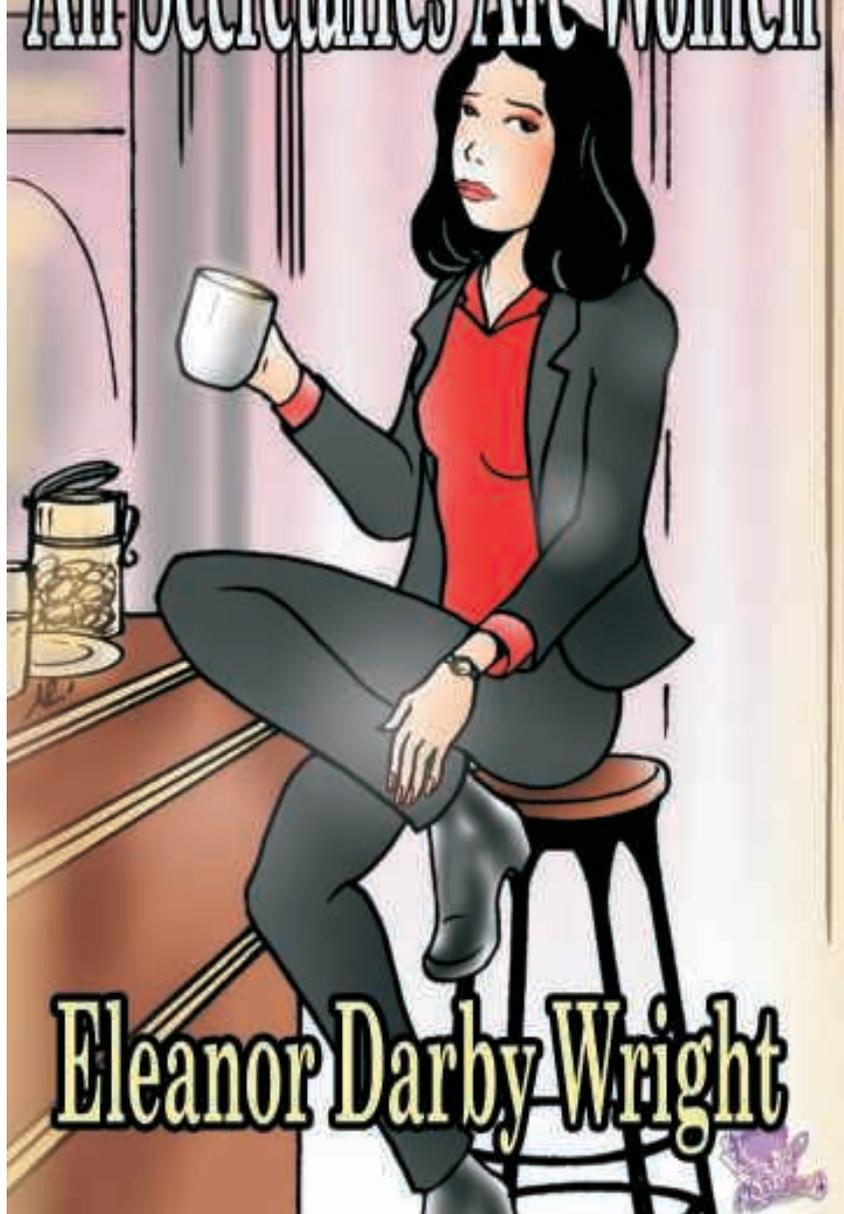


# All Secretaries Are Women



Eleanor Darby Wright



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# ALL SECRETARIES ARE WOMEN

by Eleanor Darby Wright

## I - EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT

What's in a name? In my case, everything! I'd been hired and working at Ekco for over two months before I found out that Executive Assistant really meant 'secretary'. I mean, I knew what an Administrative Assistant was in Newspeak, but it took Rosemary Henning (Roz to everybody) just ten seconds to clue me in.

"This is a Ladies' Bathroom!" she'd laughed when I tried to enter the E.A. Room. Everything was initialled and labelled at Ekco. I hadn't tried to go in before be-

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cause I wasn't sure that the initials stood for the position I held and, well, because I was new.

"But I'm an Executive Assistant," I protested, red-faced. I had overheard a conversation between two of the bosses about the keys to the executive wash-rooms. One had mentioned that she was so glad to be able to graduate from the E.A. Room then, and leave that for the Executive Assistants.

