



*IDOL*eyes

my new perspective on
FAITH, FAT & FAME

MANDISA
WITH ANGELA HUNT



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Idoleyes: My New Perspective on Faith, Fat & Fame

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DEDICATION

I am indebted to a group of people who have been a great support to me throughout my journey on *American Idol*. Some of them are my closest friends; I know them like the back of my hand. Some I may recognize only by face. And still others I have never met. But at one point or another, all of them have lifted my name to the heavenly Father in prayer. I could try to name you all, but that would be impossible. So to be sure I include each of you, I dedicate this book to the body of Christ. I consider it an honor to be called your sister. I love you.

*There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.
There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
and one God and Father,
who is over all and in all and living through all. . . .
He makes the whole body fit together perfectly.
As each part does its own special work,
it helps the other parts grow,
so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

EPHESIANS 4:4-6, 16

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FOREWORD

I couldn't sit down. Not even during the commercial break leading up to the moment each week when Mandisa would take the stage. Neither could I bring myself to go to the houses of friends who were popping popcorn and watching the show en masse. I was too nervous. And anyway, I needed to concentrate; God forbid that anyone would talk when I was trying to listen. This was big, and I didn't want to miss a single facial expression on that screen. I held my cell phone in a choke hold in my left hand. I'd need my right hand to throw something at the television if one of the judges had the audacity to be derogatory. The cell on the left, however, was the necessity. Anybody who knew the drill knew to let her fingers do the talking the second the lines were open. After all, this is the land of the free and the home of the brave, where the democratic process of getting to cast your vote is an inalienable right.

The phone was stuck to me like glue for a few other reasons as well. I often had some kind of text message from Mandisa on broadcast days, directing me how to pray. I also needed to be ready to text my buddy Travis Cottrell at least half a dozen times during the course of the show. He has been the worship leader for our Living Proof Live events for nearly a decade and is the one who introduced that precious woman into my life. Our girl was in a world none of her advisors had ever navigated. In fact, had the decision been up to some of us, we probably would have counseled her to stay under the umbrella of the

church at large and out of the harsh elements of a mean world. It wouldn't have done any good. To her tremendous credit, if Mandisa believes God has told her to do something, there ain't no mountain high enough.

I remember the first time I ever laid eyes on Mandisa. I was meeting my team at an arena in Charlotte, where we were holding an event for the next twenty-four hours. I am the lone Texan serving with a mass of Tennesseans, so I'd flown in separately, getting my notes ready and keeping my face turned to the sky, seeking a torrential downpour of God. I had worked with the same basic praise team for several years, and I was wild about every single one of them. We have truly been a team in every sense of the word, never seeing ourselves as two separate entities on that platform. Worship is very important to me. The Word is very important to them. I'm in the front row while they lead the singing. They're in the front row while I lead the study. We do what we do *together*.

Travis had let me know we had a sub on the worship team that weekend in Charlotte. One of our regulars had not been able to make it. The thought that Mandisa came to us as a sub still amuses me. It just goes to show, God doesn't call subs. There are no accidents in His work. There is no coincidence in who backs out and who steps up. He moves His chess pieces around the board at will, and that weekend, we got the queen.

When we gathered for prayer time before the event began, I still hadn't heard her sing, but I instantly liked her. Mandisa has a sweetness in her demeanor that is endearing before you know how gifted and stunning she is once the cat is out of the bag. In that small room in the underbelly of the arena, I sat across from her for the first time and had to fight the temptation to stare at her. My goodness, she was beautiful. Not only

that, she was dramatic. Goodness knows, I like a little drama. I can't remember if she prayed out loud with us in our first prayer time or not, but once she did, I marveled over the depth of relationship I could tell she had developed with Jesus at such a young age. I recall thinking that she must have known a lot of pain to love Him like that already. Only in the Christian faith is desperation a gift.

As our praise-team novice took the platform that evening, she'd learned forty songs in three days, complete with sign language to one of them. She was a team player. And when it was her turn to take the lead, she brought the house down.

