

“Holding out for a Hero”

by

Ryan Jones

Disclaimer: I do not know any person involved with American Idol, especially Adam Lambert, and all events are completely fictional. Some of the other characters, including the main one, are based on people in my life, but all their last names have been omitted to protect their identity.

Also, if you are not of legal age to be reading graphic material (which this story will eventually contain) according your part of the world’s laws, don’t pursue this story.

Forward

I have never had one of those celebrity-fan relationships where the famed person drove me wild with desire until now. Of course, I always played CDs continuously until every sound I heard echoed the chords from various tracks. Those artists were mainly female, and they never turned me on except spiritually. Adam Lambert has changed that. I can’t get him out of my mind, and it’s all because I just happened to turn American Idol on one day. That performance of “Black and White” by Michael Jackson quickly enraptured me, and I haven’t been able to stop listening to his performances from his past and present.

Why is this happening? I could go into all the theories now, but I think I will let the story explain it for you. Also, I have always wanted the opportunity to write something for Nifty because it has entertained me for years on end. I just never thought it would be about a celebrity crush, especially on someone from American Idol.

In the end, writing is how I sort through things. Welcome to my therapy. I will use this story to sort through these feelings and my theories on it, while, hopefully, creative an entertaining story for all of you

Criticism and compliments are always welcomed at ryotails@gmail.com

Chapter 1

The email read:

Congratulations everyone,

You have been selected to be a part of a team to document a week in the life of an American Idol Contestant. As you all know, the show has taken large measures and changes to make itself a more reputable show for finding talent. They sought out us to show the true rigor these contestants go through and how they do not just depend on having a lot of supporters at home.

Idol could have sought out professional photographers and videographers for this, but they told me they wanted an inexperienced team with celebrities, well, potential celebrities, and people encouraged to delve much deeper than the surface on a regular basis (it also helps we're doing this for free). That team is now you.

This is a big deal for our school and a great thing to put on your resume. Let's not fuck up, ok?

Pat

Leave it to Pat to show his lack of faith in us. Even after three rigorous photojournalism classes all taught by him, he still thinks we would blow any opportunity we get. It made me want to laugh or strangle him, depending on my mood. He's always telling us to know our audience when we deliver our final projects to various publications and possible jobs, but he certainly never cared to understand the effect his barking orders and apathy had on overstressed and overworked photojournalism students.

Regardless, I wanted to hug his neck now, in a loving manner, of course. I was fortunate to be selected for our last big break: documenting the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games. My performance, unfortunately, did not match my appreciation. Dealing with sickness and my lack of appreciation and understanding of sports photography really hindered my usual direct dive into my work. Pat saw this. I hated my excuse-filled attempts at an explanation for what I thought was a poor performance. Somehow or another, they still put my photographs in the daily slideshows, and not out of pity. If photojournalism taught me anything, it's that editors have no pity. So, thankfully, by being selected for this trip, I am not being pitied, rather, rewarded.

Alex came running through the photography lab doors howling with excitement.

"Holy shit! I'm on the Idol team! How? What? I can't...can I? Pat picked me?" Alex said all in on breath.

I could not help admire the energy she brought with every emotion. If she was worried, she would freak out without any hesitation or fear of embarrassment. She felt it and said it as she called it. So few do.

"Congrats, Alex! We're going together! Ahhh! I know how you've been way too excited about the possibility of documenting our fellow Tar Heel competing this year. Here's hoping you get to be on the team covering Anoop!" I exclaimed.

Alex deserves this opportunity. I hate seeing her question her abilities as photographer and picking this major. It only hinders her performance and desire to be one, and I don't think she will ever realize it. I attempt to point it out as much as I can. She's a fighter, and I refuse to see that spirit dwindle.

"Ryan, don't get my hopes up! Damnit, now they're up! "

“Hey, you got selected for the group and you didn’t think you would, so maybe Lady Luck will continue working in your favor,” I said.

She cocked that devious, hope-filled grin that scrunched her face and neck down into her body. She wanted this. She fidgeted with hope.

“Enough about who I want. We all know who you hope to cover...with a camera and kisses.”

I sighed, settling into revelry of why I gave a damn about this season of American Idol.

I never watched American Idol for any great extent except sophomore year. My friends Ashton and Lisa lived a floor below me and watched it religiously. I would be in their room a lot on the nights it came on, so I naturally watched with them and formed favorite contestants. The politics of the show quickly turned me off from dedicating any peer pressure-less interest, though. Sanjaya sang like Milli Vanilli yet made it to the top 12. Jordan Sparks won while being the least polished of the three finalists. Neither of these made sense to me.