Roz giggled but stood in the doorway, resisting my attempt to enter the room I was entitled to use. I was tired of having to go down to the basement all the time where the janitors, security guards and visitors would go. I was the only one from the top floors down there; and it was quite a trip sometimes when the elevators were in constant use.

"Oh, yes," sneered Roz. "You are an E.A. I forgot that Dana had to hire a male secretary for herself!"

Things clicked suddenly into place for me. I was embarrassed by the way Roz was smirking at me.

"But just because your name is Pat," Roz said, the words floating after me as I retreated back down the little hallway, into the glassed-in main office, where the secretarial pool, the grouping of administrative assistants, was located. I was quite flushed by the time I got to my boss's office.

Dana Hansen, Vice-President, Contracts, my boss, was the epitome of feminine chic. She just smiled at me when I blurted out my predicament. Her perfect grey silk blouse matched her perfect brown, thick, wavy hair and perfect, grey business suit.

"Well, Pat," Dana drawled at me, a glint in her blue eyes. "Since I broke the gender barrier in this firm to become the first female VP, I felt that it was only fair that my Executive Assistant be a man and break that barrier, too."

“But, but,” I protested with color in my cheeks, I know, “what, what I really am, is a, a secretary!”

Dana’s exquisitely made-up face mocked me again. “Personal secretary,” she explained, handing me a stack of folders with a smile.

Angry and embarrassed, I took the stack as Dana folded her arms, daring me to protest more and say things about men and women and which jobs we should have. Yes, I did need this job. It was highly paid and, I had thought, up until my encounter with Roz, that it might lead to something better and more permanent at Ekco.

But secretaries were never appointed to executive positions. I knew that from all the companies I’d worked for, in the last two years, since I’d got my degree. Now, I’d have to look somewhere else to get ahead. I should have enquired more fully about the ‘executive’ in executive assistant. I’d just presumed I knew what the title meant. All that resonated in my mind was what Dana had just said. She’d said I was her secretary.

I went back to my work station in the front section of Dana’s offices. She actually has three office rooms, more than any of the other VPs. It was the only thing that Roz, or any of the other staff, had spoken to me about, as if Dana was really making herself out to be something special.

Dana’s office arrangement was only natural, I guessed, as I sat and thought about it at my desk, fuming over the embarrassment I’d just suffered. Dana has her inner office where she does her work and has her business meetings. I’m in the outer office with the files, computers and stuff. Her third room is what Dana calls her dressing room. It has a bathroom as well. Well, if the Executive Washroom was really for men,

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as the EA room was for women, where could Dana use 'the facilities'?

If you knew Dana and how she thought of herself and her privileges, you'd know that she'd never use the same room as the EAs, assistants being a lower level to the assignment she had 'won', over many men.

The barbed remarks I'd received and not really understood, the raised eyebrows when I was introduced to other EAs on my first day of work, the winks and such from some of the men when I said who and what I was, all surged up to the front of my memory, making me feel so stupid. The reception had been so disconcerting at the start that I'd become something of a recluse around the company. I don't think anyone really knew who I was, now, as I didn't introduce myself any more, not wanting the winks and nods that I'd seen so much on my first day.

I tried to concentrate on my work. I had a program to write for my Laser 3000A computer, preparing a graphic display that Dana could use in her explanation to the Board of Directors, about why she would not be recommending the Technivision contracts.

On the surface, the contracts were fine and legally sound, but the liabilities were enormous. I had calculated them for Dana, the insurance premiums staggering. The New Accounts Division had been glowing in its praise of Technivision. I was the one, however, who'd researched the contract, clause by clause. My year in law school had helped me. I'd thought that was the reason why I'd landed a prestigious job with Ekco. I was pleased with myself and the work I'd done on Technivision. Now, I'd found out that I was 'just' a secretary.

I became more annoyed as I worked. When I'm angry, I work quickly. When I'm furious, I race through

any problem in front of me. I had the program completed and had the printer set for print handouts that the oldtimers on the Board always insisted upon.

Dana strolled out of her office, checked the program, raising her eyebrows at me in surprise and pleasure at what I had done.

