

"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 to your part of the world's laws, don't pursue this story.

Part 2

My phone sang and danced to a lyric-less tune 10 minutes before it was needed. I rolled over and reached beneath the pillow muffling the nuisance, resisting every urge in my body to catapult it off the seven-foot cliff that is my lofted bed.

However, surprise won over morning grouchiness as I saw that Hannah was the cause of the racket. We share all the same mutual friends in the photojournalism program, yet she tends to keep her distance from everyone. Seeing her name come across my cell's display had me curious more than anything.

"Hello," I answered an octave lower than my normal voice. It told anyone I had awoken in the last hour.

"Shit, Ryan, I didn't mean to wake you," Hannah apologized.

"It's no big deal, my dear. What's going on? I don't think you've called me since we had to stalk Kay Hagan across the state together last semester."

"Ah, well, I'm assuming you've seen the contestant assignments for the American Idol trip."

"Of course! I am so glad you're coming on this trip, as well. Maybe we'll get so frustrated again and have to slip off to Starbucks to hold another anti-photo rant. Good times."

"Why on earth do I have two people?!?!" Hannah exclaimed.

Wakeup calls are rarely pleasant. My foggy brain searched through its contents to answer her question, and all it could muster was the fact her name did, indeed, sit in the email I worshiped for hours last night assigned with two contestant names.

As I climbed down the ladder end of my bed, clenching the phone to my shoulder with my head, it hit me. Consciousness does have its uses.

"Oh, duh! We won't start working until after the results show next week, meaning we have no clue who will be going home. So, if one of yours goes home, you get the other. If someone else's goes home, I'm sure Pat will let you keep whomever you and your group prefers." I explained.

"I hope Michael Sarver goes home when we get there. He's a good boy with a good voice that's going nowhere fast, and I do not want to be stuck with him. Danny Gokey, on the other hand, will suit me fine," she said with innuendo that made me giggle.

"I see your Gokey and raise you a Lambert," I chided back.

"That pretentious asshole, are you kidding?"

"Hey, hey, there will be no hating of him on my watch!"

She fell into a fit of laughter. Everyone was quickly learning this person I had not even met yet had some strange hold over me. Facebook statuses about marrying him one day and posting of videos of his pre-*Idol* performances certainly helped spread the word, as well.

I stood in the middle of my room clad in only tribal-themed pajamas thinking that all I needed was a sign claiming to be carrying Adam's baby and I would officially be a teeny bopper. My zygote-less stomach tensed at the insane thought.

Hours upon hours of searching YouTube for Adam's previous performances certainly informed me at least he enjoyed men to some degree. In fact, yesterday is when all the photos of him kissing another male surfaced on the internet. Many even said he submitted those himself, which certainly impressed me.

I cannot think of any big time celebrities who lived openly queer lives from the start of their careers. People throw Freddie Mercury up there along with Ellen. As amazingly queer as they were and are, they did not come out until they were well established or facing death. Freddie actually never came out about his sexuality, just his HIV infection. Society did the rest of the math to figure out the rest.

"Adam could be the first," I mumbled mindlessly.

"What?" asked my interrupted, babbling friend.

"Nothing, I just, yeah...American Idol..."

"Ryan, there's no hope for you."

I sighed in agreement and finished the conversation quickly. We were about to see each in an hour, anyways, for class.

The same senseless, pop-culture obsessed babble took over the class once I arrived their. Pat had troubles talking over all the random conversations about how we will give Tar Heel hope to Anoop once we arrive and who was the most attractive contestant.

As graduating photojournalists entering an awful economy and a time where the all the standards of getting into the journalism world are changing, we were excited to add this to our resumes. Not to mention, we would be covering the show the world was watching and talking about. The closest any of we would get to these contestants otherwise would be through a 1-866 number.

Not everyone could go, though, and they provided the only silent spots in the room. I hated watching them burry their faces into the oversized Mac's lining the classroom, trying to occupying themselves with editing, emails, anything other than the classroom chatter. They all wanted to be a part of the infectious laughter and desire to be something greater that lined every conversation when any of the fortunate team members going to California gathered.

Those discussions didn't stop, not even as we were going through security. I watched Heather spread the enthusiasm as a security guard used a hand-held metal detector on her body.

"Spread your legs and hold out your arms," commanded the short security guard.

"It's these hairpins, I tell you," she pointed to her Pentecostal-length hair as she obeyed.

"We have to do this regardless, ma'am"

"I wonder if Kris will like this style," Heather gushed over the Christian, soft rocker while trying not to laugh at the wand scanning various parts of her body.

The guard paid her no mind.

"He is married but I think once he got a sample of some big girl lovin' he would reconsider his options."

