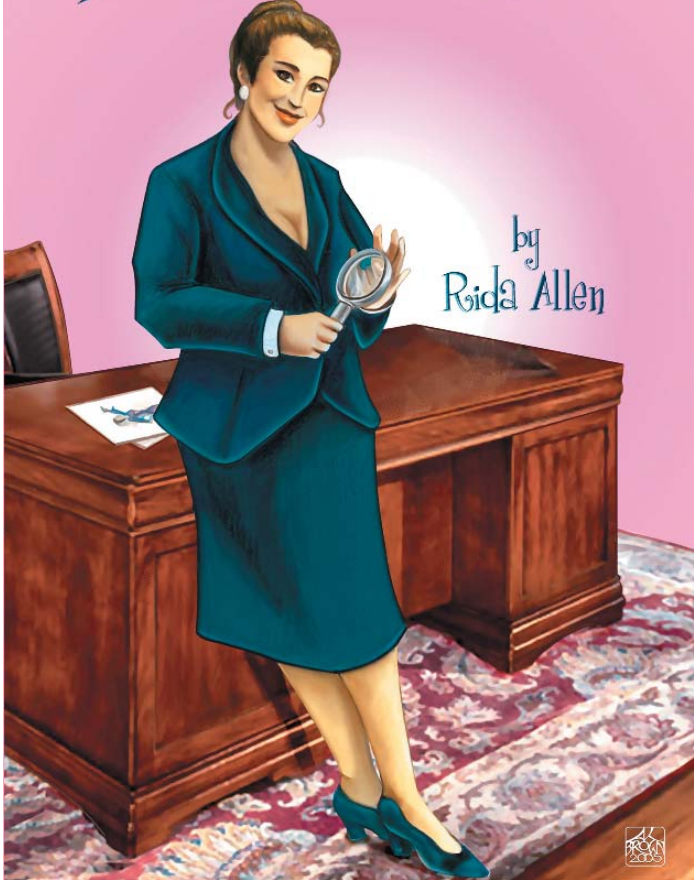


The Fashionable PI.



by
Rida Allen



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The Fashionable Pl.

The Fashionable PI.

Rida Allen

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The Fashionable P.I.

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Dedication

In the quiet time of my days, I know I would not be able to survive without my husband's unfailing support. We've been through much in our years together and he has always been there for me, to love me and care for me.

With everything he does for me on a daily basis, I wanted to dedicate a book to him alone.

You say it often and with such feeling, that I am humbled. I say it now for everyone to see.

I love you, Rob.
Thank you.

Prologue



Jordan Devereaux sat silently at the head of the long table, watching the small woman flit around a second woman who stood still as a mannequin on the stage. The smaller woman, Miyuki, was marking and pinning parts of the outfit hanging on the middle-aged model. Although Miyuki was one of their best designers, she tended to get lost in her art and often forgot the executives sitting around the table. Being the senior executive, Jordan figured she should speak up and remind the designer that they were there.

“Miyuki?”

She froze, then turned back to the people gathered around the polished wood table. “Oops.” Her almond shaped eyes twinkled with humor at herself. “Sorry, as I was showing you the skirt, I realized I could make it look better if I put a dart...” Trailing off, she shrugged apologetically and picked up her notes off the stage where she had dropped them next to the model’s foot.

As Miyuki began talking again about the outfit, Jordan felt her eyes glaze over. It wasn’t that the designer was boring, it was the fact that she had absolutely no interest whatsoever in the clothing industry. But since the previous president of the company felt the need to be in on every meeting, she did the same.

Dean Devereaux, her father, had been a micro-manager and so the staff had expected the same from her when she took over the company several months before. Unlike her father, Jordan respected the people who worked for her and wanted to give them the responsibilities they had earned over the many years. But old habits were hard to break and inevitably, the staff continued to invite her to every meeting they held. That made her days long and often filled with squabbling she didn't need to hear. And no matter how often she told the staff that she trusted their judgement, her schedule continued to fill with endless meetings.

“So, Jordan, what do you think?” Miyuki asked.

