



Ice Crystals on Velvet by Bea

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by

BEA

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by Bea

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By Teeje

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CHAPTER ONE

Jack Rand was confused. This was the most unusual set up for a job interview he'd ever seen.

He wasn't surprised at being the only male amongst the five candidates. Knew perfectly well that secretarial positions had long been a bailiwick of women. What was confusing him was the fact that the women sitting beside him were all, without exception, drop-dead gorgeous. In addition? If they were applying for the same job as he was? Why weren't they carrying briefcases like him? Why did most of them seem to know each other - though they didn't talk very much? And why was he getting these funny glints of humor in their eyes when they looked at him? He found it difficult to ignore the sheen of the nylon-shod legs and the tight little mini-skirts that they wore - almost like a uniform.

Another thing bothered him. Every one of them was exceedingly well dressed - though a little flamboyant for a secretarial position he thought. He felt positively dowdy. His suit was getting really shiny, especially around the ass, and his best tie had spots on it. He clutched his case to him, and thought seriously of leaving. Who in the hell was going to hire him? Least of all the very popular author, Elaine Evans. He grimaced at the thought, but knew he just had to stay. He desperately needed a job and, even though the chances seemed remote, there was always the *possibility* of being hired -and at least he was out of the cold wind for the present.

He knew he was intimidated. The women around him seemed so sleek, so self-assured. One or two of them would check their makeup using little compacts from their handbags - but it was more for something to do he thought, than any sign of nervousness on their parts. He wished he looked as self-assured but was certain that he didn't. He was smaller than them too! He knew he wasn't physically prepossessing and was well used to being the tiniest person in a room full of men - but being the smallest in a room full of women!

He knew he was going to be the last one interviewed. Sitting in the public library reading the want ads, he'd seen an article in the Toronto Star saying that the well-known novelist, Elaine Evans was in town just prior to her yearly "escape" to her winter cottage where she could "replenish her

batteries" and start doing preliminary work on her next novel. The article had also mentioned the name of her hotel - one of the better class places down by the Marina. It hadn't meant anything until later when he'd overheard two young women in a coffee shop (where he'd been sitting waiting for a job interview). They were of the same type as the women currently in the room. Exactly the same, he thought gloomily. "Yeah! Elaine's looking for a secretary again." One had said. "Gonna try for it?" The other asked. "Sure! Why not? Pay's good. Work's easy" "But I heard there's a fair amount of overtime that you don't get paid for." The second one said, snickering a little. "There's compensations though," the first one laughed. "Great accommodations - though Annie can't cook worth a shit. I swear, she could burn water!" She sighed. "It IS almost like a vacation. Like I said? Pay is good, and you've got no expenses. Elaine spends a lot of time writing - and with her being a famous author? There's often company of one kind or the other come visiting. So it's not as if you're buried out in the sticks altogether."

He had put two and two together. Now knew that a good job was for the asking - or taking. All it took was a little bravado. Normally, he was sadly short of this, but starvation does funny things to people - and he was down to his uppers. After his (poor) interview at the coffee shop, he'd gone back to his dingy little flat and changed into his best suit. Before he could lose heart he'd taken some of his last change and splurged on bus fare to the hotel. Using the desk phone in the hotel, he'd asked for her room. A fairly sharp voice with little touch of Quebec answered "Ms. Evans suite. Annie here."

He coughed nervously. "I understand that Ms Evans is looking for a secretary?"

There was a pause. Then she said. "You wish to make a referral?"

"Yes. Kind of. I mean - I'm looking for a job and would like to apply."

He could practically hear her shaking her head. "I'm sorry sir, but..."

Then he heard another voice in the background. A woman's, but authoritative. Then the jumbled noises one hears when a hand has been put over the receiver.

Annie's voice came back on the line about twenty seconds later. "Sir? You'd have to take the interview today. There's been a change..." "I'm right here in the hotel lobby." he said eagerly.

The phone went quiet again, though he could hear a faint mumble of conversation. Then she was back again, but this time with a peculiar note of levity in her voice.

"Very well sir. If you would come up to the ante- room for suite 409 please? Just let yourself into the anteroom. Join the other applicants."

"Whe... when? Right now?"

"Yes sir. You'll have to wait. I'm afraid that Ms. Evans is *extremely* short of time..."

