

**I**F NOT FOR THE CHICKEN soup, Jordan Grant's entire day would have been different. He would have stayed at the television studio to sign post-interview autographs. He would have been prepared for Mo McDaniel's notorious "gotcha" questions, designed to make him look insecure and naïve. He might have never found out. And he would have looked forward to dinner with Ginny.

Above all, Jordan wanted the one thing fame and money could not buy: a heart that mirrored his own. A love to die for. But for now, he had made his decision. The more he chewed on it, the better it tasted.

His only regret? The six months it had taken to come to his senses. Sure, he had heard the rumors. But gossip was an occupational hazard—particularly in this town. So he had dismissed the reports, passing them off as another example of the press doing what they did worst.

"You should've been more careful, Gin," he muttered, tightening his grip on the steering wheel until the color drained from his knuckles.

Under reasonable scrutiny, her alibis would have dissolved like sugar in a steaming cup of Earl Grey. The occasional migraine. Working hours that would have sent TV crew unions protesting. Meetings with her agent at suspicious hours because "I'm *busy*, Jordan—when else do I have the time?"

Perhaps Mo McDaniel was right. Perhaps he was naïve. Maybe he should feel foolish. Instead, he vacillated between anger at her cheating and relief that it would end. Tonight.

He navigated his convertible toward Malibu as if on autopilot. Warm wind skimmed through his hair as he cruised north on Highway 1. Disjointed recollections—good and bad—gusted through his head like the curving rows of inky clouds before a coming cyclone.

He had declined having a car pick him up earlier, much to the frustration of his agent.

"What's the point of being a rock star if you won't act the part?" Bill had urged, as he always did.

"I'm not a rock star," Jordan had playfully insisted, as he always did.

"Your fans disagree. So does your publicist, the media, distributors, promoters, recording studios, Lockhardt Sound...need I go on?"

"You left out my 'entourage.'"

"You don't have an entourage."

"So, I probably don't need a car."

Bill Taft had hung up with a disapproving harrumph. As he always did.

Jordan rolled his shoulders and adjusted himself into the hand-sewn leather seat. The high noon sun beat down upon his lap, his forehead, and the top of his head. Not a cloud in sight. He regretted not grabbing a hat.

To his left, beachgoers sunbathed, frolicked along the strand, or waded out into the Pacific. It was late spring. A perfect day for a drive. A nice break from a hectic schedule, and a welcome pause from recent events. June was a month commonly associated with graduations and weddings. Beginnings. But not tonight. Not for him.

The last four months had left him physically and mentally spent. Japan, Germany, Australia, his native England, and finally back to the States. Sometimes, he struggled to maintain the obligatory smile. But that famous Grant smile had brought him success every bit as much as his voice. Jameson had drilled this fact into his mind.

It had also brought him Ginny.

On some level, Jordan dreaded confronting her. Hollywood's reigning princess would doubtless claw like a street cat once confronted. Defensive aggression, they called it. He hoped Ginny would maintain her decorum long enough to get through dinner. That she would consider both their reputations. Or at least hers.

The upside of his preoccupation with her infidelity? It had made today's show almost bearable. Though

anxious, his decision to uncouple their coupling had brought unexpected relief. He had answered questions with wit and candor, charming both host and audience.

“So, tell us about *Umbra*,” Maureen “Mo” McDaniel had said. “I listened to it on the way in this morning. People say it’s your best so far. I’d have to agree.”

The crowd cheered and applauded, shouting Jordan’s name.

He flashed a nervous smile at the frenzied audience, mindful of the common “tells” that gave him away. No rubbing his hands along his pantlegs. Or crossing and uncrossing his legs. He lifted his chin at his host. “Thanks, Mo. Of the three, it’s my favorite. I even co-wrote a couple of the songs.”

“Talent sure runs in your family. How’s Ben?”

“I think he’s started writing the next album.”

“Already? Wow.”