Caught, Jordan's eyes flew to hers. “I trust your judgement, Miyuki,” she announced, hoping her response was at least pertinent to the discussion that had been going on around her. She was relieved when the designer grinned and turned to shoo the model off the stage. Inwardly she groaned as a younger woman replaced her and Miyuki launched into another long narrative about the outfit being modeled for the upcoming spring line. Staring at the woman who was now posing on the stage with a goofy grin on her face, Jordan tapped a finger on the notepad in front of her. They had several different lines of clothing, some of which appealed to the more mature customer—like the first model—some of which appealed to the younger women. All of their clothes were geared toward the upper class and in general, were only affordable to them. The Devereaux line was highly regarded and often other companies tried to knock-off their designs, but their regular clientele could tell the difference. Devereaux used nothing but the best quality and workmanship, employing only the best workers. From the workers in the factories all the way to those who worked behind desks, they were a loyal faction. Most of them had been hand-picked by her father many years ago, although they were now getting an influx of younger designers. Miyuki had been with them for almost ten years and the woman's talents seemed to have no end, for which Jordan was eternally grateful. She was one of the few designers who worked on almost all of their lines because her design skills were so varied. She might be a little flighty during presentations, but she ran a tight shop and was one of their highest regarded designers.

Jordan shifted in her chair and picked up her pen, hoping to stay focused on what the designer was saying. After making a few notes, her mind began to wander again and her notes turned to scribbles and doodles. It was very unprofessional of her, but these presentations took so long and were so boring. She understood the need for them, but not the need for her to be involved. She was a good businesswoman, otherwise her father would have never passed the reigns on to her, but she knew squat about making clothes. She really had no fashion sense and depended on her personal seamstress to make sure she was appropriately supplied for all business-related events. At home, she was just as happy in jeans and a sweatshirt or leggings and a tee shirt. Besides all that, she always got the sketches of the clothing when they were in their infancy stages and had the opportunity to make comments at that point. But once again, her father's legacy left her stuck here in this never-ending meeting. And unfortunately, these meetings happened several times a month in preparation for each season's lines.

Miyuki finished her presentation and after taking a few questions, gathered her notes and left the room.

Before Jordan could even take a breath, the next designer strode in with yet another model hot on her heels. Pushing to her feet, Jordan crossed to the sideboard and refilled her coffee cup in the hopes that the caffeine would keep her from falling asleep. As she stood with her back to the rest of the group, she closed her eyes and prayed for her secretary to summon her with some kind of emergency so she could get the hell out of dodge. As she was settling back into her chair, resigned to another two hours of darts and seams, the phone at her elbow bleated.

Crossing her fingers under the table, she pressed the intercom button. "Yes?"

"Jordan, I'm sorry to interrupt, but you have a call on line four. They said it was important," the company's receptionist informed her.

"Okay, thanks." She held up a finger to the waiting designer before picking up the receiver and pressing the button for line four. "Hello?"

"Yo."

Mentally, Jordan cheered and did a little happy dance. It was her brother, D.J, coming to her rescue. Somehow he always knew when these meetings were scheduled even though he didn't work for the company. More often than not, he would call and she would make her apologies, saying she had to take the urgent call. "How are you?"

"You owe me, you know. I had to leave a really hot woman to make this phone call."

Leave it to D.J. to have a date in the middle of the afternoon. "Oh, that's not good. Can you give me about five minutes to wrap up here so I can call you from my office? We'll handle this right away."

"Yeah, sure you will. You always say that, but you never really mean it," he teased. "You'll hang up with me and disappear into your fancy office and I won't hear from you for days."

"I understand and I'm happy to get this resolved right away. I'll talk to you shortly." Placing the receiver back in its cradle, she turned back to the group with a frown. "I'm terribly sorry, but I've got to deal with this right away." She gathered up her notepad, her pen and her coffee and got to her feet. "Just send the meeting notes over to Stacey and I'll make sure to review them tomorrow morning." Giving them an apologetic smile, she hurried out of the room to the elevators that would take her back to her top floor office. First thing in the morning her assistant and secretary, Stacey, would hand over a folder with notes from the abandoned meeting. She would take a few minutes to skim them and then hand them back for filing, having saved hours of her time.

As she approached her office, she made a mental note to take her brother out for a good steak dinner to thank him.

"Are they finished already?" Stacey asked, looking up from her computer screen.

"Uh, no, not exactly."

Rolling her eyes, she handed over several phone message slips. "You really do owe D.J. big time."

