectator than a contributor.

This is interesting, Royce mused with a slight narrowing of his eyes, *I've a feeling we'll be getting to*

the point quickly.

As though he'd read Royce's thoughts, Clyde sat forward in his chair and looked intently at him. His tone was brisk and business-like. 'Royce, I'm sure you're eager to hear the panel's decision on the CEO appointment.'

Travis watched Royce as Clyde gave him the news, but his thoughts strayed to the other contender for the job, Verity Parker. In response to their latest summons, she would be sitting outside the door, waiting to join them.

Quick to form impressions, Travis considered himself a good judge of character. In their first meeting, he'd studied Verity carefully from the moment she'd entered the room. Dressed impeccably, she'd projected a composed and professional image. He'd been impressed, and not, he hurriedly assured himself, simply because of her looks. But the rating of all candidates, male and female, took into account not only what they wrote in their job applications and said in their interviews, but also their appearance, behaviour, attitude and interaction with the panellists. And Travis had to admit to admiring the 'whole package' Verity had presented.

Although she was young as far as executives went, she was also obviously capable and highly intelligent. She had proven herself worthy of promotion, but he still had some niggling doubts....

With an effort, Travis focused his attention on the matter at hand.

For the second time that day, Verity found herself sitting outside the door to Clyde's office. It occurred to her that this would be the new CEO's inner sanctum, and she took a sharp intake of breath. Suddenly, the intercom on Kerry's desk squawked and Verity suppressed a startled jump. It felt like all the excitement had super-charged her nervous system. She was buzzing.

Kerry pressed the intercom button and listened for a second, before turning an impassive face to Verity and saying, 'Please go in, Miss Parker.'

Verity made herself rise casually. She took a second to smooth her suit, taking a deep breath to settle herself, and walked with outward calm into the office. Her step only faltered when she saw Royce sitting with the other two men.

Clyde and Travis smiled their greetings and Clyde indicated the vacant chair beside his. As she eased herself into it, Verity risked a sideways glance at Royce. For the briefest moment, she glimpsed traces of disbelief and disappointment on his face, until a shutter came down and his expression became unreadable. But she knew he'd be reeling at the knowledge he'd been beaten to a position that he, and everyone else, had assumed he could simply reach out and take.