“I’m hoping to get down to Miami soon to work on some ideas we’ve thrown about, but I still have a few weeks for *Umbra*’s publicity campaign.”

The crowd’s whooping and cat-calling increased.

The thought of those few more weeks had dimmed his polished interview smile. Harsh lights. Cameras. Talk shows. Photo shoots. He detested the lot. For him, it was all about the music. His professional persona could not run more contrary to who Jordan Grant really was.

“You returned from Europe a few days ago. Did you manage to spend any time with your parents while you were in England? Or meet up with Chris—isn’t he over there?”

He nodded. “Mum and Dad met me in London while I was there. Never saw Chris, though. Mirage was in Madrid. We tried to meet up in Paris but, conflicting schedules and all. Their tour’s winding down. I’ll see him sometime next month.”

“And what about Ginny Stevens?” Mo had sidled up close, batting her artificially taugth eyelids at him as if to wheedle out some juicy scandal. A chorus of whistles sounded from the men, and a few women, at the mention of the actress.

Jordan’s cheeks had flushed, instantly annoying him.

Mo turned to her audience, a victorious grin stretched ear-to-ear. “There it is, girls. Isn’t he *cute*?” She touched his arm in mock sympathy as the predominantly female audience squealed with delight. “Forgive me, Jordan. I couldn’t resist.”

However baffling, Jordan Grant’s public shyness endeared him to his fans. Teenaged girls swooned for the blond pop idol who blushed whenever asked about his love life.

The taping consumed most of the morning. And his patience.

Of course, the interview looked different in his head than what the cameras filmed. To offset the irritation of Mo McDaniel’s probing questions, he had fantasized about how the interview might have unfolded had he the freedom to face her interrogation with honesty instead of measured, restrained talking points.

*“So, Jordan,” Mo would have asked, “how’s Chris?”*

*“Chris and Mirage are still touring Europe. I would’ve seen him while I was there if he’d taken time out of shagging every groupie at his concerts.”*

*“And Ginny? It’s been six months now. Any wedding bells in your future?”*

*“Funny you should ask, Mo. I rang to see her when I returned, but she was sick.”*

*“What a shame. Nothing serious, I hope.”*

*“She’ll be fine. Actually, I cooked her some homemade chicken soup.”*

*“You cook?”*

*"I cook for my son all the time."*

*"Your son?" Mo would have gasped. "You have a son?"*

*"Mm-hmm. Chase. I'm not supposed to tell anyone about him. It's in my contract. Jameson Lockhardt insisted. He'd hate to have my being a grown man with a school-age son ruin my image as a perpetually boyish 'sex symbol.' I mean, what teenager wants to hang posters of someone's dad on their bedroom walls?"*

*"S-so, are you...married, too?"*

*"Nope, never married. Too busy raising my son."*

*"What about Chase's mother? Where is she?"*

*"Dead."*

*"Dead?" Mo would have cringed, wondering how she had lost her upbeat interview with pop music's biggest celebrity.*

*"I watched her die giving birth to my son."*

*"I...I'm so sorry. Does Ginny know about Chase?"*

*"Of course. But they're not close. She doesn't much like children."*

*"Oh, um, okay. Is, uh, Chase home in Malibu right now?"*

*"No. He finished kindergarten last week. He's in Miami with Ben and his wife. I miss him. Of course, I could spend more time with him if I didn't have to do these sodding talk shows and public appearances and run all over the world smiling my famous rock star smile. But we all have to pay the bills, don't we?"*

*"I see."*

*"So anyway, I fixed Ginny some homemade soup earlier this week. I'd been booked for a signing here locally, but it was canceled due to some problem with the venue. A broken pipe in the loo or something—which was fine with me. Anyway, I drove all the way to Bel Air to deliver this soup. And then the funniest thing happened."*

*"What?" Mo would have asked, eager for an upturn in conversation.*

*"She walked out her front door with Matt Kincaid."*

*"The actor?"*

*"That's him."*

*"He was visiting?"*

*"I wouldn't exactly call it 'visiting.' She was wearing the house robe I gave her for her birthday two months ago. This blue silky thing she'd fancied."*