Jordan gave her a sheepish grin, flipping through the messages to see if there was anything pressing. "Yeah, I was just thinking that. Anything I need to know?"

"Nope."

“Okay. Give me about an hour before you put any calls through.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want anyone to know that you’re playing hooky.” As Jordan disappeared through the doorway to her office, Stacey called after her, “You’re a bad influence on the rest of us model employees!”

Jordan snorted before closing the door between them, leaving her assistant cackling madly on the other side.

Jack stood in the front room at the church, a closed door between him and the guests gathering to watch him join his life with another person under the eyes of God. As time ticked forward, he paced back and forth to the window, watching the people who were milling around outside. He hadn’t tied his tie yet, his cummerbund was sitting on the small loveseat across the room and the wedding band he and Ellen had purchased together was sitting on a nearby table.

As usual, he was alone in the room. More than likely Ellen’s parents were with her in the bride’s room, but he was by himself. In deference to his lack of family, they had decided to not have any attendants and guests would be allowed to sit on either side of the aisle in the sanctuary. Even though Ellen was an only child, she had many more friends and extended family than he did. In fact, he could count the number of people attending on his side on one hand and they were mostly the guys who worked in his department at the office.

Sighing, he turned away from the window and picked up the ring box off the table. He turned it over and over in his hands, his mind running at full speed. In so many ways, he and Ellen were alike and yet...

He set the ring box down again and turned to the mirror so he could tie his tie. Time was running short and he needed to finish getting ready. It was impolite for the groom to be late to his own wedding. Purposefully he kept his eyes locked on his neck as he tried time and again to get the tie just right. He knew he should have gotten the clip-on tie, but he had wanted to be old fashioned. Frustrated, he left the tie as it was—crooked—and reached for his cummerbund. At least that was easy to put on, pleats facing up he

had been told, to catch the crumbs. Smiling wryly, he turned back to the mirror and stared at his pale image.

“I, Jack Morgan, take you, Ellen Brayden...” Clearing his throat, he tried again in another voice. “I, Jack Morgan, take you, Ellen Brayden...” With a groan, he turned away from the mirror. It didn’t just sound wrong, it felt wrong.

“Five minutes, Mr. Morgan,” the church’s assistant called through the closed door.

The church wedding had been Ellen’s idea. As a matter of fact, getting married had been Ellen’s idea. He had sort of gone along with her, riding the idea to its logical end. But now he was feeling the wrongness of this down in his soul. Wedging a finger in between the tight shirt collar and his neck, he looked toward the emergency exit for what seemed like the tenth time in as many minutes.

It took him only an instant to write, “I’m sorry, Ellen.” on a piece of paper and then he was gone.

Chapter One



Closing the folder labeled 'Spring Update', Jordan pushed it away from her. The Devereaux fashion label was synonymous with upscale designs...they were known for their trendy fashions as well as their classic lines. Personally, she hated them all with a passion. But the company was her namesake and it was her responsibility to carry on the family tradition of running the business.

She looked longingly at her private bathroom, thinking of the comfortable jeans and knit shirt that waited for her behind the closed door. But they were only for after hours, when her hair was down and her face was hidden behind oversize sunglasses. If her father, who had retired three months ago, even knew that she owned those discount jeans, he would plotz. Giggling, she thought of her stiff, formal father turning purple as she modeled the faded denim on the catwalk. She was *at least* a hundred pounds too heavy and five inches too short, without heels of course. But she didn't need to be thin and gorgeous to run Devereaux Designs...in fact, she found people responded better to her plain Jane face and plump figure than they did to her father's outstanding good looks. People found her approachable and easy to talk to. That was all she needed.

Sighing softly, she rested her chin on her hand. No, what she needed was to live her own life and do the job she really loved, where her plain Jane looks made her invisible...but that was not to be.

When her intercom buzzed, Jordan pressed the button to respond to her secretary. "Yes, Stacy?"

"They're waiting for you in your conference room," the disembodied voice responded.