"Pat," Dana said with a smile as I silently handed her the computer disk with the whole presentation laid out on it. "I'm gone for the next week. You'll hold the fort here until I get back. Damian will be after you for an advance look at our Technivision report."

Yes, I noted the 'our' in front of the work that I'd done entirely. Later, that 'our' would become 'my' in Dana's talking about the work. It had already happened twice in little papers I'd prepared for her.

"Don't tell him a thing, Pat," she ordered me, taking the papers that the printer had completed. "I want to surprise Damian Robertson with it at the next Projects Committee. Not a peep. If he knows anything about this before then, I'll know who to blame."

I looked up at Dana in shock. I couldn't believe the malicious look she gave me as she went into her inner office. Through the open door, I saw her put everything into her safe before she locked it.

"Not a word," Dana reiterated to me as she left. "See you at the end of next week!"

Dana Hansen looked smug as she stopped and chatted to some of the secretaries, sorry, administrative assistants, who seemed to think that she was really something. I knew what she was thinking of, her rivalry with Damian Robertson, one of Ekco's other Vice-Presidents. I think there were fifty Vice-Presidents at least. But some vice-presidents, as it says in *Animal Farm*, are more equal than others. Dana and Damian each had quite a lot of power and influence at

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Ekco while others were just names filling titular positions.

Damian was a 'coming man', Dana had said to me sarcastically, when she'd talked to me and told me about him. Roz had said, "Damian Robertson, he's one of Dana's string," when she'd gone down the list of VPs and oriented me to Ekco's ways of working, on my second or third working day.

No sooner had Dana left than Roz appeared in the doorway of the outer office. Roz is a striking redhead. A big girl, she's as tall as me, somewhat overweight, but she carried it well and dressed to disguise her real figure.

"So, Pat's in charge of Dana's office," Roz said, coming in and sitting on the edge of my desk. She gave me a wicked, little smile. "I'm surprised you're not in there," she signalled with a toss of her hair, at Dana's inner office, "exploring."

"Please, Roz," I said grimly. "I have a lot of work to do." I didn't really.

Roz's sly glance and raised eyebrow took in my clean desktop, the empty mail 'In' tray and the neatly stacked mail in the 'Out' tray. She smiled smugly at me and swung her legs off my desk. I thought she was going but she lifted the top of the printer and took out the original of the Technivision print report.

"Roz!" I snapped. "That's private for the Board." I moved to get it from her, but she was quicker at moving than I was. She was reading the recommendations before I could stop her.

"Roz!" I yelled again, snatching the copy from her hand. "That's strictly confidential!"

Roz gave me a stunned look. "You guys," she said, even though she knew Dana's work habits, and that I

was the one who did the research for her. "You're nixing the Tech bid!" she gasped.

"That's privileged information!" I snapped at her, something like panic rising in me as I knew what a gossip Roz was. Dana was hardly out the door and the secret she'd told me to keep would be common knowledge in Ekco before the nightshifts came on.

"Good grief! That's going to cause conniptions," smirked Roz, sitting down in my chair and grinning at me. "Damian," she went on, her voice highly amused. "He'll blow a fuse. Oh! Oh! That's why Dana's taken off for the week. Left you to deal with the blow-up."

"No," I told her in a panic. "That's privileged, Roz! You mustn't tell anyone what you read in here!"

Roz wouldn't, couldn't, it seemed, just leave it alone. "It won't be pretty," she said. "Damian Robertson will have your head, Pat, if he can't have Dana's, when he sees what you're recommending about his pet project!"

I couldn't tell Roz what Dana had said to me. Appealing to her better instincts wouldn't work. The woman had none, I thought sourly. But I didn't want it all over the office that she'd seen the report and what it recommended. That surely would have made Dana fire me. I would leave Ekco soon, but I wanted it to be on my own terms. My thinking and fuming about being an EA, a personal secretary, had made up my mind about that.

"Roz," I interrupted her glee at what would happen when Damian found out about my recommendation. "You shouldn't have seen this report."

Roz smiled at me. "I shouldn't see inside Dana's office either," she pouted at me as I shivered. "I won't tell about either one, if you don't."

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I was trapped, sort of. Would Roz be a blabbermouth about the office? I didn't know. She was clearly the outer office 'snoop'. She had her nose in just about everything.