*"No!"*

*"Yes! She walked him to his car and kissed him goodbye. He grabbed her bum and she giggled before he finally got in his car and drove away."*

*"My goodness," Mo would say. "Did you confront her?"*

*"I'm having dinner with her tonight to break it off. Good thing this show won't air for another couple of weeks, huh?"*

During the interview—the *real* one—Jordan had grown agitated as the memory of Ginny's betrayal invaded his mind. Mo McDaniel assailed him with questions about his public and private life. His sole source of relief came while performing a cut off *Umbra*. At least while he sang, he could put everything else out of his mind.

His relief was short-lived. Mere yards beyond the studio's electronically controlled gates he encountered the ever-changing, though never-vanishing, group of young girls who stalked his every move. The announcement of his appearance on the *Mo McDaniel Show* had drawn fans from across the greater Los Angeles area to the Burbank studio, each hopeful for a glimpse, a picture, a conversation...a marriage

proposal.

“Bloody summer vacation,” Jordan had muttered as he motored through the coterie. His Jaguar’s leaping cat hood ornament provided little by way of a barrier. For a moment, he regretted rejecting Bill Taft’s suggestion of a driver.

The crowd erupted into a screaming frenzy as Jordan pressed the button to close his convertible top. The roof rose and unfolded rapidly enough to isolate him from the throng of teenagers sprinting toward his car. Security kept them at bay while he navigated through the animated mob, flashing a gracious smile as he turned onto West Alameda Avenue. The gates had narrowly avoided trapping one young girl’s arm as they closed.

The commute back to Malibu took longer than usual, thanks to a couple of ill-timed road construction projects. Beach traffic caused further delays. But as always, Jordan endured. Soon, he would be able to change into shorts and a T-shirt. Maybe take a dip in the pool, if he had time. The thought of having to change again in a few hours to meet Ginny drained him on several levels.

In fairness, they had little in common. Ginny enjoyed dressing up. He preferred casual attire. She enjoyed the nightlife. He preferred the beach. She attended awards shows. He never attended—even when he knew in advance he had won. Their problems were a matter of incompatibility as much as infidelity. He should have known it would not last.

His brothers did.

Both Chris and Ben had warned him at one time or another, but he had discarded their advice. They had babied him his whole life.

“Not exactly marriage material,” Ben had commented. “Chase will want brothers and sisters. Is that what Ginny wants?”

“It hasn’t come up yet. It’s still new. I don’t want to scare her off.”

“If it scares her off, at least you’ll know.”

Jordan had dismissed the notion—not due to any confidence in Ginny, but because Jordan doubted he could ever be half the man Ben was anyway.

Chris, on the other hand, had encouraged the relationship at first.

“She’s exactly what you need,” he had said. “Someone to draw you out. Give you something worth blushing about. I mean, c’mon. You don’t smoke, no drugs, little drink. Not much point in being a pop star if nothing pops, is there?”

But lately, even Chris had voiced suspicions.

Tabloids routinely portrayed Ginny’s smiling visage arm-in-arm with Hollywood notables. Bachelors, as well as men who had lost any claim to bachelorhood. One rag had even issued a picture of her with Chris at some New York gala. A gala neither of them had attended. Jordan ignored tabloid news. Especially if it involved his brother. Chris’s reputation was legend. One Jordan had witnessed first-hand at a young age. Still, he trusted his brother.

Bottom line: Jordan wanted more—and less—than Ginny could offer. He wanted to raise his son, make music, and settle down with someone who loved him for himself.

If anything, Jordan Grant was an *anti*-rock star. Ginny, on the other hand, lusted for celebrity like an addict.

*Or a whore.*

He rattled his head, surprised at the profanity of his inner voice.

To complicate matters, Ginny had started dropping hints. Marriage-type hints. Jordan did not envision

his actress/girlfriend in that role.