"Could you possibly tell them all to jump out the window?" Jordan requested politely. She grinned at her secretary's soft tsking sound and stood in preparation for yet another meeting. "Yeah, I know, where would we be without the accountants..." Taking a quick detour into the bathroom, she checked her reflection. Here in this building, which Devereaux Designs owned, she was always perfectly coiffed. Her long, straight brown hair was tightly wrapped in a fancy chignon at the back of her head, her olive colored skin was smooth and uninteresting and her face perfectly made-up. She always went light with the make-up so that she wouldn't have to spend the day touching it up. Plain brown eyes stared back at her as she straightened her custom-made suit jacket. Her family's company did not make clothes in her size so all her business clothes were made-to-order.

Figuring she'd stalled long enough, she sighed and headed for the door directly across the room from her bathroom. For convenience, the door connected the president's office to the main conference room where the majority of meetings were held. It allowed the president of Devereaux to slip in and out of meetings as required by his or her schedule. The only exceptions were the meetings that included models showing Devereaux Designs clothes. Those meetings required the raised stage that they had installed in the designer's conference room. Opening the door, she greeted the two women and one man waiting for her at the cherry-wood table.

Two long hours later Jordan sorted through her messages, setting most of them aside to answer tomorrow. When she came across one message, she felt a genuine smile crack her business facade and she reached for the phone. Hearing the gruff response at the other end, she lowered her voice and said, "Hey baby, you

called for hot phone sex?”

The man laughed and responded, “I think my credit card is already maxed out...how ‘bout a freebie?”

“George, George, what would your beautiful wife and daughter say?” Jordan asked, unable to wipe the happy smile from her face. George was a good friend as well as the guru who managed Devereaux’s marketing account. She’d known him for almost six years and had worked closely with him on several of their advertising plans. He was a bright man who worked hard but had a softer side she admired.

“But what would your father say about those raggedy clothes you got hiding in your closet?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “We’ve resorted to blackmail, have we? Well, tell me what’s got you all up in arms, my friend.”

Today should have been the first day of his honeymoon with Ellen. Hawaii had been Ellen’s idea as well, and he wondered if she was there now on her own.

Jack sighed and logged another shipment into his computer. He was sorry, incredibly sorry, about what he’d done to lovely Ellen. They’d known each other for four years, but had only dated for half that time. He’d been attracted to her down-to-earth ways... her love of life and her need to be part of a couple. The fact that she’d been blond and petite with great legs hadn’t hurt, either. But why she’d been attracted to him had always been a mystery. He’d been adopted right at birth, both his parents having been killed in an auto accident the day he’d been born. The only thing he’d ever known of them was his inherited brown hair and green eyes. He sometimes wondered if he’d received his tall but somewhat husky frame from his father or another relative. Not that it mattered much, but his size and strength helped him in his shipping manager job.

As he pondered his heritage, the phone on his desk rang and he answered it absently. He’d been ignoring his phone for the past two days, trying to avoid anyone who might have been involved in his aborted wedding. “Morgan.”

“Hello, son.”

Jack sighed inwardly as he recognized the voice that greeted him. He had not remained close with his father, Bill Morgan, after

his adoptive parents' divorce when he was four. Jack had stayed with his mother, Adele, who had died over seventeen years ago, shortly after Jack's fourteenth birthday. He'd loved her desperately and had been devastated when cancer had taken her life. Living on his own at fourteen had been hard, but avoiding social services for those four years had been even tougher. Still, he'd finished high school and had taken some community college courses in the past thirteen years. And all that time, Bill had kept his distance. He only reappeared every six months or so to 'check in'.

"Hello, Bill," Jack greeted him without emotion. Lucky for Jack, Bill had not been invited to or even known about his engagement to Ellen so there was no need to dodge any questions in that arena.

"I was phoning to check in with you...make sure everything is okay," the elder Morgan said gruffly.

Jack rolled his eyes. "Everything's fine. How's Chicago?" He couldn't be less interested in the answer, but his mother had taught him to be polite and so the words left his mouth without thought. "You still working there?" Bill spent most of his time moving from city to city, searching for that perfect job. Another reason why Adele had divorced him.

"Nope, I'm in Detroit now. Chicago turned out to be a bust, but I have high hopes for Michigan. A buddy of mine has a great new venture that needs some investors. Of course, I'll be doing the physical labor part of it since money is tight for me right now."

Money was always tight for Bill Morgan.

"How's your job?"

"Same old, same old. Look, I'm really busy today..." Pushing a few papers around, he made some noise to indicate his busyness. "And I'm sure this call is costing you money."