The sad part of it all is that I crave live music like ice cream. I step to the rhythm of Alanis Morissette’s “No Pressure over Cappuccino” all the while humming “Just for Now” by Imogen Heap. One would think I would seek out a show the featured constant live performances by not only the contestants but guest established artists, as well, but I never did.

The whole spectacle didn’t stick with me until last night. I happened to be bored with tons of schoolwork to ignore and nothing else to watch on TV. Potential artist after potential artist vied for the judges’ approval and mine, for that matter. They weren’t prevailing.

An emo rocker belting out the anthem words of my favorite Michael Jackson song snared my attention in an instant, though. He pranced upon that stage as if he bought it years ago at a yard sell and loved it ever since. And that voice, that rock-imbued, musical theatre-conditioned voice. It soared through the thousands of miles that physically divided us and danced through the cables connecting the camera, to which he made love, to my television. I was sold.

“Did that really happen?” I asked my roommate-less dorm room.

Only the judges’ approval of Adam Lambert’s performance answered back.

“I don’t even notice the stage because my eyes were transfixed on you, your innate ability to know who you are as an artist and marry fashion with music, as we do that. You’ve got the whole package going on,” Paula Abdul said. “And I believe with all my heart we’ll be seeing you run all the way to the end, in the finals.”

Paula’s drunken stammering hit the mark. While I had only seen all the contestants performed this once, he danced circles around them and played in a whole different league, as Simon Cowell said. Beyond that, there was something about him: the way he stood up there confident after that brilliant performance, decorated in a style that sent my eyes in a dizzying ecstasy

I shook my head, attempting to break the reverie.

“He’s an American Idol contestant, Ryan,” I thought to myself. “Let it go.”

Some people are just too stubborn to even listen to themselves. I happen to be one of them. As much as I wanted to break the idea of developing a teenage obsession over some pseudo celebrity I could never meet, I felt the roots stretching their way through me.

It didn’t feel like the Johnathan Taylor Thomas obsession I witnessed in my pre-teen the years. The posters, the screaming, the crying.

“No, please, not that,” I thought.

I never had those pointless obsessions, at least , I didn’t think so. I pondered for a few minutes as the commercials barked orders of oppression and excess. There was Tommy. Oh, Tommy, the Mighty Morphin’ Power Ranger of my dreams.

He fought evil, mentored kids, seduced who he wanted all the while sporting a pony tail with shaved hair underneath (a hairstyle I kept for six years). Mom said I was “queertail” from birth, which isn’t surprising. I knew I felt different and questioned everything life handed me. I didn’t want to be a walking shadow, featureless and useless except for appearances. I want to be Tommy: free spirited, confident, sexy and a hero. Little did I know I wanted to be with him, instead. Growing up, he was the closet to queer I knew. He had long hair. No male I knew had long hair. He was different. I was different. The math’s simple.

The few remaining contestants took their turns not impressing me while I chatted with friends online. They shared the general consensus, and we all worshiped Adam’s performance, amongst other things. It was nice to give into the false hope of it all, to let imagination run wild with images of the native Californian stroking the side of your face with his gloved had as he sings “Unchained Melody” softly into your ear, all the while titillating the skin with every breath.

“Alena: And just think, if you’re selected to go on the American Idol Documentary team, you could be telling his story! Of course, you will be picked to go, so I should say when you go, you will be feet, inches, maybe even millimeters away from him.”

My heart stopped. I had completely forgotten about the chance to document the contestants and didn’t even realize the source of my bewilderment could be my next photo subject.

My eyes sat wide open, as if trying to soak it all in: Alena’s optimism, the opportunity, what I would wear, the chance to be there...

I shook my head, hoping the nonsense would freefall from my brain.

Alex looked at me with concern. The random mutterings and head shakes interrupted her while reading aloud the second email Pat sent.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked.

My lips tightened over my teeth. She knew I missed every word.

“Thanks, Ryan. Anyways, Pat just sent another email. He forgot to mention the assignments and the details of when we leave in the other.”

My hand gripped the seam of my right pant leg, causing the sweat to form a small pool of darkened jean. I didn’t even realize how the rest of my body had tightened until Alex broke her reading to stare at me as if I just rose from the dead. I certainly was hungry for brains, some that would not constantly replay these idiotic thoughts.

“Assignments will be sent later this evening. I will randomly draw names from a hat to decide the two videographers and single photographer for each team. From hearing your conversations in class, I know people all want certain artists, and many overlap. Therefore, this is the only fair way to decide the assignments.

“On the other hand, if you do not even watch the show, start doing so tonight. These will be your subjects, and you should have at least a shallow depth of knowledge about each of the contestants. You will be around all of them while covering the single subject, so it will help when group interaction is required.

