

CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE AMERICAN IDOL SOUL

**Stories from the Idols and
Their Fans That Open Your Heart
and Make Your Soul Sing**

Jack Canfield
Mark Victor Hansen
Debra Halperin Poneman



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'Til Death Do Us Part

My lady and I never liked the Denny's in LA. We'd drive all the way out to the one in Canyon Country because the atmosphere there is much better. On one of our drives I think she had a premonition. She didn't know yet that she had cancer, but she was looking out the window and said to me kind of quietly that she felt like she hadn't accomplished anything in her life. I told her that neither had I. We drove the rest of the way in silence, each of us kind of reflecting on our own.

I met Melissa twenty years before when we were doing *South Pacific* in community theater. It was the only play I'd ever been in. She was one of the singing nurses, and I was Captain Bracket. Mine wasn't a singing part, which was too bad because I love to sing. I sing everywhere I go. I sing when I drive. I sing in line at the bank. That's just what I do.

When Melissa was in the hospital, everyone knew when I arrived because I'd be singing when I came down the hallway. I knew it made her smile even before

I reached her room. It would make the other patients happy too, as well as the doctors and nurses. I felt like it was the only thing I could do to ease my lady's pain. I had to do something for her. I felt so helpless. The hospital became my home. They set up a cot for me in her room. I'd go to work during the day and come back home to her at night.

It was her idea for me to audition for *American Idol*, even though she thought I was too good for it. I told her that I was singing in line at the market when someone said to me, "You are amazing! You should try out for *American Idol*." When I told him I was too old—the age limit was twenty-eight, and I was sixty-four—everyone in line started saying, "That's not fair!" Back at the hospital I told Melissa what had happened, and she also thought that it wasn't fair. So, as sick as she was, the day before they moved her from the hospital to the care home, she started working on a petition asking *American Idol* to make an exception to the rule.

She organized everyone in the hospital to sign my petition, which they did because they all loved my singing, and they loved her. Then she pushed me out the door and said I had to go and get more signatures. I went across the street to a pizza parlor and told the manager that I had a petition I'd like her to sign so I could get on *American Idol*. I said that I didn't want her to sign it just because of my age, but only if she liked my singing. So she had me sing for her customers right then and there, and everyone in the whole restaurant signed my petition. Then she went next door to another

restaurant to get signatures and came back and said, "They won't sign unless you go and sing for them." So I went and sang there, and everyone in that whole restaurant signed it too. I was up to almost one hundred signatures.

A few days later I went to the Rose Bowl, where they were holding the *American Idol* auditions. The line outside must have been forty people wide and five hundred people long. When I got in line, everyone assumed I was there to support another contestant. So I made an announcement that I was there to be a contestant and was looking to get my petition signed. People started yelling, "You have to sing first!" So I did, and then they all wanted to sign. When we got inside the Bowl, people were shouting to me from five aisles away that they wanted to sign my petition. It was so exciting, and I would have given anything for Melissa to have been there to experience it all.

I didn't get in to sing the first day, so I overnighted my letter and petition to the *American Idol* office. They would have received it on Thursday, and that was the day that Melissa started having serious trouble breathing. They transferred her from the care home back to the hospital, and I slept that night on my cot next to her bed. My hand was on hers, and as she fell asleep I sang to her "I'll Be Loving You Eternally." In the morning, Melissa died. A few hours later, I got the call that they wanted me back at the Rose Bowl on Sunday.

I wasn't feeling much like going, even though this was Melissa's dream, and she had gotten so many

signatures at the hospital and the care home. I knew she really wanted this for me, but I didn't feel much like getting off the couch. So I asked Melissa to show me a sign. Next thing I knew, I walked over to the bookcase, and I found a pile of greeting cards I had saved that we had sent each other over the years.

One card fell out of the pile.

It had a picture on the front of two little country kids. It said, "Tomorrow is waiting for us," and when I opened it up, it said, "We'll face it together." Underneath I had written to her, "You light up my life," and put musical notes around it. I remembered the card, but in my mind the two kids were walking side by side. This time when I looked at it, I saw that the little boy was looking down, and the little girl was a few steps ahead of him and turned around with her hand held out, as if to say, "I'll help you."

That was all I needed. I guess everyone knows what ended up happening. On Sunday, I stood there in front of Paula, Randy, and Simon, and I sang a song dedicated to my lady. They liked it so much they put my audition on TV. What most people don't know is that two gentlemen who heard me sing on the show called me up and offered me a record contract. The reason they thought I could be really popular was that one of them was sitting in the hospital with his wife who just had twins, and when she heard me singing on the TV, she just started crying, and then his mom called the hospital because she had heard me and she was crying too! It was the same hospital that Melissa had just been in.

And when I went to the office building to meet these gentlemen and sign my contract, it turned out to be the same building where Melissa had worked. I recognized it because I used to pick her up there. She did calendar-ing for a law firm, and she had tried so darn hard to work even after she got sick. She never wanted to let anyone down.