The tension in his shoulders eased as he motored through the gate of his Malibu property. Days like today, he valued his community's tight rein on the paparazzi and fans who seemed forever more skillful in their attempts to sneak onto his private beach or scale his fence.

The second he walked through the door, he dropped his keys onto the entry table next to a stack of mail and kicked off his Bass penny loafers. Out of habit, he cocked his head and listened for Chase's infectious laughter. When he heard nothing, he opened his mouth to call for him, then stopped. His eyes darted across the empty living room, dining room, and stairs. Silence enveloped him, save the distant rumble of a passing airplane.

He flattened his lips, dipped his head, snatched up the mail, and strode into the kitchen, cursing the obligations that had prevented him from accompanying his son to Florida.

*Umbra* was the classic blessing-curse scenario for the twenty-eight-year-old. It had cemented the success of his first two multi-platinum albums. But the mark stamped on the annals of music like a branding iron on cowhide had resulted in unmanageable demands on his time.

Since February, Jordan had signed so many autograph books, headshots, album covers, and cassette and CD inserts with indelible markers, his left hand threatened to remain permanently curled in position.

After tonight, though, he had four days before his next commitment. He intended to spend most of that time sleeping—alone.

The indicator light on his answering machine blinked red. He dropped the mail on the kitchen counter and pressed "play" before pulling loose his tie and untucking his shirt. The robotic voice announced three messages.

"I guess you're not back yet," Ben said. "Ring us when you can. Cheryl took Chase shopping today for a new life jacket. Quite the waterbug, your son. I took the boys out on the boat yesterday. He tried to jump off the side."

Jordan hitched his breath and jerked his head toward the machine.

"No worries. I caught him mid-jump."

He exhaled, then grabbed a glass from the cupboard.

"Anyway, I've been working on some songs for the next album."

"Let's get over *Umbra* first, buddy." Jordan pulled open the refrigerator door and grabbed a bottle of apple juice.

"Another reason you should move out here. It'd be easier to work if we were closer. Chase agrees. Tell your father, Chase..."

"Come to Mimami, Daddy!" Chase's small voice cheered into the telephone. "I love you! Hey, gimme that back, Kyle! It's mine!"

Jordan smiled sincerely for the first time all day as he listened to his son argue with his cousin before the call ended. From what he deduced, Ben's youngest had helped himself to Chase's rubber dolphin—a solemn offense amongst post-kindergarten boys.

The second message was from Nancy Chambers. "Mr. Lockhardt wants to discuss your itinerary. Better prepare yourself, Jordan. He's making tour-talk again. Call me back."

He grabbed a pen and note paper from a drawer and scribbled a reminder to call Bill Taft to schedule a call with Jameson, who was notorious for dealing directly with artists—not their agents. An annoying habit Jordan had grown accustomed to during his time with LSI. Chris had never even bothered with an agent. He had dealt with Jameson, and Lockhardt Sound, his entire fifteen years in the business.

Another tour. Bigger than the last one, if he knew Jameson. Gotta sell those units.

He gulped his juice, then dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. Hopefully, it would not eat into Chase's summer vacation next year. Fall and winter tours generally involved fewer dates and were more tolerable. So far, he had avoided a full-blown world tour. But he was a headliner now. An all-season commodity. Son or no son, his life was not his own.

His jaw set as the last message played.

"Hello, my darling," Ginny cooed, her voice invading the sanctity of his home.

"Hello, whore," he spat, easing into the term. He leaned against the counter and finished his drink.

"Calling to confirm dinner tonight. I'll have to meet you there, though. I have an appointment at six."

"I bet you do."

"You sounded so mysterious when you called last night. I can't *wait* to find out what's been going on in that adorable head of yours."

"Me too."

"Hope the show went well today. I'm sure Mo loved you. They all do, you know. Oops! Gotta run. Love ya. Ciao!"

Jordan closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils.

It was going to be a long night.