"That's not important, son. I want you to know that I'm around if you need anything--"

Jack stopped him before he could continue. "Sure, Bill, I know that."

"Right, right. Well, you can always get me on my mobile phone, son. Take good care of yourself," Bill grumbled, sounding reluctant to hang up.

As if that was any comfort after the years of abandonment.

“Okay, goodbye.” Jack dropped the receiver into its cradle and returned to the shipping docket on his desk. Sometimes he wondered what his biological parents were like. Had they’d looked forward to their first child? Had they made plans for their future together? He wasn’t even sure if they had been young or old, or if they had known he was going to be a boy. Sighing, he pushed a hand through his hair. At thirty one years old, why did these questions continue to haunt him?

It was late as Jack slid the key into his doorknob. He nearly jumped out of his skin when someone moved out of the shadows.

“Hello, Jack.”

He groaned silently as Ellen’s slight form came into view. “Ellen.”

“Can we talk?” she asked, her voice a whisper in the darkness.

“Yeah. C’mon in.” He unlocked the door and stepped back to allow her to enter. Just the thought of having this conversation was enough to make his stomach turn, but he followed her into his tiny living room. The apartment was ridiculously small, especially for the rent that he paid on it, but it was neat and clean. “You want something to drink?”

She settled onto the old, faded couch and looked up at him through her glasses with wide, blue eyes. “Sure. Blush?”

Nodding, he disappeared into the kitchen and poured a glass of wine for her. She was acting so calm and so sure but then again, that was just like her. That was another reason for his attraction to her early on. With a deep breath, he returned to the living room and handed her the glass.

“Sit already, Jack,” she said softly. “I’m not going to bite.”

He gave her a slight grin and dropped onto the couch. “I’m really sorry, Ellen.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me? If nothing else, we could always talk to each other,” she reprimanded him.

“I don’t know what happened, it all rushed up on me when I was in that little room.” He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. “I really thought it was right up until that moment.”

“You never loved me, did you?” she asked.

Hanging his head, he stared down at his hands. “Ellen...”

“It’s okay, Jack.” She took a sip of her wine. “I realize now that I didn’t love you, either. We were comfortable together and you made me feel safe. But it was never love.”

“Then why...?”

Her shoulders fell and it was her turn to avoid his gaze. “I thought it was the right thing to do. Like I said, I was comfortable with you and in all honesty, I’m not getting any younger.” She took another drink for courage before admitting, “And I wanted a family but I was scared that I wouldn’t have the chance if I waited much longer.”

A family? They had never discussed a family! “You’re a beautiful woman...you can have any man you want. Don’t settle,” he told her.

Smiling wearily, she set her glass down on the scarred coffee table and turned to face him. “I hope we can be friends again, Jack.”

“I think we can,” he replied softly, grasping her hands in his. “We have such a long history together, there’s no way we could walk away from each other.”

“You’re right, of course.” After a moment of silence, she released his hands and got to her feet. “Even though it didn’t work out that way for us, having been with you makes me realize what I really want out of life.”

“I hope you know that I’ll always be here for you to talk to, no matter what happens in the future.” He knew he would miss their intimacy, but they would be better friends than lovers.

“We’ll make sure to do lunch very soon,” she promised.

“I’m glad you stopped by, Ellen. I appreciate the opportunity to apologize in person and am grateful that you’re such an incredible person to accept it.”

“We weren’t right for each other, that’s obvious to me now. But someday we’ll both find that special someone.”

“And when that happens, I expect to be invited to the wedding.”

She rolled her eyes, letting the irony twinkle there. “Well, hopefully you’ll stay for the next one.”

Laughing, he draped an arm across her shoulder and walked her toward the front door. “You’re one of a kind, Ellen.”

“Too little, too late!” she quipped, hugging him around the waist. “I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

“Good night,” he called after her before closing the door between them. Leaning back against the door, he rubbed his hand over his face. He was lucky that Ellen was such a classy woman, otherwise that might not have gone quite so well. Thinking back over their conversation, he wondered again at how she had kept her need for a family from him. Had he known that up front, it was likely they would never have gotten to the planning stages for their wedding. That admission would have been a deal-breaker for him.