Now, here he was. Sitting in competition with a bunch of women. Probably going to get beat, he thought.

But he had been dreaming. All of a sudden a rather austere young woman was standing in front of him. "Ms Evans will see you now Mr. Rand."

"Hey Annie!" One of the three young women left called across. "Going to be much longer? And wasn't I here before him?"

"You could always come back next year, Cecily." Annie replied sweetly. "Ms. Evans will see you in good time. That is, if you care to wait?"

The young woman sighed deeply and leaned back in her chair. Annie led him through the door and into the room. An attractive blonde woman sat on a sofa, a glass of wine in her hand. She patted the sofa beside her.

"Why don't you sit here Mr. Rand? A glass of wine?"

Nervously, he held his hand out. "A real pleasure Ms Evans. You're my very first, real live author. I'll pass on the wine if you don't mind?"

"Oh!" She said, pleased. "You like my books?"

He blushed, and she laughed. "See Annie? What did I tell you? I write stuff for women! Men don't care!" Then she turned serious. "Don't worry Mr. Rand. I won't hold it against you. Now? Why are you applying for a job as my secretary? What have you heard about me?"

She was so direct! He quavered inside. Then plucked up his courage. Still was nervous, so decided that a little Dutch courage couldn't do any harm. "Ms. Evans? Maybe I could have a little of that wine after all? It looks very nice."

She smiled and poured a half glassful. He took an appreciative sip. "Ms. Evans? I need a job. Badly! I'm broke and going to be thrown out of my apartment. I know that's the wrong way to answer. But it's the truth. I won't pretend that I'm a great secretary, but I type at seventy words per minute and I'm pretty accurate. I have a good phone presence. My shorthand isn't that great, but it's adequate..."

"Can you cook?" she interrupted.

"Eh? Yes. As a matter of fact, I used to be considered a fair to middling chef and.."

"How are you at taking orders from women?"

"My last supervisor was a woman - and her boss was one too."

"When could you be ready to go? I assume you know that Annie and I - and whoever we hire are going north to my winter cottage?"

"Yes ma'am. I'd got that from somewhere. The newspaper I think."

She nodded. Stared at him. "You didn't answer my question. When would you be ready to go? Could you leave tonight?"

He was dazed. Was he actually being offered this job? "Yes Ms. Evans. No problem."

"What about your family? Girlfriend? Wife?"

"None of the above ma'am" he said sadly.

"Well then. Let's get down to business. I'll pay you a decent wage, and there will be no charges for room and board. You'll be ready by..." she looked at her watch... "Three hours from now at Malton airport - the commuter terminal. Is this agreeable to you?"

"Yes Ma'am. But...?"

"What?"

"I'm embarrassed ma'am. I'm so broke - I don't have the fare to get me there."

She looked a little embarrassed herself. "I'm sorry. Annie. Give Mr. Rand a hundred before he goes - against future earnings Mr. Rand?"

"Oh thanks ma'am. I'm really gratef..."

"Before we go any further Mr. Rand. I want you to know why I hired you."

"Yes ma'am?"

"I've been taking girls with us for years - and bedding them, in other words, I'm a lesbian. Does this offend or disturb you in any way?"

"Oh no ma'am. Not at all." He answered honestly.

She nodded and smiled, before continuing. "Unfortunately, I've just got word that a major cold front is moving in. If we don't leave tonight, it may be weeks before the airstrip there is clear for landing again. I'm telling these little baggage's (she smiled fondly) I've been interviewing about this and, the next thing is that the cheeky buggers know my position and try and hold me for ransom. This year? If I take a man? I might get a little better rate NEXT year from them. Teach them a lesson too? Understand?" "I think so ma'am." "Do you accept what I'm telling you?" "Yes ma'am."

"Well, welcome aboard Jack. You don't mind if I call you that?" With that, she stood up, so he followed her example and was surprised to find that she was only a little bigger than him - and that was probably because of her heels. She held out her hand and he shook it. Was immediately surprised by the strength in her hand. "No Ma'am. Jack is just fine." He said.

"Good! Just one thing? It's a light plane so don't be bringing anything you really don't need, please?"

He couldn't help it. Giggled. "Any stuff I don't need? Pawned ages ago ma'am."