"All right," I agreed. "For a few minutes."

Dana's inner office was comfortable, though Roz found the carpeting 'upgraded' from her, Rosemary Henning's, boss, another VP. The pictures were originals, she said with certainty.

Dana's 'third office', her dressing room as she called it, was an eye-opener for me as well as Roz. I'd only had glimpses from the inner room when Dana had gone in there to get something, like a different jacket.

The room was pink with full drapes and lace curtains across the room's only window, concealing the room from the skyscrapers looking down and across at the Ekco Building. There was a huge dressing table, surrounded by soft lighting, mirrors and just about every cosmetic known to humanity. There was a huge, walk-in closet, that Roz oohed and aahed at. Dresses, in plastic covers, hung there in rows.

There were shelves of women's shoes with high heels of every height. There were wigs on the shelves above, mostly in Dana's natural hair color, in styles that I had seen before and admired. I recognized, as well, several different colors, including the long, blonde fall that Dana had worn for a 'special occasion' once.

"Luxury!" murmured an astounded Roz, her hands caressing a gold-threaded dress. "This is incredible. It's as if Dana had her own apartment right here!"

"She doesn't have a bed," I pointed out. "It's just what Dana says that it is, a dressing room."

"This is so much more than that," sighed Roz, opening drawers in the dressing table and lifting out packages containing fancy women's lingerie, dark blue and red, very sexy.

"You know that she has to entertain a lot after work," I said as Roz examined each drawer, the panties, bra and stockings, very closely.

"Wow!" exclaimed Roz as she shifted the heavy, dark curtain at the end of the room. It was a shower curtain in fact and revealed a low, shiny, black bath tub behind it. "She definitely does have the power, doesn't she, our Dana!"

"Perhaps she deserves it," I said uncomfortably as Roz caressed the long drapes that had concealed the bath alcove. She continued on with her inspection, reaching up to the cupboards above the pink marble sink and john. She giggled as she showed me a pink safety razor.

"Time to go," I said to Roz, opening the door to Dana's inner office.

Roz looked around, envy written clearly on her face. She touched the frilly, feminine lamps and the padded, pink chair.

"And you have all of this to yourself, Pat, for a week," Roz said with a coy smile at me.

"I'll be at my work station," I said firmly, locking the dressing room with the key that had opened it from the key-set Dana had given me some weeks before.

"I wonder if her dresses would fit me?" mused Roz as we left the inner office.

"Roz!" I exclaimed in alarm.

"Well," Roz said, with that same supercilious smirk on her face as when she had defended the EA bathroom from me. "They'd fit you all right. Dana would

never know if it was you who tried them on. But I suppose," she looked down regretfully at her arms and plump hips, "she'd know right away if I did."

"Don't even think of it!" I snapped at Roz.

"I won't if you won't," laughed Roz, giving me a playful tap on the shoulder. "You'd look good in that black and silver ball gown, though. Imagine, with a wig and that fox fur stole. Um, um, um, you'd look as good as your boss, you know. I would love to see you in it. Can't we have a dress up party some time next week when my desk is as tidy as yours?"

Rosemary Henning went off laughing at my flushed face. I shuddered at the thoughts she had left me with and just hoped that she could be trusted not to gossip about the report or Dana Hansen's dressing room.

## II. THE CRISIS

"I want to speak to Pat," said the female voice on the phone.

"Pat speaking," I said easily.

There was a short silence. "Oh," said the woman who had called Dana's office. "This is Cheryl Bonney, Mr Robertson's EA. He's on his way over to collect some papers that Ms Hansen left for him."

"Which were in what connection?" I asked her politely.

"The Technivision report," said the woman after what seemed like a search through some papers in front of her. "Ms Hansen has left you, Pat Kirk, in charge of Contracts, hasn't she?"

I hesitated. What if I agreed, and also agreed that there was a report? Damian Robertson, a VP, could or-

der me to give it to him, and what could I do, but to give it to him?

"I thought that I should warn you," said Cheryl quickly. "Mr Robertson is really anxious to get his hands on the contracts so that the project he has promised can get under way. Roz let the cat out of the bag in the EA room. She said that Pat, that's you, isn't it, had really done the work, not Dana, um, Ms Hansen.