Jordan kicked off her high-heeled shoes and dug her toes into the plush carpet in her luxury apartment. Her day had been a long one, filled with meetings and an unending number of phone calls. It was a rare day that she actually disapproved of a design, but today had been one of those days. And once she had made noise about the specific design, then she had to defend her opinion to the designer. They were all artists and had artists’ temperaments so she spent a good amount of time on the phone soothing ruffled feathers while still standing her ground.

Now that her regular work week was over, she could begin doing that research for her friend, George Richards. He, his wife, and his daughter from a previous marriage, lived about an hour away in the suburbs. They were delightful people and delightfully happy...with this one exception.

Valerie Richards, born Valerie Neal in a Maryland suburb, was searching for a newly discovered sibling. At two years old, her parents had been taken away from her in a violent car crash on their way to deliver their second child. However, because of her young age and her parents’ deaths, Val had never known that a younger sibling existed until recently. She hadn’t even known that her mother had been pregnant at the time of their deaths. Her parents’ close friends and neighbors had assumed that the unborn baby had died with its parents, so they did the only thing they could. They contacted child services and made sure Val was taken

care of, which also meant she had disappeared from their lives. Growing up, there was no one around to tell Val why her parents had disappeared that fateful night, so she had spent the majority of her life thinking they had abandoned her for no reason.

After meeting George and his daughter Jess, Val had to come to grips with her past in order to pursue her future with them. In doing so, Val reached out to the friends and neighbors who had been left behind and found out the whole story behind her parents' deaths. The two children's cases had been separated due to the unusual circumstances, so Val was sure that her younger brother was unaware that he had family still alive. They, George and Val, wanted to make contact with her brother and see if he wanted to meet. That's where Jordan came into the picture.

She filled her father's shoes as President of Devereaux Designs, but her real joy was in her secret hobby. Few people who knew her in the fashion world were aware that she had been moonlighting as a private investigator for almost five years. The only reason that George knew was because he was a good friend versus just being a colleague.

And so with mounting excitement, she had grilled both George and Val over the phone. They had no pictures of the subject, but were able to mail her pictures of Val's parents. In addition, she had the subject's name and birth date as well as his adoptive parents last known address. While this wasn't the most difficult case she'd dealt with, it sure was an interesting story. And, of course, she was thrilled to be able to help her friends.

Padding through her apartment, she entered her dark bedroom and stripped off her work clothes. Ah, sweet release. She grinned at herself and rummaged through her chest of drawers for some comfortable clothes. After pulling on dark green leggings and a mismatched, thigh-length orange sweater, she released her hair from its bun. It fell straight and sleek almost to her waist and she tossed her head a little to untangle the soft strands. Retracing her steps into the hallway, she crossed to her den where her high-powered computer was connected to a digital line for internet access.

She slipped into her padded desk chair and wriggled her fingers before opening her internet browser. If Val's brother had

an e-mail address, she was going to find it. But before that, she was going to do a simple search for his home address. Sometimes answers were easier to find than you expect.

And sometimes it was a thousand times harder, she thought about three hours later. Who knew that the name Jack Morgan would be so popular? But what was worse was finding information on his parents. Val had found their names, but they, too, had been difficult to track. William Morgan seemed to be all over the map, literally, and Adele Morgan seemed to have dropped off of it. How bizarre was that?

Rubbing her eyes, Jordan pushed away from the computer and stood. She had all weekend to do this search, but she was itching to get these questions answered. It was too late to call George with the little information she had, so she went into the kitchen to make herself some coffee. As was her habit, she ground fresh beans and brewed enough coffee to fill several cups. At this rate, she was going to need it.

It was late, or rather quite early in the morning, when she made her first real hit. There were divorce papers registered for Adele and William Morgan. Maybe that was why Adele Morgan had disappeared...because she had gone back to her maiden name. Taking copious notes on what she'd already done and what she'd found, Jordan searched for information on a change of name for Adele Morgan.

She was definitely hitting more brick walls than she was getting information. But she was no stranger to hard work, both in her regular job as well as her P.I. work. Right now, though, she needed to get some sleep.

Entering her bedroom, still ensconced in darkness, she stripped off her clothes and slid into the softness of her king size bed.