Travis loves to shock me. If he has somebody new on the team and he knows full well the person is going to blow my mind, he usually won't tell me in advance. He waits until I'm standing in the front row with my chin to the ground, having a near-death experience, before he cuts his eyes away from the keyboard and laughs his head off at me.

Not long after that, Mandisa became part of the family. We have had the great honor of serving alongside that darling young woman of God many, many times over the years that followed. Travis summed it up beautifully: "In all my years of doing this thing, there was never one any more musically prepared, more 'prayed up,' and more selfless in their offering." She had a huge gift without a huge ego. What an incredible rarity!

Mandisa was not only a wonderful worship-team member. She was also a remarkable student. A teacher's dream. A lover of Christ and a devourer of His Word. She had remarkable insight and the gift to express it. She was dead honest about her issues and dead-on about the solutions. I have no idea how many times I quoted something she'd said backstage in her

feedback on a lesson, and it never failed to resonate deeply with the participants. Then came the time in Seattle, when we actually handed her the microphone and let her express to the audience for herself what God had been doing in her heart. I was flabbergasted. *You have got to be kidding me*, I thought to myself. *The woman can sing and speak?* Yep, apparently she could. Who ever said life was fair? Travis reminded me how we all piled in the van after that event with exactly the same thing on our minds: We, a consummate group of loudmouths, were dumbstruck. I broke the compulsory moment of dead silence with a prophetic word: “I think *we* are all going to be working for *her* before it’s all over.” And lo and behold, look at us now. It took a maniacal card game of Pit in the hotel that night for our team to recover.

I love Mandisa Hundley. I’ve cheered for her so many times that I’ve nearly thrown my back out. So maybe you can imagine how devastated I was when I felt responsible for an unfair and public attack made on her values after she sang a blatantly Christian song on *American Idol*. Her critics didn’t have grounds for the attack based on anything she had said. They tied her to me and held her responsible for some of my stands. We were both floored. Mandisa wouldn’t offend a flea if she could keep from it, and I’ve spent my adult lifetime trying to love and serve anybody God puts in my path, regardless of differing beliefs. I’d been called a lot of things, but never a hater. As for Mandisa, until then, I don’t think anyone had ever had an unkind word to say about her. They still wouldn’t have if they’d known her. The worst part of the ordeal was seeing her labeled unfairly because of me. My heart broke. I felt I’d hurt a friend I’d so wanted to support. I wept before the Lord and said, “Look what I did!”

God responded in a way I didn't anticipate. I felt Him say clearly in my heart, "Look what *you* did? *You*? I believe *I* wrote the Book. You'd better look at what *I* did. And what great things I'm going to do."

God has only begun to use Mandisa Hundley. He put her to the test, and she passed it. Her faith proved genuine in a world that esteems pretense highly and rewards it richly. Even when a number of Christians would have preferred that she be less vocal about her faith until she had bagged the prize, she took her moment in the spotlight and gave it to Jesus. Maybe she agreed with something my grandmother from the hills of Arkansas used to say: "You betta dance with the one who brung ya."

That night Mandisa threw the shackles of expectation off her feet so that she could dance. And I'd be willing to bet that she had an unseen Partner: One who can take her far beyond any platform this world can offer her.

If you haven't had the pleasure of knowing her already, I am honored to introduce you to my friend Mandisa. When you turn the last page of this book, I think you'll be nuts about her. There's still room on that dance floor in case you want to join her.

—Beth Moore

PROLOGUE

On a chilly January night in 2006, I gathered with twenty of my closest friends to watch my first appearance before Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson, and Paula Abdul, the judges for *American Idol*. I smiled and tried to remain calm, because I knew something no one else was supposed to know. I had done a pretty good job of keeping quiet, but most of my friends had taken one look at my shining eyes and guessed my secret—I'd made it past the round that would be televised that night. In a few minutes I would sing for America; then the judges would hand me the coveted “golden ticket” and tell me that I could advance to the next level of competition.

That wasn't all they'd said that day. As soon as I had finished singing, Paula said, “You definitely have the pipes.”

