

HAD IT NOT been for the chicken soup, Jordan Grant's day would have been entirely different. He would have agreed to stay and sign autographs at the television studio after his interview. He would have been better prepared for Mo's infamous "gotcha" questions that seemed designed to make him look insecure and naïve. He might have never found out. And he would have looked forward to having dinner with his girlfriend.

Ultimately, Jordan wanted the one thing he did not possess: a heart that mirrored his own. For now, he had made his decision. And the more he chewed on it, the better it tasted.

His only regret? The six months it had taken to come to his senses. 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.

Under reasonable scrutiny, most of her alibis would have dissolved like sugar in a steaming cup of Earl Grey. Perhaps he should have felt foolish. Instead, he vacillated between anger at her infidelity and relief it would end soon.

He navigated his convertible toward Malibu as if on auto pilot. 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 in being a rock star if you're not going to act the part?" Bill had urged.

"I'm not a rock star," Jordan had insisted playfully.

"I'm sure your fans would disagree. So would your publicist, the press, 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."

Defeated, Bill Taft had ended the call with a disapproving sigh.

Jordan grinned as he replayed the conversation, taking in the brightness of the late spring day. A perfect day for a drive. A nice break from a hectic schedule, and a welcome pause from recent events. But too soon, his thoughts returned to the task at hand.

On some level, he dreaded the idea of confronting her. Odds were, Hollywood's reigning princess would claw like a street cat when confronted with her extracurricular affairs. Hopefully,

she would maintain decorum long enough to get through dinner. He considered ringing Le Dome ahead of time to request plastic cups and dull utensils for their meal.

The last four months had worn him out. Japan, Germany, Australia, his native England and finally back to the States. Sometimes, he struggled to keep a smile on his face. But that famous smile drove CD sales every bit as much as his voice. This point had been drilled endlessly into his mind.

There was one positive result of his preoccupation with her infidelity, though. It had made today's show almost bearable. He had answered questions with wit and candor, charming both host and audience. Of course, the interview looked much different in his head than what the cameras had filmed.

"So tell us about Umbra," Maureen "Mo" McDaniel had asked. Her audience had cheered, applauded, and shouted Jordan's name. "I listened to it on the way in this morning. Everyone's saying it's the best work you've done. I'd have to agree."

Jordan had nodded gratefully at the audience, then back to the host. "I'm quite proud of it, thanks. Of the three, I think Umbra's my best. I even co-wrote a few of the songs."

Mo had smiled. "Talent sure runs in the Grant family. How's Ben?"

"I think he's started writing the next album," Jordan had chuckled.

"Already? Wow."

"He's always writing, you know. I hope 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 erupted into more cheers and applause.

A few weeks. He could hardly wait to finish promoting the album. His promoted image could not run more contrary to who Jordan Grant really was. He detested the lights, cameras, public appearances, and photo shoots. For him, music sat center stage.

"You just got back from Europe a few days ago. Did you spend any time with your parents while you were in England? Or meet up with Chris—isn't he over there?"

Jordan had nodded. "Mum and Dad drove down to London while I was there. Never saw Chris, though. He was in Madrid while I was in Berlin. We tried to meet up in Paris, but we were both so busy. Their tour's winding down. I'll likely see him sometime in July."

"And what about Ginny Stevens?" Mo had sidled up close as if trying to coax him into revealing some dark secret. The crowd had whistled and whooped at the mention of the actress.

Jordan's cheeks had flushed at the question, instantly annoying him.

Mo had turned to her audience, a victorious grin on her face. "There he goes, girls. Isn't he cute?" She had touched his arm in mock sympathy as the predominantly female audience squealed with delight. "Forgive me, Jordan. I couldn't resist."

Rumor had it Jordan Grant's public shyness endeared him to his fans. Teenaged girls the world over swooned for the blond pop idol who blushed when asked about his love life.

The taping had consumed most the morning. To offset the discomfort of Mo's probing questions, he had fantasized about how the interview might have unfolded if he had had 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 have seen him whilst 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?"

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

"So," Mo would have stuttered uncomfortably, "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 sorry. Does Ginny know about Chase?"

“Of course. But she doesn’t much like children. They’re not close.”

“Oh, um, okay. Is, uh, Chase home in Malibu right now?”

“No. He finished kindergarten last week. He’s in Miami with my brother 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 our bills, you know.”

“I see.”

“So anyway, I fixed Ginny some homemade soup earlier this week. I was supposed to have been at a signing but it was canceled due to some problem with the venue. A broken pipe or something in the loo—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, relieved at the 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 in the house robe I gave her for her birthday back in April. 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.”

During the interview—the real one—Jordan had grown agitated as the memory of Ginny’s betrayal flashed in his mind. It had distracted him as Mo assailed him with questions about his public and private life. His sole source of relief came when he sang a cut off Umbra. At least while he sang he could relax and put everything else out of his mind.

Mere yards beyond the studio’s electronically controlled gates he had encountered the ever-changing, though never-vanishing, group of young girls who stalked his every move. The announcement of his personal 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 navigated his vehicle through the coterie. His Jaguar’s leaping cat hood ornament had provided little by way of a barrier. For a moment, he had regretted rejecting Bill Taft’s suggestion of a driver.