Jordan awakened to the sound of her doorbell. Rolling over, she stared at the clock until the green numbers came into focus. Eleven fifteen. Considering that she'd been up until about four a.m., this was way too early for her. She groaned and slid out of bed, snatching her robe from where it was draped over an overstuffed arm chair in the corner of her bedroom. Slipping the robe on over her camisole and panties, she shuffled down the hall.

She had absolutely no idea who was leaning on her doorbell on a Saturday morning, but if they didn't quit it, she was going to kill them. Okay, she thought, they'd only rung the doorbell twice that she'd heard, but still...

"I'm coming, dammit," she muttered grumpily. As she was opening the door, the bell sounded again. "Jeez, give me a break, would you?"

"That's no way to greet your father!" he boomed as she stepped back to allow him to enter. "And in your robe at noon?"

"It's barely eleven," she answered as she rolled her eyes at his gruff reprimand, then smiled as her younger brother sauntered in after her father. At sixteen, he had been the surprise of the group. After four children, Joy and Dean Devereaux were sure that their family was complete until the unplanned pregnancy five years after the birth of their last child.

"Hey, sis."

"Hi, Taylor," she greeted him. He was a carbon copy of her father's handsome good looks...he was destined to be a heartbreaker. It was a good thing he was a nice person. "What's going on?"

"You can't offer us a drink, daughter?" Dean asked as they stood in the front hallway.

She sighed and pushed her hair out of her face. "C'mon into the kitchen." Tightening the belt on her robe, she wished again that she wasn't such a frump. "Is everything all right?" Her father almost never visited her at home.

"Your mother sent us out to the hardware store for a new kitchen faucet," Dean said as he watched her prepare the coffee pot. "Why aren't you dressed?"

Keeping her back to him, she made a face at the coffee maker. "I was up late last night."

"Oh, hot date, eh?" Taylor teased her.

She threw him a grin over her shoulder as she hit the button to begin the grinding and brewing process. "So, if you he-men are supposed to be at the hardware store, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the spring line." He paused and his voice dropped when he continued. "And espionage."

"Daaad." She groaned and began taking mugs down from the

cupboard. "You do this every season."

"You don't take this seriously enough," he accused.

"Most of our employees have been with us for ten, fifteen, and even twenty years. We take care of them, pay them extremely well, provide them with excellent benefits and make sure we reward their loyalty!" she exclaimed. "No one is going to steal our ideas and sell them to our competitors."

"And what about those people who are new? You trust too easily."

Frowning, she poured hot coffee for her brother and father, as well as a mug for herself. "You know we have security checks in place, Dad. Why are you letting this worry you?"

He shifted uncomfortably and refused to meet her gaze.

She sat heavily on a kitchen chair and stared at him. "It's because of me. You don't trust me."

"No!" he said fiercely. "You know I trust you or else I would never have stepped aside."

"Then what?"

"There are people in the industry who are...unhappy with the change of power at Devereaux."

"Why?" she whispered. She'd been working at Devereaux for seven years and training at her father's side for the past three. He had only stepped down three months ago and she'd kept all his policies in place. Who could be upset at the seamless change?

"I don't have anything concrete, but certain rumblings have been brought to my attention," he admitted.

She straightened her spine and gripped her mug tightly between her hands. "I can't spend my time worrying about people making noise. I have to do my job."

"You tell 'em, sis," Taylor cheered her.

She may not love her job the way her father had, but Devereaux was her responsibility and she would not back down in the face of rumors. "They're probably just trying to rattle me."

"Jordan..."

"No, Dad, I'm serious. I'm running Devereaux, now. I'll take your concerns under due consideration, but I won't let it change my life. I'm a good leader...you trained me well, now trust me," she said firmly.

“You know I trust you, but—”

She stood, cutting him off. “Don’t you guys have a faucet to buy?”

“Yeah, Dad, let’s get going. I want to be home in time to see the game,” Taylor requested. “I’m going to decide which college to go to based on how cute their cheerleaders are.”

Jordan groaned and glared at him in mock disgust. “You wait until you meet the perfect girl because she’s going to lead you around by the nose, baby boy.”

“No way.” He winked at her before sauntering out of the room toward the front door.

“Jordan...”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Dad, I promise. Now get going before Mom gets wise and tracks you down here.” She shoed him toward the foyer.

“And if your mother calls...”

“I know, I know, you were never here,” she murmured.