And Simon said, “You were everything I'd hoped you'd be.” Simon, known for his brutal evaluations, had also commented on my pretty face.

The three judges looked at each other, smiled, and then together counted: “One, two, three—you're going to Hollywood!”

I was so excited when I left the room that when host Ryan Seacrest asked how I felt, I'd said, “This feels like *heaven!*”

Those golden memories colored my thoughts as I smiled and chatted with my excited friends. Someone had lit candles throughout the room, and the dining table was practically groaning from all the food on it. A party atmosphere filled the house, and I was having the time of my life.

In order to avoid the commercials, my friends and I were watching *American Idol* on TiVo, but other friends in Nashville were watching in real time. I was confident of the night's outcome—after all, I'd already *lived* through the hard part—so I didn't think it the least bit odd when the phone rang and Chance, the party's host, stepped away to answer it.

A few moments later Chance caught my eye and motioned to me. I stood and walked toward him, wondering why the joy had fled from his expression. I wanted to celebrate, but Chance looked as if someone had just died.

"Mandisa—" he pulled me away from the others—"Kevin just called. They're watching the show live."

I blinked, unable to understand the reason for the shadows in his eyes. I knew I'd made it past the panel of judges. I'd already been to the next round in Hollywood, so he couldn't tell me it had all been a mistake.

"Simon," Chance said simply. "After you left the room, he made comments about your weight."

I looked away as my eyes filled with tears. Simon? Though more than a few *Idol* contestants had felt the sting of his tongue, he'd been complimentary after I sang. He'd agreed that I should go to Hollywood . . . and he'd said I was pretty.

I closed my eyes and felt myself slipping back to high school, where immature, rude boys had called out cutting comments when I performed with the drill team.

I thought I'd heard the last of cruel and callous remarks. But I was about to hear them again, with twenty of my closest friends nearby to witness my humiliation on national television.

I'd have run away if I could. But big girls don't run, even if they do cry.

*I waited patiently for the LORD to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.*

*He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.*

*He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.*

*He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.*

*Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the LORD.*

*Oh, the joys of those who trust the LORD,
who have no confidence in the proud
or in those who worship idols. . . .*

*LORD, don't hold back your tender mercies from me.
Let your unfailing love and faithfulness always
protect me.*

*For troubles surround me—
too many to count!*

*My sins pile up so high
I can't see my way out.*

*They outnumber the hairs on my head.
I have lost all courage. . . .*

*But may all who search for you
be filled with joy and gladness in you.*

*May those who love your salvation
repeatedly shout, "The LORD is great!"*

*As for me, since I am poor and needy,
let the Lord keep me in his thoughts.*

PSALM 40:1-4, 11-12, 16-17

1 Waiting Patiently

Hello. I'm Mandisa, and I'm a foodaholic. I'm also addicted to reality television. I love cheesecake, ice cream, and *The Amazing Race*. My idea of a perfect night is an up-sized cheeseburger meal deal followed by a two-hour episode of *Survivor*.

These days I'm learning how to deal with my food addiction, and I'm choosing to eat healthily. I've come to realize that being overweight is bad for my body and that if I'm going to be a good steward of the life God has given me, I need to change my eating habits.

The reality shows, however, are a different story. God has not led me to give those up; instead, He's used them to change my life.

Before I ever thought about auditioning for *American Idol*,

I had watched every episode of every season and knew all the finalists by name. I believe *Idol* is the greatest TV show in the world, and every time I watched, at the back of my mind lurked a question: *What would happen if I were to audition?* But whenever I'd wonder about my chances, I immediately reminded myself that I was too old. For the first three seasons, contestants could be no older than twenty-four when they auditioned, and I was twenty-five when *Idol* first aired in the United States.

Ultimately, though, I'd flash back to all the comments I'd heard Simon make to people who are overweight—let's face it, the man is not the sort to spare anyone's feelings. He must adhere to the philosophy that one must be cruel to be kind, because I've seen him deflate dozens of contestants' hopes with a well-placed barb.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder. Then, at the start of season four, *Idol* raised the age limit to twenty-eight. I was eligible . . . but I didn't have peace about proceeding. The timing didn't feel right.