“We are leaving Tuesday morning for California. We will arrive around 3 pm and check in the hotels. You get to spend the first two days being fanatics since the company has given you all free tickets to watch the performance and results shows.

“Enjoy that time because the works starts going the very next day. You will be spending a great deal of time with them everyday, going to rehearsals, promotional work, hotels, recordings and everything that goes into the week of an American Idol competition.

“Let’s do this. Pat”

Alex blinked at the oversized Apple screen, wanting to see more. I walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her neck.

“Even when he’s informative, he always leaves you needing more details. The day he sends one comprehensive and cohesive email about any project is the day that I start shooting with a Nikon,” I joked.

Photography, not surprisingly, permeated my humor. Hours of chasing around politicians, children and a porn star a whole semester leaves little else to think. Of course, the work didn’t edit itself. I found myself working every free moment I had in the lab. My perfectionism swallowed my soul and wouldn’t cough it up until everything was in place.

Little did I know that such perfection did not exist because all my other work fell to the wayside, causing me to fail all my classes but photo. I received an A in there, as if that made up for anything. But it didn't. I lost friends, perspective and the chance to graduate with my loved ones.

I couldn't think of any worse Christmas presents than those facts. But after Santa Clause left, Baby New Year brought perspective. Yes, I had to stick around for another semester, but it almost meant the possibility to TA for Pat and to get out of the whole rat race of graduating in four years. Plus, I would not have a photo class, meaning I could find more photo work on my own and possibly work an internship during the semester.

All of it would soften the fact I would be taking a bunch of classes that would never help my career let alone my life in any way. It would provide the balance of duty and enjoyment that anyone entering college needs.

And here I was finishing up my last semester. Little did I know that what adventures it would hold. First Idaho for the Special Olympics, now California for Adam...and American Idol.

"Yeah, now we have to wait. I'm a compulsive e-mail checker as it is, so tonight is going to be worse. How will I get anything done between hitting refresh on my email?" Alex asked.

"Well, you do have tonight's result show to distract you," I replied.

"That won't help! I will see one person perform, then immediately check to see if I will follow them around for a week. Great, now Pat's ruined and ripened American Idol for me at the same time. Damn," she remarked.

I chuckled at Alex's complex yet simple desires. Soon we both realized we were starving and headed our separate food sources. I stopped by the dining hall to grab a to-go plate and took it to my room. As much as I did not want to succumb to Alex's overwhelming desire to know our assignments, the first thing I did was check my email. That browser window did not go down once during dinner, homework or the results show.

After such an astonishing performance and reception from the judges, everyone knew Adam was safe. He had better been for my sanity, anyways. With all the mediocre performances, it was much more difficult to figure out who would go home, especially this early in the competition.

Unfortunately, one of those happened to be our fellow UNC student, Anoop. His performance of "Beat It" placed his head firmly on the chopping block. His uneasy movements and quick descent to the waiting area for elimination told the world he saw it coming too.

Jasmin Murray had already left the show, leaving only Jorge Nunez and the newly introduced rule stood in his way of elimination. Before tonight, nobody knew what the changed would be. I had hoped it would turn the show more towards *So You Think You Can Dance's* rules. In that show, America votes to put people in the bottom, then the judges send their least favorite home.

It made sense because the producers of American Idol are trying to make the show more valid to people in its search for true talent. They already added a new judge to mix up the reviews. I figured they would allow her and the other “experts” do more than just receive boos and cheers.

I was partly right. Ryan Seacrest, with all his annoying mannerisms intact, delivered the news that the judges had the privilege of saving only one contestant from elimination until the top five was decided. The decision mildly intrigued me but definitely raised the stakes. They could save only one person once who they thought could redeem themselves and earn their keep during the race, which is very difficult with America constantly not voting on talent alone.

“Would they use it on Anoop?” I thought to myself.

For Alex and campus morale’s sake, I hoped so. Before that was even an issue, Seacrest had to deliver America’s decision: Jorge or Anoop.

The tension was thick. I held my hand tight over my mouth in anticipation and sudden realization I would be there next week, witnessing this firsthand.

“Eek!” I squeaked in delight.

“Jorge...you are out,” pronounced Ryan

“Oh, my god! He did it!” I stood up and shouted at the TV.

“Doo, doo,” my e-mail box yelled at me.

I stood paralyzed in place, afraid to check the email I knew had arrived.

“Just do it,” I told myself.

For once, I listened. I quickly scanned passed all the visual communication journalism students until I found my group.

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed over Jorge’s final attempt to impress the judges. “Group Adam Lambert: (video) Eileen and Nacho, (photo) Ryan”

Thanks for reading. Comments and criticism are always welcomed!

Ryan

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