She looked discomfited again, and he felt a twinge of regret for saying it. At the same time, he wanted out of the room before she changed her mind, so made a hasty retreat after getting the hundred dollars from Annie. His carriage was a lot more erect when he left the outer room than

when he'd gone in. He enjoyed the astonished looks on the girl's faces when they realized that he'd got the job but was in too much of a hurry to stay a while to savor it. He grabbed a cab at the hotel entrance and made for the nearest McDonalds. Stuffed himself on Cheeseburgers and fries until his stomach rebelled. Feeling content for the first time in months, he relaxed over his coffee for ten minutes,

Once home, he notified his landlord and, after changing into more comfortable clothes for traveling, packed all his clothes - he didn't have many - into a hold all. Boxed almost everything else and asked the landlord to hold it for him. This was agreed to, after Jack agreed not to press for the refund (small) of his security deposit. He was in the commuter section of Malton airport with more than an hour to spare. He knew he needed a haircut and did find a barber close by, but the man shook his head.

"Sorry son. I work by appointments only - and that ponytail of yours? Would take me a while. Sorry."

Jack shrugged. He'd been doing his own hair for months now. Wouldn't hurt to do it again. When he re-entered the terminal, Ms. Evans and Annie were there. They motioned him to join them, and then led him outside on to the tarmac. He could feel the immediate drop in temperature. Shivered inside his light jacket.

The plane was a little bigger than he'd expected, and he shook his head when he saw how much luggage was being loaded - thinking about his single piece of baggage. The pilot was a woman, who shook hands with him but was preoccupied with getting away before the weather turned, so just nodded. Ms. Evans looked askance at him. "Jack? I hope you have a warm jacket with you. These small planes are pretty damn cold."

He shook his head. "Sorry. Don't have one. But I'll be okay." She looked concerned but got interested in saying something to the pilot. She was going to be sitting with the pilot up front. He was told that the inboard seat behind the pilot was going to be his, and that Annie was going to sit beside him, next to the door. About five minutes before they were due to take off Annie approached him, a fur jacket in her hands.

"Here Jack. Elaine wants you to wear this. She thinks you'll freeze up there... here, let me help you into it."

She had been so direct that he didn't have enough time to come up with an argument. Almost as if hypnotized he lifted his right arm, and then his left. Seconds later, Annie was fastening it at the neck. He cringed inwardly. He was standing out there in front of people wearing a woman's mink jacket! It did feel wonderful though. Rich and velvety. He could understand why women raved about them but was still uncomfortable.

"Annie?" he said quietly. "I feel kinda funny? Having this..." he plucked at his jacket. "A man in a woman's jacket? It looks funny."

She gave him an impatient look. "You'll be in the plane in a few minutes. Nobody will see you then - and anyway, it would be almost impossible to put it on in there - too crowded. Just keep it on for now, why don't you." A ghost of a smile playing on her lips bothered him. "But Annie..."

Her smile was replaced by an impatient frown. Then he saw something light in her eyes. "Wait a minute!" she said, reaching into one of the jacket pockets. "Here's an idea!" and pulled something bright and flimsy out. And, to his horror, she was wrapping a bright blue chiffon scarf around his head, then tucking the ends loosely into his jacket. "Now. I'll bet that nobody'll take you for a man now!" she cackled triumphantly.

Humiliated beyond measure, he stood there in his feminine finery for the next few minutes, before being allowed into the plane. He was surprised at how commodious the seat was. Found the seat belt and fastened himself in. Annie disappeared for a little while, then he saw her pull up beside the plane in a large BMW sedan. She left the engine running, exited the driver's seat, then opened a rear door. leaned in, then straightened back up, her arms filled with a froth of feminine fabrics. She approached the plane. "Jack? open that door, would you. Let me get this stuff in?" she shouted.

He leaned over and opened the door.

"Here!" she said, handing the clothes to him. "Put these over your lap if you don't mind? With all this hurry we had no time to put them in suitcases - and anyway, this'll stop them from getting creased."