"The girls in this office all want to be the first one to bed our handsome Damian. You know how it is. So, one of them, not me, told him all about the report and that Dana was gone for a while. So, watch out. He's coming in and looking for Pat. Heads up!"

I was flabbergasted. "Th-thanks for the w-warn-ing," I stammered.

"That's all right, girl," came Cheryl's voice. "Now, if I were you, I'd go home sick. You do sound very throaty, you know. You're on the spot with Dana away, aren't you, dear? So, go home quickly."

"I'm," I began, confused with her calling me in the first place, and then calling me 'girl' over the phone. I mean, my voice isn't that fruity, is it?

"I used to work for Dana," came Cheryl's cheerful, disembodied voice in my ear. "Back in Legal Affairs. You can tell her from me, when you see her, that we are close to being even now."

"But," I gasped. Cheryl had hung up, however.

Roz chose that moment to come busting in. "Oh, Pat," she moaned, looking at me like a little girl with a big sin to confess. "You'll never guess what I did."

I looked at her stonily. "You blabbed about Technivision," I said icily, "and Damian Robertson is on his way over to browbeat a copy of the report out of me, a report I was told by Dana expressly to keep secret for the next Board meeting."

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"It's worse," Roz said with a worried look at me. She bit her lower lip, smearing her teeth a little with lipstick.

I reached for a tissue to give to her.

"He's in Magus' office right now," Roz said. Magus was the company's Comptroller, his office on the same floor as Dana's, just a little way down the hallway. "I came up behind him on the elevator. He was talking to Mort Cooper. He thinks that Pat Kirk is female!"

I grimaced at Rosemary Henning. "Then, he'll have another think coming, won't he?" I said, turning back to the program that was running calculations on two overseas contracts Ekco wanted to take up. I was finding it hard to reconcile the insurance costs to the size of the operations. One of the contracts was definitely dubious, as proposed.

"You didn't hear him," said Roz fearfully. "Mort asked him what he'd do if you were a man. And Damian Robertson laughed. He said that he wished you were because he could then fire you on the spot if what he heard about your report, yes, he said Pat Kirk's report, and not Dana's report, was as bad and as biased as he'd heard."

"He can't fire me," I said to her with a tremble in my voice. "I work for Dana Hansen, not him."

"Mr Robertson said he could do that," said Roz in distress. "Fisher in Personnel will do whatever he wants, he said to Mort. He said that Pat Kirk was a woman's name, though, and you know what that meant. You'd be in tears and crying at him if he so much as raised his voice. So, he hoped he was wrong and that you were a man. Then, he'd have you out. He'd have the report downloaded by a computer tech before Dana could do anything!"

"But," I gulped, "Dana, Ms Hansen, gave me very specific orders."

"If you're fired," cried Roz, "you have to turn everything over anyway to Personnel!"

"There goes Len Fisher," cried Roz, pointing out of the glass windowed door to a grey-haired man who was heading down the hallway. He stopped and talked to Christine, the blonde, office flirt, in what had once been the steno pool.

"It won't come to being fired," I said weakly.

"I bet Fisher is going to Magus's office," said Roz emphatically. "If Robertson or Fisher sees you in here, they're just going to say, 'On your way. Turn what you're working on over to Personnel', and then Damian will have your report. He'll have the whole office to rummage through, for Dana's files, while she's away and you're not here!"

"He can't do that!" I gasped, a knot in my stomach. I was supposed to be the gatekeeper, in charge of Dana's office files. "I'll protest!"

"To the Harassment Office?" Roz asked, actually wringing her hands together in her distress. "That's just for women. Do you know where Dana is?"

"Skiing out west," I said. "I'll call the resort she said she was going to."

"No time," said Roz, pointing to the little knot of people gathering close to Christine. A tall dark-haired man was laughing with her, his arm on Len Fisher's elbow as if he wanted to talk to him and get him to do something for him. "There's Damian. He'll see us if we go out!"

"I'm fired," I told Roz, my heart fluttering in my chest at the distress I felt.

"If Pat were only Patricia," said Roz and then her eyes opened wide as some idea hit her. "Come on!"

she blurted out at me. She grabbed my hand and began to pull me into the inner office.