Yet as I celebrated my twenty-eighth birthday in October 2004, I realized that would be my last year to be eligible for an *Idol* audition.

Was I going to let fear of one man's comments keep me from fulfilling a dream? Would I blow out the candles on my thirtieth birthday cake and wonder if I could have qualified for the competition?

In the early winter months of 2005, I decided that I wanted to live a life of no regrets. I didn't want to reach thirty-five or forty and still be wondering whether I had what it took to make it onto the *Idol* stage.

Back to the Beginning

I grew up in Citrus Heights, California, near Sacramento. I lived with my mother, Ruby Hundley, and spent every other weekend with my father and stepmother, John and Millie Hundley.

My parents named me *Mandisa*, which means “sweet” in the language of the Xhosa, a South African people group. Growing up, I heard my name pronounced every imaginable way. Kids used to tease me by calling me “Medusa,” so I’m sure you can understand why I wasn’t thrilled to be compared to an ugly mythological monster with snakes for hair. Because of that horrible nickname, in junior high I tried to change my name to “Kandie.” After all, *Mandisa* means “sweet,” and what is sweeter than candy? On the first day of school I would approach my teachers before class and tell them that I wanted to be called Kandie instead of Mandisa.

The result? Many of my classmates never knew what my real name was. When I enrolled in junior college, I finally decided it was time to let go of my childhood nickname and live under the name my parents gave me.

There’s power and meaning in a name. And just as my friends struggled to switch from calling me “Kandie” to calling me “Mandisa,” I’ve had to learn how to refer to my mother by a different name. In 2003, Mom decided that she wanted to return to her maiden name, Ruby Berryman. My brother, John, and I were grown, so she wouldn’t have to explain why she and her children had different last names. I also think she wanted to clear out some painful memories from the past.

Like most children who grew up with divorced parents, I felt torn between my mom and my dad. I wanted to love them equally, but it’s not easy to be loyal to both parents when they

are divided by hurts that are as tender today as they were thirty years ago.

Like millions of working mothers, my mom was out of the house most of the day, so I spent many nonschool hours at home in front of the television. Combined with my love for food, those periods of inactivity began to pack extra pounds on my childish frame. In hindsight, I can understand why researchers have discovered that children who watch more than three hours of television a day are 50 percent more likely to be obese than kids who watch fewer than two hours. In fact, more than 60 percent of instances of being overweight can be linked to excess TV viewing.¹

I started getting heavy in late elementary school, and there I heard my share of fat jokes and sharp comments. Kids can be cruel, and even though I had always recited “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” I would have preferred any number of broken bones to the sting of those condemning words.

Yet I could forget those mean remarks and nicknames when I went home and lost myself in a TV show. I’d go to the refrigerator or cupboard, grab a snack, and settle down on the sofa as I ate and laughed and let the television take me away from the real world.

When I wasn’t watching TV, I’d go to the bathroom, pick up a curling iron, hold it like a microphone, and watch myself in the mirror as I sang along with the radio and pretended I was a talented television star.

Lately I’ve come to understand that I’m an introvert by nature. I used to think that introverts were shy and withdrawn, and I enjoy parties and people! Now I understand that being an introvert means that I need to be alone to reenergize. I sup-

pose it's because of that tendency that I've always preferred sedentary activities to active ones. As I grew heavier, the excess pounds only reinforced my preference. My personality, combined with the ridicule I sometimes heard, led me to stay indoors and keep to myself.

I might have continued forever in a sort of vicious cycle—eating and sitting, sitting and eating—until a new interest entered my life by way of a book.

A Novel Leads the Way

My high school creative-writing teacher assigned the classic novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert A. Heinlein. Michael Valentine Smith, the hero of Heinlein's novel, is a human raised by Martians. He comes to earth as an innocent child, grows up, establishes a church, preaches love, and ultimately dies—the fate of most messiahs.