Face flaming, he accepted the armful of brightly colored dresses and gowns that she was thrusting on to him. She then made another two trips loading him under a plethora of sweetly scented satins, taffetas, and lace. She

then drove the car away, returned a few minutes later, and climbed into the seat beside him. He thought she'd offer to take some of the pile from him, but she didn't, just slid under some of the clothes that were spilling over on to her seat. A few minutes later, Ms Evans and the pilot boarded. It was almost immediately after that that they were taxiing out onto the runway and, before he knew it, the pilot had got clearance from the control tower. A quick sprint down the tarmac and they were aloft, his chiffon covered head and his hands practically the only parts of his body visible above the mound of female clothes.

The flight was uneventful, though the lady pilot was concerned about getting back to Malton before the bad weather hit. "Do you have transportation from the Airstrip, Ms. Evans? she asked. "I hope you do because it's kin da quiet there, and I certainly don't want to be hanging around waiting if I can help it. You don't mind I hope?"

"Of course not!" Elaine said quickly. "I've had the car taken out of storage and it'll be waiting for us. The cottage has been getting warmed up for days, the larder's stocked - everything's been taken care of - don't worry. Me and Annie have been doing this for years now, haven't we Annie? Probably do it with our eyes shut."

The landing went beautifully, the plane settling down on what appeared to be nothing much more than a mowed field with a Nissan hut at the end, and a gravel parking lot - where a large Sports Utility vehicle sat in the gloom of the evening. It was dreadfully cold once they climbed down from the cabin and Jack was very grateful now for both the coat and the scarf, well aware that his ears would have been numb without the protection within minutes of his leaving the plane. Annie did take the dresses from him to allow him to exit properly but before he knew it, he was totally burdened with the load of clothes again. He felt embarrassed though as both of his women companions were nowhere near as warmly dressed as he was but seemed impervious to the chill.

Annie took off running to get the car while Ms. Evans and the pilot unloaded the luggage quickly, the pilot continually looking up at the darkening sky. Annie brought the car up just as the last of the luggage was put on the ground.

"I can stay and help you load ..." the pilot began. "No dear. Off you

go. I know you're concerned about the storm-GO!" Ms. Evans insisted, smiling.

"Thank you, Ma'am," the pilot said. "Goodnight to you. Annie? Nice meeting you. Miss? Have a nice stay."

And the pilot was up into the cockpit before Jack realized that he was the "Miss" that the pilot had referred to! Once more, he felt peculiarly feminine standing there holding a mess of women's clothes while the two women loaded the trunk of the car with luggage. He was the only occupant of the back seat now, as Annie joined their employer in the front, after letting him enter, then piling the clothes back on top of him again. He thought of putting the finery on the seat beside him as there was now plenty of room, but something in the way that Annie had loaded it on top of him, made him leave it, just the way it was. He rationalized that she wasn't demeaning him-it was just better for the dresses. Otherwise they would all end up on the floor of the car if it were braked suddenly.

The drive to the cottage took about a half hour, through the rapidly darkening skies. Just as they reached the 'cottage' sleet began to fall, then changed to snow. He was concerned about getting the dresses wet - after all he was responsible for them, so was very pleased to see Ms. Evans activate an automatic garage door opener. Inside the garage they were protected from the elements, and as there was a door leading into the house, he followed the two women and came into the kitchen.

"Ms. Evans? Where do you want these clothes put down? I can give you a hand with the luggage then."

"Don't worry about that Jack" she said, stretching hugely. "Annie? Show him his room. If you don't mind, Jack? Hang them up in your closet, would you? There's TONS of closet space there, and lots of hangers. Okay?"

Annie crooked her finger at him, so he followed her along a hallway and into his room. He was impressed. It was a good size room and though it was decidedly feminine in decor - lots of pinks and whites - and ruffled pillows - he was very pleased to see an adjoining, private, bathroom. "Wow!" he said. "This is nice!" Annie smiled at him. "It is, isn't it? Elaine will be glad to hear you're pleased - though I was almost positive that you would be. But you'll find hangers in the closet there - hang the clothes there."

He nodded then decided to ask. "Annie? Why do you ladies want to hang these clothes in my room? Won't Ms. Evans be wearing them?"

Annie had been on the point of leaving, but she turned around. "Oh no Jack. All of that stuff is for altering. We weren't going to bring them at all, but seeing that you're going to be helping me? I'll have more time to make the alterations. We thought this room would be best because you're right beside the sewing room and have more closet space than you'll ever need. We generally only bring one or two of her outfits up, but with you instead of those silly girls that she normally has along, I suggested we bring a lot more. I enjoy dressmaking and it'll keep me occupied. You don't object, do you?"

