

# MANDISA

FOREWORD by NATALIE GRANT



## Out of the Dark

MY JOURNEY THROUGH THE  
SHADOWS TO FIND GOD'S JOY

with Suzanne Gosselin

*Out of the Dark*



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SHADOWS TO FIND GOD'S JOY

MANDISA

with Suzanne Gosselin  
Foreword by Natalie Grant

**KLOVE**  
BOOKS

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FRANKLIN, TENNESSEE

# K-LOVE BOOKS

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*To Kisha*



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## OVERCOMER

You're an overcomer  
Stay in the fight 'til the final round  
You're not going under  
'Cause God is holding you right now  
You might be down for a moment  
Feeling like it's hopeless  
That's when He reminds you  
That you're an overcomer

I cracked the door to the bedroom open and entered the dimly lit room. A day earlier, my friend's husband, Breonus, had texted me: "We've called in hospice. You'd better come see Kisha as soon as you can." My beautiful friend, hairstylist, and former background singer had been in the fight of her life against breast cancer for a year and a half. Now with the palliative nurse on hand to make

Kisha more comfortable, it seemed she wasn't going to win the fight. I couldn't bring myself to believe it.

I had learned of her illness on a chilly January afternoon. Our scheduled hair appointment began as it had for over a decade. I sat in the salon chair with a towel and protective cape around my neck as Kisha worked her magic on my "new growth." The smell of chemical relaxer filled the air, and the sound of Wayne Brady giving away a vacation on *Let's Make a Deal* was drowned out by our conversation. Now that Kisha no longer traveled with me, we relished these hours when we could hash out the latest details of our days. I would catch her up on road life, the latest album I was recording, and any male suitors I had my eye on. She would talk about church, gush about Breonus or their son, BJ, and fill me in on her recent gigs.

That day, though, the appointment ended differently than past visits. She told her next client, who was already sitting in the extra chair in her room, that she needed an extra minute with me. She pulled me outside. Sensing that something was off, I furrowed my brow. "What's wrong?" I asked anxiously. I didn't expect Kisha's next words.

"I'm pregnant!" she said, flashing a beaming smile.

My jaw dropped and I squealed with excitement. BJ was about to turn ten, and Kisha was in her late thirties, so this news was an answer to my friend's prayers

for another child. I had hundreds of questions, but they could wait. All I wanted was to celebrate with my friend and pray for the little baby growing inside. I laid my hand on her belly, ready to pray right then, but she stopped me before I could bow my head.

“Wait,” she said in a way that made my stomach tighten. “There’s something else I need you to pray for. I found a lump in my breast.”

A few weeks later, Kisha received her official diagnosis of stage 3 breast cancer. When she called me with the news, I immediately went into fight-and-fix mode. I knew she had a battle in front of her, but she would get through this. I was 100 percent sure God would heal Kisha. Why wouldn’t He? She had a young family that needed her. She was a bright light in so many lives. Countless people were praying in faith for her healing, and a full recovery would bring God so much glory.

Because she was pregnant, Kisha chose a less aggressive form of chemotherapy to protect her developing child. Her cancer was already advanced, but for Kisha, threatening the life of her baby wasn’t even a choice. She would do whatever it took to keep him safe. And on June 8, 2013, Brennon Michael Mitchell was born perfect and healthy. When Kisha texted me the picture of her beautiful, chunky, chocolate baby, tears welled up in my eyes, and my

## OUT OF THE DARK

heart rejoiced for my friend. I marveled at her grace and strength. Her top prayer request during her pregnancy had been for God to protect the child in her womb as she battled the disease threatening both of their lives. Brennon's birth was an incredible answer to prayer. And fresh hope rose in my heart. Now that Brennon had been born, Kisha could step up her cancer treatment. The worst was behind her, I thought.

## SOUL SISTERS

I first met Lakisha Mitchell when I was a college student at Fisk University. I attended Greater Grace Temple Community Church where her husband was the pastor. At Greater Grace, as is the case in many Black churches, the pastor's wife is referred to as the First Lady. Just two years my senior, Kisha carried herself with grace and class beyond her years. She was always dressed to the nines, and she had the smoothest skin and whitest teeth I had ever seen. What impressed me the most about my First Lady, though, was her voice.

I'll never forget the first time I heard her sing. The choir stood as Kisha walked to the center of the stage, and the congregants shouted, "Sing, First Lady! Sing!" As the piano intro began, rowdy applause erupted along

with voices calling out, “Oh, yes!” and “Come on, now!” The sanctuary quieted to a hush as Kisha’s soulful voice launched into the first notes of “Fight On” by Kevin Davidson and the Voices.