Roz demanded the keys. I gave them to her, thinking she'd lock the inner door but Roz went immediately to the dressing room and opened it, hurrying me in there. I was quite confused at what she wanted me to do, there, in the back room. I supposed she would lock me in and hide me away from Damian Robertson, but the computers were still in the outer office. They could be taken away for some tech to play with. I doubted if what I had done would be concealed for long.

Roz went straight for a wig blocks, eyeing me speculatively as she did so. Suddenly, it clicked! I got the picture of what Roz wanted me to do.

"No!" I said. "Hey no, Roz. I'm not doing anything silly like that!"

"It's the only way to save Dana and your job," insisted Roz. "Quick! A wig! A little makeup. That's all. We'll put a scarf about your neck and a loose coat on you. You'll sit all the time. I'll say you have a cold and can barely whisper. Oh, come on, Pat! It's the only way to keep Damian Robertson out of here! Oh Pat!" she began to cry. "Don't you see? When this all gets out, everyone will know it was me who was the blabbermouth! I'll be the one fired! I can't lose my job, Pat, I can't! I've got my kids to think about!"

Funny, I hadn't been thinking of the predicament Roz was in. When Dana got back, however, there'd be hell to pay. I was sure of that. Cheryl, and other people I didn't even know, already knew that it was Roz who'd given Damian the spur and the excuse he needed to come up and rifle Dana's office.

"Oh, sit down, Pat!" cried Roz; I sat.

"This won't work," I insisted.

Roz whipped my tie off. The silk scarf she re-tied about me was orange and black, soft like a cravat. The dark-haired wig she put on my head fell partly across my face.

"Roz!" I exclaimed but she began combing and poking. I looked like a hippy version of myself but with curled, wavy hair. It was odd to see how I looked so pansy-ish, so femmy, so quickly. Roz grabbed a stick of lipstick, very pink, and quickly dabbed it on my lips. A few deft lines followed with a dark pencil at my eyes and over my eyebrows.

"See," said Roz.

I shuddered. My gender orientation was definitely changed if only you had to look at me from the neck up. I stared at my face, at my girlish face, my clone, I thought wildly, looked back somberly at me. It was amazing that with so little, a wig and a darkening of my eyelashes, makeup on my eyes, and I could see what Roz must have noticed about me long before. I did look womanish!

"Quick, the coat!" hissed Roz. She draped a loose, dark, shaped coat of Dana's over my shoulders. We heard the noise from the outer office. We'd barely got out of Dana's sanctuary, when Damian Robertson came bursting into the main, or outer office.

Mr Robertson, as I thought of him then, came to the inner door and stared across the office at Roz and me. My stomach hit the floor as I saw the intense look on his face as he stared at me, stared at Dana's wig that Roz had insisted that I wore. I had to sit down behind Dana's desk, my legs shaking as I thought about the absurd thing I was doing.

"No, Len," said Damian over his shoulder to someone behind him. "I won't need you after all."

“Mr Robertson,” said Roz brightly as I wished for the world to end as I expected the man to march over to me any second, pull the wig from my head and expose me as some kind of pervert, to the office. “Mr Robertson,” Roz went on, “I don’t think that you’ve met Pat Kirk, Ms Hansen’s Executive Assistant, have you?”

Damian Robertson’s slate-grey eyes hadn’t left my face at all. I knew that I must hold his look, but I could barely do it. He knows, I thought, panic-stricken. How stupid could I have been? Roz had gotten me into a crisis even worse than the one she’d been trying to get me out of. I felt hot, shivering as curls drifted over my face. I remembered how girls used two hands to push their hair back from their face. I tried to do that, but not disturb my wig at all.

I had to look away, down at the woman’s coat covering my shirt and pants. I shivered as I saw Damian Robertson fold his arms, lean on the door frame and glare at me.

“You’re acting in Dana’s place these days?” asked Damian Robertson with a pleasant smile on his tanned, handsome face. Well, I’d heard girls say that he was the handsomest man in Ekco. I suppose with black hair and eyebrows, piercing blue-grey eyes, a straight nose and a firm chin, he was handsome. He was also obviously athletic, and rich, or so I think all the VPs were.

I looked to Roz, but she seemed as flustered as I was. I glanced back at Damian and saw him smile, even white teeth shown, as he caught the exchange of looks between Roz and me.

“You girls have been talking,” Damian Robertson said abruptly, still staring at me.