"We're done here," moaned the officer while pointing the way for Heather to retrieve her items and leave her alone.

I laughed as I walked up to Heather and thanked her for that entertaining bit.

"All these cameras around, and nobody got a single shot of my violation," Heather responded.

"Well, I will be sure to document when Kris's wife attempts to violate your face for making movies on her honey," I added.

"I could take her."

With that, we joined the remainder of our group and headed to our flight. Time could not pass fast enough, though.

While I enjoy most of the people on the trip, they aren't the first people I would spend hour after with on a long journey. That said, I made some breakthroughs. I managed to entice a member that hates me for no apparent reason into several rounds of Go Fish. It was better than sitting in my head, willing with all my might that I could stop being herded around like cattle.

Those compartments never provided comfort room, rather it allowed airlines to move as many possible to the next field. There, you could much for a bit, but then another shepherd led you to the next pasture before you could even reach your proper bearings.

I just wanted to taste the sweet grass of LA and soon.

"We will be arriving at LAX in approximately 15 minutes, passengers," the pilot relayed to my screaming brain.

The UNC crew scattered about the plane all looked around at each other in excitement, even Pat.

This was not his first choice of a photojournalism project since the paparazzi give us such bad names. While the money American Idol offered to donate to the program didn't hurt, he hoped we could show pop culture what our careers are truly about, and that was not needlessly stalking celebrities.

I held onto the arm rests as our plane landed in the city where everyone went to make it big. Adam did it. We were doing it.

The fresh, outside air pleasantly filled my lungs with freedom. We wheeled our suitcases up to the four vans FOX has provided us to reach our hotels,

We had to move quickly because the officials needed to brief us as soon as possible with the week's events and we had to get all our credentials and tickets before the show started in a few hours.

"You have 15 minute to drop your stuff off and return to the lobby," barked Pat before proceeding to call out room assignments.

We of course had to share rooms with the same gender, which kept my options limited. They numbered a few, and I certainly wasn't best friends with any of them. They either were crazy, quiet or unconcerned—all things I didn't understand.

"John, Ryan and Zach, room 502," Pat read.

John the Quiet and Zach the Unconcerned and I rushed to our room where I lost a coin toss, giving me the foldout bet. It was more secluded, which gave me some semblance of personal space in an invasive area, so I did not mind much.

I gathered what I needed for the day and left the hotel before the other two. Sitting around and waiting for something epic never bodes well with me, and this was no different. When I arrived to the lobby, only a few others had dashed in and out as fast as me, and I could see the same reasons on all their faces: let's get the work done and the fun going.

Gradually, the less eager, or at least slower, members of our team reached the lobby, permitting us to take the vans to FOX studios.

The ride took a very short time, much to my relief. I either was too nervous to notice how much time went by or they had done us a great convenience with the close proximity.

We were going to be spending every waking moment with these contestants, and I was sure much of it was spent on these grounds, preparing for whatever the next week in competition brought.

I had to live Adam's life. Hannah had to live Danny or Michael's life. Heather had to live Kris's life.

Photojournalists have to become actors playing silent, reflective mirrors to the cast before us. While nobody could hear us, we play the most important role. Without us, the story is never told. With us, the story could be wrong. The pressure and experience alone could be mind blowing, and it often robbed us our personal time. Just knowing our temporary respite into our own lives was only a short distance provided a little relief.

"Welcome Tar Heels to the FOX studios," Mark Jacobs, our liaison to Fox, greeted us.

The suited big wig watched with a smile of forced enthusiasm as we piled out of the vans and approached him.

"As you all know, I am Mark and I will be your "go to person" during the stay. If you have any issues with the contestants, other media or anything in general, please come my way. Ok, for more details, let's get out of the sun."

He led us through hallway of the cavernous production until we arrived in a room where several foldout, movie director-like chairs sat in front greatly lighted makeup booths. In the center and long various walls stood various couches of different fabrics and colors.

The place seemed so vague yet homey, almost like a big recreation room or lounge. It was.

I was too caught up with the strange décor of the room to notice that each makeup area had names above them. I stood before Allison Iraheta's personal space. The red-headed Latina that I also adored greatly sat here each week, allowing various makeup artists and stylists create the image the whole world watched.

"Wow," I let escape from my mouth.

"Yes, this is where all of your subjects relax and prepare for the big show when they aren't on stage during filming," responded Ben.

Everyone looked for their perspective subjects' makeup counters in hopes of gaining some glimpse of their personality but Ben asked we all take a seat on a massive blue pleather couch and the area around it in the center of the room.

I rushed to ensure I had a comfy seat on the couch while knowing the long lecture we were about to receive.