"Of course not Annie! Now I see why Thanks."

"You're welcome" she replied. "I'll bring your hold all to you then, after you hang up these dresses and you unpack everything, have a shower and change into your robe and pajamas. We have a ritual of a just a light meal and a very relaxed evening when we arrive, so just join me and Elaine when you're ready. Okay? You can hang your mink up in here as well, if you want."

"Sounds wonderful! Thanks." he said. She wagged her fingers at him, smiled, and left.

He laid the clothes carefully down on top of the bed and, somewhat regretfully, took his scarf from his head, folded it carefully and put it in one of the pockets of the mink jacket. Unfastened the neck buttons and slid the jacket from his shoulders. Went to put it away.

He got a shock when he saw the contents of the closet. It was a huge storage space, that was for sure, but it still held a fascinating array of women's clothes - pastels and primary, hot, colors. Blouses, dresses, skirts, of every conceivable style - evening clothes. Fabrics were of all sorts, silks, satins, velvets, laces, cottons, linen, taffetas, organdies, chiffon. He couldn't help but touch some as he hung his employer's dresses in there, turned on by the pure femininity facing him.

It wasn't a shock then when he went to put his underwear in the chest of drawers and discovered a plethora of beautiful lingerie - all the colors of the rainbow - in some drawers, and others filled to overflowing with sweaters - wool, cashmere, angora. He shook his head in a mixture of wonder and

resignation, blushing a little as her ran his fingers lightly over the lustrous fabrics, loving the feel of them. Glad that no one could see him admiring the clothes. With a start, he left his reverie. 'Better join the ladies' he thought, as he heard what sounded like water running for showers in another part of the house.

His bathroom was inundated with things feminine. Perfumes and colognes. Powders and talcums. Bubble bath and skin emollients, lipsticks by the dozen. Mascara's. Blushers. Eyeshadow - brushes, pencils, little boxes, big boxes. His toothbrush, toothpaste, and anti-perspirant practically disappeared into the muddle. He was a little aggravated to discover he'd forgotten to pack his razor - but it wasn't something he used much at all - and he was positive there would be some lady's razors lying around somewhere (which turned out to be the case).

He looked out his pajamas and dressing gown, then stripped and jumped into the shower.

It was absolutely marvelous! He had a JOB! He knew where his next meal was coming from! No rent to worry about. No bills! He soaked in luxury, the soap was somewhat perfumy, but nice. After stripping the band from his hair, he shampooed it three times, rinsing it over and over, then applying conditioner. Then he washed himself slowly and thoroughly, feeling all the fears and disappointments of the previous months wash away from him. Dried himself in the biggest, fluffiest, towel he'd ever seen. The powder he used (having a tendency to chafe) had the same perfume, but he knew that the miasma of the soap clung to him - so what difference did it make? He was feeling a little puzzled about the remark that Annie had made, 'helping her'? wasn't that what she'd said...?

He was in the shower for a long time, before it dawned that maybe the ladies were waiting for him. Hadn't there been some kind of implication that he might have to give Annie a hand with the preparation of meals? THAT'S what she'd meant! Relieved, he quickened his pace appreciably, put on his pajamas, then slid his robe on. Tied the sash and inspected himself in the mirror. He then pulled his hair back and banded it. 'Not too bad' he thought. 'Wish I had slippers - but what the hell!'

He discovered that Annie and Ms. Evans were, in fact, waiting for him - though his welcome was not quite what he expected. Both ladies were

ensconced in their robes and nightwear and holding wine glasses in their hands. Elaine was in a light blue brocaded robe, long and belted at the waist, a pair of dark blue silk pajama pants showing beneath the hem with flashes of good ankles and dark blue, high heeled slippers. Her hair was brushed back - a halo of burnished gold. Practically no makeup, but her face was just radiating good health.

Annie was a lot more feminine. A yellow chiffon peignoir over a pale green nightdress. Her dark hair was also pulled back from her face and tied with a yellow ribbon. All of a sudden, he realized that she was a very attractive woman. Dark lustrous hair, curling back from a pair of bright brown eyes. Eyes that were looking at him with undisguised humor. Puzzled, he looked over to Elaine. She was shaking her head in an "I don't believe this" sort of way

"Is something wrong Ms. Evans?"