Well, one person she never let down was me. I know her last few days on earth were happier because she saw me pursuing this dream. She knew I never would have thought to do the petition or gotten all those signatures without her encouraging me.

And I know she's still helping me and guiding me every day from wherever she is now. In fact, in some ways I feel closer to her than ever. People ask me why Melissa and I never got married, and I have always given the same answer: "It's not that we didn't love each other more than anything; we just never wanted to have to say, 'Til death do us part.'"

Sherman Pore

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The Turn of a Page

My four-year-old son cuddled closer to me. It was afternoon nap time, and he had asked me to lie with him as he fell asleep. He always wanted me to be close while he slept. I was tired too. My husband's random tirade the night before had made sleeping in that house impossible once again.

I had learned long ago that the only way to survive was to become invisible. I had learned to hide my real self away so that my husband's angry words and actions no longer hurt me. After a while, I became invisible even to myself.

My son drifted off quickly. He hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before either. As his soft breath became even and I knew he was deep in the cherished peace of slumber, I saw a rare opportunity to temporarily bring myself out of the shadows.

I retrieved Clay Aiken's autobiography from the bottom of a drawer where I had carefully hidden it. My husband had told me that I wasn't allowed to

read Clay's book. He hadn't given me a reason, but the less of a reason he had, the louder he yelled, and I knew not to argue.

As I opened the book, a wave of relief washed over me. I wasn't completely invisible just yet. There was still a spark that gave me the confidence to defy orders—if only for a few precious moments. I sighed in silence and opened the book to a random page.

As I read Clay's words that told of the abuse he and his mother had suffered at the hands of his biological father, I nearly stopped breathing. I began to tremble as he shared the account of the strength his mother had to find in order to leave the man who had oppressed her and her son for so long—and how that act of strength helped Clay to become the man that he grew into, that wonderful young man who has inspired millions with his own strong and gentle spirit.

I shut the book quietly so as not to wake my son, sleeping so innocently beside me. As he lay in the refuge of his dreams, I looked into his beautiful face. In that face, I saw two futures laid out before him, one dramatically different from the other. And in that moment, before his nap had ended, I had made up my mind. Like Clay's mother, I would find the strength to make a better life for the two of us.

The next morning, while my husband still slept, I quietly and triumphantly packed a few of our belongings into my car. I buckled my son into his seat, took a deep breath, and started the journey toward the

future that God intended us to have.

Several months after our escape, my son and I celebrated our newfound freedom by attending a Clay Aiken concert. Tears streamed down my face as I held my son's hand and we watched Clay perform. But these were no longer tears of fear or sadness or hopelessness, but rather tears of gratitude—gratitude for this man who will never know how the turn of a page changed our lives forever.

Lexie Matthews

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And the Top-Ten, Too

It was the evening of January 17, 2006, and I was on cloud nine. The premier of *American Idol's* fifth season was about to air, featuring Chicago, my audition city, and my friends Chance and Jennifer were hosting an *American Idol* premier party for me. They had made a fabulous feast and lit candles throughout the house, and more than twenty of my closest friends had gathered to celebrate and watch my debut. As I chattered excitedly with my friends, I felt like royalty: Chance had “crowned” me with a plastic tiara, while other friends had printed almost a hundred brown T-shirts that said, “Mandisa is my American Idol—All Hail the Diva,” beneath a shining star.

The amazing thing was that none of them had even known whether I was still in the running. I already knew I'd been selected for the top forty-four, but I hadn't been able to break my silence and share the news with my friends until tonight. When I did, the room erupted in cheers. I told them I wasn't sure if

tonight's show would include my performance, but I had a strong positive feeling about it because I had seen commercials featuring my triumphant exit from the audition room.

After dinner we moved into the family room, crowding onto the couch and filling every chair. When the *American Idol* theme song began, I almost pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Little Mandisa had finally found the courage to stand up, leave the house, and take a chance.

The minutes ticked by, and I kept wondering when my audition would come on. I barely noticed when the phone rang, but Chance pulled himself off the couch to answer it. A moment later I saw him signaling for my attention and felt a fleeting second of irritation: Whatever it was, couldn't it wait? Then I realized that something was up.

"That was Kevin on the phone," he said. "They're watching the show in real time. You just sang."

"So?"

"So, after you left the room, Simon said something rude about your weight."

I felt like I'd been slapped. Tears stung my eyes, and a sob stuck in my throat. My emotions, at a high pitch all day, now plummeted into despair. I thought about walking out the door and not coming back. Instead, I took a deep breath, thanked Chance for the warning, and rejoined the group. My friends barely noticed my return, they were so focused on the show. And then, there was my face filling the screen.