"First of all, let me say thank you so much for taking time out of your busy, college schedules to come and help out American Idol. We have heard nothing but great things about the photojournalism program at UNC and knew it could provide the fresh, talented people we need for this endeavor"

"AKA, people crazy enough to do this for free," I whispered to Hannah would was sitting to my direct right. A few others nearby heard and started to giggle as well.

"Now, that the honeymoon speech is out of the way, I have to get serious. This is American Idol."

"Thanks, Ryan Seacrest," hollered Zach.

We all had to laughed in response. Even Mark broke his business only stare with a slight grin.

"Anyway, everyone wants a piece of these contestants, and we are more than willing to protect them however need be from the press and overzealous fans. This access we're giving you is unprecedeted but we think it necessary to help us beef up American Idol as a true competition seeking the biggest, undiscovered talent.

"You will learn things about these contestants we do not want leaked to anyone," said Ben while staring piercingly at me.

I glanced to my sides to see if anyone else caught that but everyone else seemed lost in their brains, trying to figure out what dirt they will uncover and keep until they die about their subjects.

"Adam's gay, I get it," I tried to telepathically send back to Mark but he continued unaffected.

"Media will try to reach you as soon as they find out you have this access. They will ask for everything they can get from you, and we're willing to protect you like our own, if you promise in return to shield the personal lives of our top contestants from them. It's a fair trade. Can we count on you?"

"Yes," we all responded without any effort.

"Good, good. Now, I have ID necklaces for every one of you and security bracelets. Do not come anywhere near this building or near the contestants wherever they may be without them. Even though the guards will most likely know you by the end of the week, they will not let you in without them. I'm dead serious about this."

"I can assure you I have brought the best students who will do all they can to protect your contestants," said Pat.

"That's good to know. OK, let's get you to your contestants. While you will not be working yet, we want the rapport and trust to build as soon as possible. Outside various workers will have your names and will give you your credentials and bracelets and take you to your contestants. Thank you, again."

We all had to take a few seconds to shake off the level of responsibility Ben bestowed upon us before we followed him outside into the hallway.

"Hannah, Emma and Phil," called a nameless worker wearing all black. "Come this way."

They had to awkwardly meet two people, while not knowing which would be their subject. Then again, any of ours could go home this week.

"So, this is why people get so caught up in the show," I thought.

"Eileen, Nacho and Ryan," called another worker.

Eileen and Nacho (short for Ignacio) are graduate students in the program and are the two videographers for the team. They shoot stills and video incredibly well and push each other to do even better. Nacho has been doing video for years but came to

UNC to refresh his talent and gain a new approach to it. Sometime during the program, they met and started dating. It kind of happened, and them, bam, they were spending every minute together.

While it does feel weird to be the third wheel, they form quite the functional couple that is mindful of people around them. I could deal with the random awkwardness in exchange for their talent on this project.

The worker gave each of us our decals before leading us down various halls. The beige walls and plain floors gave no indication of the grand sets and various shoots that stood in several of these rooms.

My brain could not imagine what movies were in production to either side of him because it was too concerned with the end of this destination.

“This is it,” she worker said as she stopped by the door. “You will find Adam inside.”

Eileen, Nacho and I looked at each other and nodded before we opened the door.

“This is it?” I asked.

Nothing but a dark, mirrored room greeted us. Small windows lining the roof gave us just enough light to see how alone we actually were.

The room took up about the area of a typical living area, giving plenty of space for a small troupe of dancers to rehearse at ease. Pages after pages of schedules lined the one mirror-less wall next to the entrance. I searched them trying to figure out if Adam had to step out for a meeting or such.

“Find anything, Ryan?” Nacho asked with a strange laugh.

“It says he should be in here preparing for country week. If I was him though and I had to do all this, I would probably be somewhere passed out. Maybe, we should investigate the infirmary for...” I said before a pair of large, yet silky hands covered my eyes.

Caught off guard, it took me a few seconds to decide if it was Eileen or Nacho.

“This isn’t funny, Eileen.”

“I’m not Eileen,” spoke my captor in a voice I had never heard before. Each word came out with a mischievousness of a small child with a secret.

“Well, that leaves you, Nacho,” I said, getting tired of his antics.

The untainted laughter escaping this person echoed through his body, into his harms and into my whole body. Goosebumps lined up in militias across my skin in response.

“I’m no chip,” quipped this person in between fits of laughter.

Confused more than anything I pulled the hands off my eyes and turned around to discover the prankster. My eyes landed on the siren of my dreams, the 6’1 American Idol contestant from San Diego.

It was Adam.

I apologize for the delay but the school year swallowed my soul! However, I hope to work on and finish this story over the summer. And, yay, Adam made it into the story. There's going to be a lot more of him soon!

If you have any criticisms or general compliments, feel free them to email them here here:

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Thanks for reading!

Ryan