The book is pure science fiction, yet because it is filled with spiritual symbolism, it piqued my interest in God. The Lord began to woo me, His Spirit drew me, and I responded.

I don't want you to think I'd never been taught anything about God. My dad and stepmother went to church, but since I saw them only twice a month, church wasn't a regular part of my life. God wasn't a top priority for me, but thankfully, I was a top priority for Him.

Now I can see how God shaped events in my life to draw me to Him. On my sixteenth birthday, instead of asking for a car or the latest trendy outfit, I asked for a Bible. My friend Jennifer Bradshaw, a Christian, was eager to provide one for me. I thanked her and planned to read that Bible from cover

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to cover, but when you don't know the Lord and you don't understand what you're reading, the task can get a little daunting around Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

I eventually set the Bible aside, but God didn't give up on me. Two months later, a coworker of my mother's invited Mom and me to go to see the "Singing Christmas Tree" at her church. The three of us filed into a pew, and I don't think I blinked more than a half dozen times as the music and narration told the story of Jesus. I had heard the story before, but this time I felt something different. Since the story hadn't changed, I suspect something in *me* had changed.

My heart warmed as I watched Mary place the baby Jesus in the manger. Tears welled in my eyes as Jesus hung on the cross and begged the Father for mercy. Terror gripped me when I saw a frightening portrayal of hell and the devil. Joy leaped in my soul as Jesus ascended to heaven on what I assume were cables being manipulated by men backstage. I knew the actors were volunteers reading lines of a script, but their performance provided answers to several of the questions I had about Jesus. My heart had been hungering for knowledge, and that church drama fed my soul.

When the music ended, the pastor stood and explained that the story I had seen was a reenactment of actual events. Jesus was a real person. He was God's Son. He came to earth to save us—to save *me!*

The pastor read from the Bible and explained that since we are all sinners and no one is perfect, a relationship with Jesus is the only way we can reach heaven. When the pastor asked, "Would you like to know Jesus tonight?" I felt a stirring in the pit of my stomach.

The pastor continued: "While everyone bows their head

and closes their eyes, if you want to meet Jesus, quietly repeat this prayer.”

When he prayed, I prayed with him. I told Jesus I believed everything I had just seen on the stage. I was lost, and apparently He was in the business of helping lost people get found. I also confessed that I didn't want to go to hell, because it looked like a scary place. If He would accept my life, I would give it to Him and let Him be my Lord, my boss, from that day forward.

Then the pastor surprised me. I'd been thinking I could sit in the pew and give my life to Jesus quietly, but the pastor said, “If you prayed that prayer, raise your hand so we can all know about it.”

I was lost, and apparently Jesus was in the business of helping lost people get found.

Lifting my hand took every ounce of courage I possessed, but I did it. I was nervous, because my mom was sitting next to me. She'd been raised in church, but she didn't attend anymore. What would she think if I lifted my hand?

I raised my right hand, the arm nearest the aisle, thinking that maybe she wouldn't notice what I was doing. Then the pastor surprised me again. “Now,” he said, “if you've lifted your hand, come down here so we can give you some material.”

Gulp. Mom was sure to notice if I stood up and left the pew. For an instant I hesitated; then I realized that following through with Jesus was the most important thing I could do in that moment. So I stood and walked down the aisle, met the pastor, and took the material he gave me.

As I read the material, I learned that following Jesus is a day-by-day process of growth and learning. While Jesus accepts

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us the moment we accept Him, nobody becomes “Super Christian” the moment they meet Jesus.

I was no exception.

Church Meets a Need

Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

HEBREWS 10:25

For someone who’s decided to follow Christ, church attendance is important, because that’s one place we can learn about God and spend time with other believers. I wanted to go, but I didn’t have a way to get to church. Mom still didn’t attend, and we didn’t have enough money for me to buy a car. So nearly two years passed between the time I accepted Christ and the time I was able to go to church.