The crowd had erupted into a screaming frenzy as Jordan pressed the button to close his convertible top. The roof had risen just rapidly enough to isolate him from the throng of teenagers sprinting toward his car. Security had kept the girls at bay while he motored through the animated mob, flashing a gratuitous 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 expected. He encountered a couple of road construction sites. Heavy beach traffic caused long delays. But as always, he endured the mild irritation. He could not wait to get home and change into a T-shirt and shorts. The thought of having to change again in a few hours to meet Ginny drained him on several levels.

It occurred to Jordan they shared few commonalities. She liked to dress up. He liked more casual attire. She enjoyed the nightlife. He enjoyed the beach. She loved attending awards shows. He never attended—even when he knew in advance he had won. It was as much a matter of incompatibility as infidelity. He should have known their relationship would not last.

Apparently, his brothers did.

Both Chris and Ben had warned him about Ginny at one time or another, but he had discarded the advice of his older siblings. 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 only been six months. Don’t want to scare her off.”

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

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

Conversely, Chris had encouraged the relationship at first.

“She’s just what you need,” he had said. “Someone to bring you out of that shell. 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 even Chris had verbalized recent doubts over Ginny’s fidelity.

The tabloids routinely portrayed the starlet accompanying an impressive string of Hollywood’s most notorious bachelors, as well as men who had long since lost any claim to bachelorhood. One publication had even issued a picture of the actress standing arm-in-arm with Chris at some New York gala. Jordan gave no weight to tabloid news, especially those involving his brother. Chris’ reputation with women was legendary, but Jordan trusted his brother. Chris would never do that to him.

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

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

Whore. Jordan shook his head, displeased at the profanity of his inner voice. He had never referred to anyone in that manner, not even in the privacy of his own mind.

To complicate matters, she had recently hinted at the inevitability of marriage. Jordan could not make that kind of commitment to her. He wanted to settle down, but did not see Ginny playing the role of his wife.

He wondered what she would do when he told her they were through.

The tension in his shoulders relaxed as he drove 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.

Malibu police officers knew Jordan’s address. He knew several of them by name. Every week or so, Officer Bill Marion complimented Jordan’s coffee, saying it tasted better than any one of the Colonyites’, Jordan’s not too distant neighbors. He wondered if Bill would ever figure out the brown liquid he so enthusiastically imbibed came from packets of instant coffee Jordan stuffed into his pocket during flights and tap water boiled in his antediluvian teapot.

Once inside, he dropped his keys onto the entry table and kicked off his leather sandals.

Umbra was a blessing and a curse for the twenty-eight year old. It had cemented the success of his first and second multi-platinum albums. It also made a mark on the archives of music that resulted in nearly unmanageable demands on his time.

Lockhardt Sound wanted another tour, bigger than last year's. During the campaign, Jordan had appeared on guest spots at radio and television stations all over the world and endured countless photo sessions with trade, teen, and entertainment magazines. He spent so much time signing headshots and CD covers with indelible markers, his left hand ached and threatened to remain permanently curled in its position.

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

Three messages awaited him on his answering machine. He played them as he went into the kitchen for a glass of iced tea. The first was from Ben, who had called to let him know Cheryl had taken Chase shopping for a new child-size lifejacket for their frequent sailing excursions. A consummate water lover like his father, Chase had started demonstrating less and less fear of jumping off the side of Ben's boat into the brackish waters of Biscayne Bay. Ben also mentioned a couple of new songs he had written in anticipation of Jordan's next album.

"Just let me get over this one, buddy." Jordan chuckled, shaking his head.

Ben ended the message with a brisk, "This is just another reason you should move out here. Working would be so much easier if we were closer. C'mon. Even Chase thinks it's a good idea. Tell your father, Chase..."

Jordan rolled his eyes.

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

Jordan smiled, his most sincere that day, as his son argued with his cousin before the message ended. From what he deduced, Ben's youngest son had helped himself to Chase's rubber dolphin—a solemn offense amongst post-kindergarten boys.

The second message came from Nancy Chambers, Jameson Lockhardt's personal secretary. Jameson wanted to set up a time to go over Jordan's itinerary for the next several months before the tour, slotted for early next year.

Jordan grabbed a pen and note paper from a drawer and scribbled a reminder to call Bill Taft tomorrow and set up a conference call with Jameson, who notoriously dealt directly with

artists—not their agents. An annoying habit but one Jordan had long grown accustomed to during his time with LSI. Chris had never even bothered with an agent. He dealt with Jameson, and Lockhardt Sound, directly his entire fifteen years in the business.

Jordan sighed, relieved the upcoming tour would not consume next year's entire summer. Fall and winter tours generally had played fewer dates and were infinitely more tolerable. With Chase heading into first grade this fall, he wanted to spend as much of the summer as he could with his boy. It was bad enough his schedule had prevented him from accompanying Chase on his annual visit to Florida.

Relief turned to agitation as the last message played and Ginny's voice invaded the sanctity of his home.

"Hello, my darling," she cooed.

"Hello, whore," he replied with acid sarcasm to no one in particular.

"Just calling to confirm dinner tonight. We'll have to meet there, though. I have an appointment at six."

"I can imagine you have an appointment," he sneered. Her carefully honed, calculated utterance sliced through Jordan's last nerve.

She giggled. "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."

"I can't wait either."

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

Jordan closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it for several seconds before exhaling. It was going to be a long night.