My experience in church up to that point had taught me that singers onstage often employed showmanship and vocal acrobatics to hype up the crowd. While Kisha expertly handled the musical notes and had a voice that rivaled any singer I’d heard on gospel radio, there was something extra powerful behind her voice. As she belted the final lines of “Fight On,” her song seemed to break chains and launch darts of hope into the congregation. Her worship felt like warfare—full of the grace and truth of Jesus—and she went to battle like no other I had ever witnessed.

When that woman worshipped, it was like Jesus was right there next to her. Everything else fell away as she brought those near her straight to the throne of God. From that point on, anytime Kisha stood on that stage, I braced myself for an encounter where heaven touched earth.

I held Kisha in such high esteem that I was somewhat surprised by how down-to-earth she was in person. During college I worked in the church office, and whenever Kisha came by, we had great conversations (just as we did later when I was seated in her stylist’s chair). We could

talk about everything from the sermon her husband had preached that week to the latest episode of *Oprah*. Our words flowed from the ridiculous to the holy and back again. She'd have me rolling in laughter one minute, then she'd be dropping a truth bomb the next.

One such bomb landed on me after one of our regular Wednesday night services. Kisha and I were walking to our cars when I noticed her eyeing my head. "Girl," she said. "What's going on with your hair?"

I laughed at her forthrightness and told her about the unfortunate experience I'd recently had at the salon across the street from Fisk. I didn't know why my hair was falling out, but Kisha—a practiced hairstylist—explained that the novice hairdresser I'd seen should have known better than to give me a relaxer *and* color at the same appointment. Hoping she could restore my hair back to health, I set up my first appointment with her and never looked back. (Now I understand why the salon across from Fisk was always empty and eventually closed down.)

My friendship with Kisha evolved over the years. After memorable moments at church, many days traveling on the road together, and hours seated in her salon chair, we developed a deep, unspoken love for each other. I say unspoken because neither of us really talked about it.

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Both of us had experienced things in life that left us with hard shells that were not easy to penetrate. We were so similar in personality that when we argued, our stubbornness and quick wits translated to the effect of two championship boxers landing jabs in a ring. But when we finally calmed down enough to listen with the purpose of understanding, we would always find a way to unite and deepen our friendship.

### VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

As I neared my friend's bed in June 2014, I hardly recognized her. Her skin sagged from all of the weight she'd lost, aging her decades. She couldn't speak, but she moaned softly.

"Can she hear me?" I asked Breonus.

"Yes, she can hear you," he said. "Talk to her."

Unsure of what to say, I sat down next to her bed, leaned in, and said, "Hey, Kish." She mumbled an unintelligible greeting. I awkwardly continued speaking to her as if we were just hanging out at her house on a normal afternoon. But I was painfully aware that this moment was *not* normal at all. Even holding her hand felt off. Under normal circumstances, Kisha and I *never* would have held hands. We often joked about how "anti-physical touch"

I was. (Kisha predicted this would change dramatically when I got married.) Part of me wondered if she felt it was strange to have her hand grasped in mine. Another part of me wondered if she could fully comprehend the moment or if she even recognized who I was. The whole situation felt surreal.

Breonus attempted to interpret her unintelligible sounds and finally suggested I sing to her. I nervously broke into the familiar hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” To my surprise, Kisha began moaning along on pitch. Tears welled up in my eyes when we rounded the line, “Whatever my loss, Thou hast taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’” I wondered if that sentiment was true for Kisha. It certainly didn’t feel true for me. My soul was not well. I was *not* okay with how my friend’s journey had gone.

\* \* \*

Ten months earlier, I’d pulled Kisha up onstage at a concert celebrating the release of my new album, *Overcomer*. At the time of Kisha’s diagnosis, I had nearly completed the album, but we needed one more song. I told my producers and songwriters about Kisha, and the song

## OVERCOMER

“Overcomer” was born with her in mind. None of us imagined how the anthem would strike a chord with listeners. It became a fight song for people all over the world going through battles of their own. The song gave them hope that with God’s help they could prevail over hard circumstances in their lives.

That night, at the release concert, Kisha was caught off guard when I called her up to the stage. I told the audience that the song had been written for Kisha to encourage her in her fight. Just two months after she’d given birth to her son, my friend was the picture of health as she smiled shyly at my side.

“This is Kisha Mitchell, the overcomer in my life,” I spoke into the microphone. “Kisha doesn’t know this, but tonight we’re raising \$25,000 to cover her medical bills.” The keyboard music swelled, and the crowd cheered. With my band and former background singers onstage surrounding her with love and support, we presented Kisha with a photo collage of pictures from our time touring together. The poster represented so many happy memories.

As Kisha studied the poster, she laughed at the picture of her, Laura, Myshel, and me standing in front of Niagara Falls—semistunned looks on our faces thanks to

the strong wind and water pelting us from every side. I wondered if Kisha remembered how her comment about hoping her wig didn't fly off had made us all laugh the moment the photo was being snapped. I hoped that when she looked at the photos, she would be reminded of the army standing with her through every high and stormy gale.