She laughed, deep in her chest. "Jack? If you want a glass of wine before you start making supper - that's fine. It's been a long day, and I'm sure you want to relax." she cocked her head, squinting at him contemplatively "But what is that outfit supposed to be? In the name of all that's holy? Green pajamas - all wrinkled yet - and a tatty blue plaid robe? You **MUST** be kidding? And? Where are your slippers?"

Annie laughed. "There's **TONS** of stuff in that room that would fit him. Some of the girls are bigger than him, but I'm sure that he could find something there."

Elaine interrupted quickly. "Naw Annie. That'd probably be too traumatic for him I think. Just run back to my room, would you? Those green pajamas and the terry robe of mine? While she's doing that Jack? Why don't you go back to your room. See if you can find something resembling a pair of slippers that fits you. Something in green is preferable, but it's not too important. Get going now! Toddle!"

He stared at Elaine in consternation. She seemed perfectly sober. Annie was giggling a little as she left the room but also seemed to be accepting the fact that Elaine was sane.

"But Ms. Evans? I can't do that. All the stuff in my room is women's stuff."

"And...?"

"I can't put that stuff on. It's women's stuff...!"

"Are you going for the record for repeating the same nonsense Jack? You are not going to wander around my house looking like some tatty male. If your clothes were decent, I could find it easy to be reasonable, but they are not. Please go and find a pair of slippers to wear. Annie should be at your door in seconds with a decent robe and pair of pajamas. Please put them on and come back here. Don't forget to try for slippers that complement your new outfit please.

She waved her fingers in a gesture of dismissal that he obeyed. Less than five minutes later, he returned to the ladies ensconced in lustrous satin jade green pajamas and a long pink terry robe. His slippers had about one inch heels and, though backless, stayed on his feet comfortably, the pink and green feathery pom-poms on them matching his nightwear closely. He actually felt warm and secure in his outfit, but was blushing furiously, expecting laughter at his appearance. There wasn't any though. Both women were talking quietly as he arrived. Annie looked up with an approving nod.

Elaine nodded "Thank you Jack." she said "Much better. Want a glass of wine or a drink before you start making supper?"

"Making supper?"

"Yes dear. Supper. Your first big test. If you can make toast without carbonizing it and water without burning it, you'll be superior to the usual cook." She smiled at Annie.

He had to smile himself - her comment was obviously made with affection.

"Yes Ms. Evans. Would it be okay if I got familiar with the layout first? I can enjoy a glass of wine while I'm doing that. Anything you'd particularly like to eat?"

"Go ahead dear. Make anything you want. But don't take too long, eh?. And by the way? I'm kinda funny about hygiene. When you're in the kitchen? Aprons and hair nets at all times. You don't need to wear an apron just now, though the hair nets are in that drawer there. "

Bemused, he went to the drawer she'd pointed at. Another piece of

women's stuff he had to wear? He opened it and found a net suitable for the purpose - one obviously designed for long hair like his. It had a tinge of pink in it. 'Most suitable' he thought dryly to himself, arranging his hair inside the fine net.



But his unease soon parted as he toured the kitchen. They were NOT going to starve. A large freezer loaded with what appeared to be choice meats, a larder bursting with canned and dried goods. A refrigerator also full of fresh refrigerated items like butter, cream, cheese - and fresh vegetables! A wine rack was mounted on the wall just inside the larder door and had an excellent selection of white through red wines. The biggest spice rack he'd ever seen. Jars and jars of dried pastas, all different shapes and sizes.

All modern conveniences too, he saw. Microwave, sparkling oven, dishwasher - garbage compactor even. Pots and pans galore. Nice tableware, glassware - everything! Happy in an area where he finally had the feeling he had some competence, he quickly set to. In practically no time, he had set the informal table in the kitchen with all the necessary condiments, had wine poured and was serving up a light savory omelet as a side to French toast.

He didn't want to appear too anxious so tried to avoid examining his table partners too closely, concentrating his attention on what he was eating. Sensed Elaine relaxing back in her chair. Then felt her hand pressing lightly on his forearm. Looked at her and saw the beam on her face.

"Yes dear. We're going to keep you. Right Annie? A 'keeper' wouldn't you say?"