The first Sunday after I got my license, I drove my mom’s car to Genesis Missionary Baptist Church. I had sung at a Martin Luther King Jr. event a few years back, and many of the organizers of the program attended that church. But to be honest, I chose Genesis because I had a crush on the young man who played drums for the church!

Thankfully, though, I loved everything about Genesis Missionary Baptist Church. At the end of the service, when the pastor asked people to come down if they wanted to become a church member, I stepped out of the pew and strode down the aisle with the determination of a quarterback. As the other members—including my drummer friend, Kevin—came up to hug and welcome me, I felt as accepted and loved as if I’d been part of that church family all my life.

From that day forward I began to dig deep to discover what following Christ was all about. No one had to remind or nag me to attend services; I was *starving* for knowledge about the Lord and what the Bible says about the way we should live.

After graduation from high school, I moved to Nashville to attend Fisk University (a Historically Black College/University). At school I met others who were following Christ, and I began to attend a small campus Bible study led by my new best friend, Chandra.

She was so patient with me and my questions. She had grown up in the church and was so knowledgeable about the ways of God. I, on the other hand, was a mere baby in the faith and inquisitive by nature. Through the good teaching at the Bible study, I became desperate to know Jesus better. I began to listen to music designed to glorify Him; I began to read books that took me deeper into spiritual topics and lessons.

As I matured, I began to understand that the path of the Christian life is not paved with stardust and flanked with smiling faces—it's a path of struggle, and sometimes it leads to suffering. But there are blessings in the struggle—and, yes, even in the suffering.

As I matured, I began to understand that the path of the Christian life is not paved with stardust and flanked with smiling faces—it's a path of struggle, and sometimes it leads to suffering. But there are blessings in the struggle—and, yes, even in the suffering.

As I talked to Chandra and others about Jesus and His purpose for our lives, I wondered about His plan for me. What was I supposed to do with my life? All I had ever wanted to be was a singer, but was that what Jesus wanted for me?

I didn't have any other remarkable talents. In elementary school I tried to play the flute but decided that ethnic lips just weren't meant to pucker that way! In junior high I switched from the band to the choir, but it wasn't until high school that I felt validated as a singer.

In fact, my life took a major turn in high school, even before I decided to follow Christ. I entered El Camino Fundamental High School with a group of friends I'd known in junior high. We began to hang out with a group of people who were morally questionable. They drank, smoked, and stole from others.

In an attempt to be accepted by them, I, too, began to steal. I would go into the girls' locker room while the class was in PE and rifle through purses and bags that were kept in an unlocked locker. I knew it was wrong, but I felt "cool" doing it.

I was headed down a dangerous path and could have ended up in jail if not for a teacher who took notice of me. My high school choir director, Mr. Robinson, noticed my love for singing and worked with me to build my confidence.

In my freshman year, Mr. Robinson asked me to sing "You'll Never Walk Alone" for a state competition. I was terrified of the high note right before the end, but Mr. Robinson spent hours outside class giving me voice lessons and working with me to perfect my performance. I did improve during those weeks of rehearsing, but by the time of the competition, I still felt mediocre. The judge who evaluated me, however, said I had a great high voice, and his positive feedback did a lot to boost my confidence.

From that point on, I became a different person. I stopped hanging around with the crowd that had dragged me down and began spending time with people in choir and drama. I be-

came more active in the performing arts department and took classes in music and drama.

Mr. Robinson and my drama teacher, Lee Elliott, saw something in me I didn't see in myself. From my sophomore year on, they cast me in the lead roles in all the musicals: In tenth grade I played Paulette DePaul in the musical *Over Here*. I was Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof* in my junior year, and in twelfth grade I was privileged to play Princess Winnifred in the musical comedy *Once Upon a Mattress*.

I began to see myself as a performer, and with my teachers' encouragement ringing in my heart, I practiced and concentrated on my singing. I realize now that many people are born with a musical voice—I don't remember ever *not* singing. But my talent grew as I learned more about my vocal instrument and how to use it.