I turned to Kisha and said, "We want you to know that we are fighting for you. We are *believing* for you. We are praying for you. And you're going to get through this thing. We're going to help you get through it." I believed every word. I imagined a glorious future moment when I would pull her up onstage at a concert again and declare that God had healed her completely.

Ten months later, as I looked at my friend's frail body lying in that bed, I tried to reconcile the reality of what I was seeing with my belief that God would still do a miracle. *He had to*. Kisha had a husband and two young sons who needed her. While I sat there by her bed, Kisha mumbled something I couldn't understand. Breonus leaned in, attempting to translate. He told me, "She says to keep praying . . . keep believing for a miracle." Even though the situation looked hopeless, I thought of the countless times in the Bible when God used a seemingly hopeless situation to display His glory and power to a watching

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world. I left that day choosing to believe that God would still save my friend's life.

## SAYING GOODBYE

Three weeks later, I sat on a passenger van the day after a concert in Janesville, Wisconsin. It was Sunday, June 29, 2014, and our tour bus had broken down in the middle of the night on the way home to Nashville. We traded in our comfortable bunks, satellite TV, kitchenette, and bathroom, and boarded a cramped commuter van for the remaining seven-hour ride. With the rest of my band snoozing behind me as they leaned on guitar cases and amps, I stayed awake to keep my eye on the driver of the van. I suspected he was too tired to drive, because I had caught him nodding off when the van drifted into another lane. With my drooping eyes on alert, ready to yell the moment I sensed danger, my phone buzzed. I looked down at a text from Breonus, telling me that Kisha had passed away. I stared at my screen for a long time, trying to comprehend it. I didn't cry. I felt numb.

As the hours ticked by, I compartmentalized my emotions by fighting sleep and focusing on the drowsy driver who held our lives in his hands. When we pulled into a truck stop for a bathroom break, I told the band about

Kisha with very little emotion. I'm sure they offered their condolences, but in my shock at the time, their responses fell into a blurry mass of feelings I can't recall. To this day, all I remember from those moments is the gaping sense of loss that threatened to swallow me. *Kisha wasn't supposed to die. She was an overcomer. I prayed for her. I had faith. God didn't hold up His end of the bargain.*

With my devastation boxed up and shelved, the rest of the summer plodded on with contracts to fulfill and concerts to give. Barely having time to grieve my friend, I continued to perform at Christian music festivals in Dallas, Orlando, and other big cities. In the fall, I went on the Hits Deep Tour with TobyMac, Brandon Heath, Jamie Grace, and others. By then the song "Overcomer" was skyrocketing. It was played daily on Christian radio stations across the country and had even received a Grammy.

People came to my concerts to hear *that song*, but each performance threatened to pull out the pain from the box I had left on the shelf. Grief over my friend's death wasn't the only thing in that box; it also contained pain from past trauma, shame over my weight issues, and feelings of failure and inadequacy from being eliminated from *American Idol*. It seemed every grief or loss I'd suffered over the years was stuffed in that box, which was now threatening to overflow. As I sang the familiar words—"Whatever it is

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you may be going through, I know He's not gonna let it get the best of you"—I struggled to believe the sentiment was true. I found myself in a familiar place of disappointment and darkness and started to dread singing that song. Kisha hadn't overcome her battle, and I was beginning to feel like I wouldn't overcome my battle with doubt either.

## WRESTLING WITH GOD

There's this wild Old Testament story in Genesis 32 where Jacob—one of the patriarchs of the Israelite people—wrestles with God. Crazy, right? He literally wrestles . . . with God. The backstory basically boils down to family drama: Jacob (with the help of his mom, Rebekah) steals his older brother Esau's birthright with a pot of soup. Their dad, Isaac, gives Jacob the blessing, and because that was a huge no-no, Jacob flees. Later he has to go back and face Esau, and let's just say he's not expecting a friendly reception.

The Bible says that Jacob, the night before going out to meet his brother, wrestles with a man all night. When the man sees he cannot overpower Jacob, the man touches Jacob's hip socket and wrenches it. At daybreak, the mystery man asks Jacob to let him depart, but Jacob replies, "Not . . . unless you bless me" (verse 26). You have to admire Jacob's boldness and grit.

The man says, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Genesis 32:28). After that experience, Jacob walks with a limp. He *has* overcome, having received the blessing he desired. He becomes the father of God’s chosen people but will forever carry the scar of the pain involved.

When Kisha died, I was angry. I felt betrayed by God. I had so much faith, and when the story didn’t end the way I thought it should, I was mad. I wanted to give the Lord a piece of my mind. I wanted to shout, “You’re just going to do what You want to do anyway, so leave me out of it!” Even now I still wrestle, like Jacob, wanting answers from the Lord. I still deeply feel the pain of losing my friend. Until I see Kisha in heaven, I will always limp from the loss.