A delicate, but discernible, ladylike burp came from Annie. "Oh! Excuse me! Jack? That was delicious! Thank you. Oh god! This means I don't have to eat the horrible meals I make any more! Yes Elaine! A keeper for sure!"

He joined them in their laughter, feeling more like a companion now. That didn't last long though. He had just started to get up to clear off the table when Elaine spoke to him again. "Hold on a second Jack? Something we have to talk about. Okay?"

He sat down in his chair again, suddenly nervous. "Sure. Did I do something wrong?"

She didn't deny it immediately, which gave him a sinking feeling in his stomach again. Just put her hand to her chin and stroked it.

"No Jack. You didn't. But something is going to have to be cleared up - and quickly."

He just stared at her in pure fear. This looked serious. Couldn't speak.

"To begin with?" she started. "Your hair?"

Relief flooded his very being. "Oh! I'm sorry Ms. Evans. I was actually going to ask Annie if she had a pair of scissors I could borrow later on tonight...."

"Scissors? What the hell for?" Elaine asked.

"Why? To cut my hair. I thought that was what you were getting at?" He was confused again, and it showed.

"No no! Annie's great with hair. Let her do it tonight after your finished here. You've got nice hair. Not going to have you walk about here looking like someone's scalped you. She'll do it nice. Trust me. Okay?"

He was getting a very cold feeling now in the pit of his stomach but agreed by nodding his head. "Another thing?" Elaine said.

"Yes?"

"You work for me now. There may be visitors come by and I'll want you neatly dressed at all times. Most certainly I don't want to ever see you in these pajamas and that robe you wore earlier on. And? if you have any scruffy outerwear of the same type, I don't want to see that either. Understood?"

He licked his lips nervously. "But Ms. Evans? My clothes weren't that good quality even when I bought them new. They're kinda used looking now"

"Jack? There's TONS of clothes available to you. Just look in your closets."

Aghast, he stared at this commanding woman. "But these are women's clothes Ms. Evans."

"Oh for Christ's sake Jack! What are you babbling about? You are here, doing a feminine job, and wearing women's nightwear at this very moment. Wore women's outerwear flying up here. What's the matter? Frightened that we'll think you're a sissy if you start wearing women's pants or shirt blouses?"

"But I'll look all funny" he protested. "I'm a man, for goodness sake! Please don't ask me to put on stuff like that...."

She shook her head. "Jack? I think you're making a big issue out of nothing ..."

"But I can't...." he interrupted.

"Oh Jack!" Annie spoke up impatiently. "Why don't you just stop arguing! You'll have to learn to do as you're told!"

"But I wasn't expecting this development! Aren't you telling me to wear women's clothes? He directed his question to Elaine.

She sighed theatrically. "Jack? You're basically working for Annie. From now on? I'd suggest that you address questions like that to her." she replied casually.

"But I thought...?"

"Yes?"

"That I was hired to *be your* secretary."

Elaine shifted in her chair, making herself more comfortable. Took a look at him, then another sip of her drink. "Jack?" she started. "Annie's my assistant. Much more than a maid. There's no disgrace, or loss of status in reporting to her. Now, normally my secretary has a different status than her - maybe not a higher status, but certainly not lower. And my girls make sure she knows that. But you? You're not one of my girls...."

"But you hired me as your secretary!" he interrupted. "Are you saying I'm not?"

"My secretary or my girl?" she answered, laughing. "Your secretary Ms. Evans." he answered, face flaming. "I know I'm not a girl."

She tilted her head to one side as if considering arguing with him, but smiled instead. "Look Jack. I'm going to have secretarial work for you to do - but there will be long stretches of time when I don't. When that happens, I'll expect you to work with Annie. Reasonable?"

"Yes, of course." He said.

"Good! But up here, we all have to get on - at least you and Annie do.

I won't stand having people who work for me fighting and feuding. Like to have everything peaceful and serene. Understood?" "Of course, Ms. Evans. But..."

She had held her hand up to stop him talking. "I'm a firm believer in letting pecking orders be established Jack. Sometimes I establish them myself, sometimes let the people do it. In your case, I thought I'd let you and Annie set it up." She looked at him as if he understood, then added. "You DO know what a pecking order is, don't you?"