After just a few lines of my song, the judges stopped me. Paula, Randy, and Simon all said nice things and then announced they were sending me through to Hollywood. The camera zoomed in on my beaming face, and then showed me leaving the room in a joyous fit.

My friends exploded into cheers and applause as I tried to keep my chin from quivering. That day had been so good. Why had Simon gone and ruined it?

Only a few were still watching the screen when the camera zoomed back in on Simon, but those who saw my face quickly turned their attention back to the television. Before a national television audience, Simon looked at Paula and asked, "Are we going to get a bigger stage this year?"

Paula slapped him playfully and said I reminded her of Frenchie Davis, a former contestant. Simon grinned cheekily and quipped, "She's more like *France*."

I swallowed hard and tried to smile when the friends who'd heard Simon turned to look at me. "It's okay," I said, my voice shaking. "I'm okay."

Dead silence overtook the room. I lowered my gaze, not knowing how to react. I'd gone from my life's highest moment to one of its lowest. One friend broke the silence. "Simon's a jerk," he said, and immediately others moved in to embrace me. I accepted the sympathy, but I really just wanted to disappear. We watched the rest of the show, but the gathering now felt more like a funeral wake than a party. Those "All Hail the Diva" T-shirts, sprinkled throughout the room, seemed to mock me.

But little did I know that Simon's words would turn

out to be a blessing in disguise. I now believe that if Simon had been uncharacteristically kind and never mentioned my obvious weight problem, I would never have been able to touch so many lives.

Make no mistake: Simon's words hurt me deeply. I cried myself to sleep that night. But as I wept, I realized what I had to do. The people on the receiving end of Simon's comments don't usually make it to Hollywood, so he never has to face them again. In my case, I made it to Hollywood, and once there, I knew that at the risk of not being put through to the final twenty-four, I had to be the voice of so many people who had been hurt by Simon and weren't able to tell him what his words had done to them. And I knew that I also had to be the voice for so many women who have been held back and told they weren't beautiful because of their weight.

I made it through every round during Hollywood week, and when the day arrived that the final twenty-four would be chosen, my childhood dream of becoming a world-class singer was within my grasp. But this was also my chance to share my truth with Simon. I knew the outcome could go either way, but I also knew that being true to myself was even more important to me than the possibility of becoming the next American Idol.

I heard my name called, and like a warrior marching to battle, I entered the elevator. As the elevator doors opened, I started walking down the long stretch we called the Green Mile to the lone chair opposite the three judges. I sat down, looked Simon squarely in the eye, and began.

“Simon,” I said, “a lot of people want me to say a lot of things to you right now, but this is what I want to say. I want you to know that you hurt me. I cried, and it was very emotional for me. But the good thing about forgiveness is that you don’t need someone to apologize in order to forgive them. So Simon, I want you to know that I have forgiven you, because if Jesus could forgive me for all the things I’ve done wrong, I can certainly extend that same grace to you.”

As I delivered my message, Simon’s grin disappeared. Although I didn’t take my gaze off Simon, from the corner of my eye I could see Randy raise his brows and Paula break into a smile as bright as the lights overhead. In the silence that followed, Simon uncrossed his arms and hung his head. “Well, I feel about this big,” he said, holding two fingers about an inch apart. “Mandisa, I’m humbled. Come here and give me a kiss.”

I can’t tell you how many women have shared what it meant to them that I refused to swallow his comments and just go on as if his words had never been spoken and then forgave him as well. I just felt that if I didn’t speak my truth, then his truth would have been the final word—and once again another woman who struggles with her weight would retreat with her head hanging and her heart broken. But I’ve always been a fighter, and my purpose in life is to shine through my integrity as well as my voice. I knew that I had to stand up for all women who struggle with their image, period.

I needed to say those words to Simon for me, but by doing so, I also hoped to help change the image of true

beauty for all the young girls in our society. The possibility of realizing that goal made it worth the risk. And it continues to be worth it over and over again.

Last December I was invited to Toby Mac's Winter Wonder-Slam Concert in Nashville. I was sitting in the audience when a mom and her two little girls came up to me. The precious girls, who I guess were about ten, stared at me with big brown eyes and nearly blinding smiles. Moved by their awe, I gave them each big hugs and signed the tickets they held in trembling, outstretched hands. Then one of the girls got up the courage to speak. She looked at me and proclaimed in a high-pitched voice, "You are sooooo beautiful!"

As I looked deeply into that young girl's eyes, I knew that I had changed her perception of beauty, and I hoped I had made the rest of her life a little easier for it. As they turned to go, the mom stopped and whispered in my ear: "You have no idea what it means to me to have a role model like you—a woman who is not only beautiful, confident, and honest, but who also loves the Lord. Thank you for giving my girls someone in this crazy world that they can really look up to."

As they walked back to their seats, a huge smile took over my face, and I thought to myself, *That and the top-ten, too.*

Mandisa
Top 10, Season 5