When she first died, the pain felt unbearable. I wondered how a good God could allow this to happen. I’m a passionate person, and whether I’m cheering for my Tennessee Titans football team or praying for a sick friend, I’m *all in*. So as I was performing “Overcomer” in those months following Kisha’s death, I began to think, *How can I get up on a stage and tell other people they can overcome, when I don’t feel like I have?* At that point, I didn’t think Kisha had overcome either. That was the start

of going into the dark. As I pushed God away, retreated into myself, and embraced my go-to ways of coping (um, hello, food), I stepped out of the guiding light of my Savior and onto dangerous terrain. I wouldn't discover until several months later how truly dangerous that terrain had become.

### *Getting Real*

- Kisha made an impact on my life through the kind of person she was and the way she worshipped. Who is a person who has greatly impacted your life?
- Did you ever pray big for something and receive “no” as an answer? How did you feel? How did it affect your relationship with God?
- When you're walking through difficult circumstances, what are your go-to ways of coping? How do these behaviors draw you closer to God or push you away from Him?
- The Bible says that Jacob wrestled with God and overcame. What does this passage tell you about what it means to be an overcomer?
- Have you ever been through something that caused you to “limp” like Jacob? What happened? How have you seen God at work in your limp?

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Contemporary Christian and gospel vocalist, *American Idol* season-five alumna, and author of *Idoleyes: My New Perspective on Faith, Fat & Fame*, Mandisa is a Grammy Award-winning and Dove-nominated artist who got her start singing backup for Trisha Yearwood and Shania Twain.

Her debut album, *True Beauty*, featuring collaborations with the Fisk Jubilee Singers and TobyMac, topped Billboard's Top Christian Albums chart. Her 2013 *Overcomer* won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Christian Music Album.

Mandisa's passions for faith, health and wellness, and mental health are common themes in her writing, both musical and literary. Her fifth full-length album, *Out of the Dark*, was inspired by the death of a close friend and the deep depression that followed.

Mandisa studied vocal jazz at American River College before earning a bachelor's degree in music with a

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

concentration in vocal performance from Fisk University. She now lives in Franklin, Tennessee. *Out of the Dark: My Journey Through the Shadows to Embrace God's Joy* is her second book.

Suzanne Gosselin is a freelance writer and editor. Formerly an editor for *Clubhouse* and *Clubhouse Jr.* magazines, she has written books and devotionals for Zondervan, David C. Cook, Tyndale, and Harvest House. She graduated from Multnomah University with a degree in journalism and biblical theology and has written hundreds of popular articles and blog posts for a variety of periodicals. She lives in California with her husband, Kevin, a family pastor, and four young children. Suzanne enjoys sharing a good cup of coffee and conversation with a friend, serving with her husband in student ministry, and soaking up the beauty of God's creation on the California coast.

*In this deeply personal memoir, Grammy Award-winning artist Mandisa shares her experience with depression and journey to find joy and freedom through life's peaks and valleys.*

Just as Mandisa's hit song "Overcomer" was topping the contemporary Christian music charts, the friend for whom it had been written lost her battle with cancer, despite months of prayers on her behalf. Mandisa plunged into a deep depression after the loss of her friend, and she isolated herself and found comfort in a familiar friend: food. But even at her lowest point—the place from which she saw no way forward—God was at work, powerfully redeeming her story and calling her out of the dark.

*Out of the Dark* explores the high points of Mandisa's journey from becoming a Christian to her rise as an *American Idol* finalist to winning a Grammy for her "Overcomer" album, but she doesn't shy away from examining the dark and challenging times she experienced along the way. Mandisa tells her story with warmth and vulnerability, writing openly about feeling betrayed by God. But ultimately He is the hero of her story, bringing her out of the valley and into His glorious light.

**MANDISA** is a Contemporary Christian and gospel vocalist, *American Idol* season 5 alumna, and author of *Idoleyes: My New Perspective on Faith, Fat & Fame* as well as a Grammy Award-winning and Dove-nominated artist. She now lives in Franklin, Tennessee. *Out of the Dark* is her second book.

### CONNECT with MANDISA:

 @Mandisa •  @mandisaofficial •  @mandisaofficial

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- New K-LOVE podcast hosted by Mandisa launching in spring 2021
- Extensive promotion through K-LOVE and Air1 (13 million weekly listeners)
- Presale campaign and ARC distribution
- Foreword by Dove Award-winning artist Natalie Grant

#### For media inquiries

contact: Ashley Harris  
ashley.harris@dexteritycollective.co  
757.251.8552

#### For sales inquiries

contact: Scott Revo  
scott.revo@dexteritycollective.co  
404.580.1575

**K-LOVE BOOKS**

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