While Mr. Robinson and other teachers were teaching me how to breathe correctly, sight-read music, and sing from my diaphragm, I thought it was a waste of time. Now, however, I use all of those skills on a regular basis. When gifted young singers ask me where to begin, I highly recommend participating in choir, competitions, music-theory classes, and even piano lessons. The skills developed in those activities can give you an edge in a world where good singers are a dime a dozen.

After high school I continued to learn more about my

When gifted young singers ask me where to begin, I highly recommend participating in choir, competitions, music-theory classes, and even piano lessons. The skills developed in those activities can give you an edge in a world where good singers are a dime a dozen.

instrument at Fisk, where I majored in music with a concentration in vocal performance. I continued performing, too, even playing Effie in the college production of *Dreamgirls*. I loved the feeling of being onstage and drawing people into the dramatic world I was helping create. I began to believe that God had created me for performance.

After graduation, however, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with my voice. I knew that many famous musicians made a comfortable living with their music, but how does one go from being a "graduate with a degree" to "famous musician"?

The Lord had a plan, although at first I couldn't see it.

If There's a Will, Is There a Way?

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.

PROVERBS 3:5-6

When I graduated from Fisk on May 24, 2000, the world seemed bright and promising. The next day, however, I woke up and realized that I had a college degree but no money, no job, and no place to live.

Chandra and her roommates let me crash at their place while I sorted through my thoughts. I was thankful for my bachelor's degree in vocal performance, but it was not exactly the kind of credential that results in a variety of career choices.

Some time ago a friend told me about her new car's GPS device. I listened in amazement as she explained how the Global Positioning System on her dashboard receives signals from at least four GPS satellites in the sky. The signals enable it to calculate the car's position in three dimensions. I'm still not

sure how it all works, but when the voice on my friend's GPS device says, "Turn right in thirty feet," you can bet she does. She doesn't even need to look at a map, because the automated voice allows for her mistakes and quickly directs her back to the right road.

After my graduation from college, I trusted the Lord to direct my path like some sort of heavenly GPS system, but I hadn't heard a word about my destination—or even my direction. The screen on my internal GPS was completely blank. I needed direction, and I needed it fast.

At the time I was working through *Experiencing God*, a Bible study by Henry Blackaby. Because Blackaby talks about being aware of what God is doing around us, I was looking for situations where God was working so I could join Him. One day, after finishing my reading, I closed the book to spend some time praying, but on the back of the book a logo for LifeWay Christian Resources caught my attention. I remembered visiting a LifeWay store with Chandra to purchase *Experiencing God*, as well as a study by a woman named Beth Moore. As I prayed, I felt a growing urge to go to the computer and look up LifeWay online.

My Internet search revealed that LifeWay was a company with Christian bookstores all over the United States and a corporate office located in Nashville, not far from where I was living. Furthermore, their Web site listed numerous job opportunities, including several in their music publishing department.

I sat back and felt a smile creep across my face. Surely my degree in music would qualify me for such a position. Surely *this* was the Lord's leading.

Greatly encouraged by this clear signal, I submitted an online application for no position in particular. Then I waited for the Lord to make His will clear.

In the meantime I received calls from several other businesses. I went to interviews and even received a few offers of employment, but I reluctantly turned them down because I felt certain the Lord had a job for me in LifeWay in a position that would utilize my degree.

Finally, my faith was rewarded. Someone from LifeWay called to schedule an interview, so I dressed up, went to the office, presented my credentials, and took the standard tests for evaluation.

A few days later I received another call. LifeWay was happy and pleased to offer me a job—in data entry.

The phone in my hand became as heavy as a lead brick. Was this some sort of joke? I was a university graduate! My classmates had entered the workforce as administrators, teachers, and program analysts. Surely LifeWay couldn't—the *Lord* couldn't—expect me to be happy about a position that required the mindless typing of numbers from Sunday school order forms!

But I had given my life to God. I had trusted Him to lead me, and He had control of the car—and the GPS, which was firmly directing me to LifeWay's data-entry department. After a long moment I drew a deep breath. Humbled, I took the position and trusted God. I settled into my cubicle and accepted the stacks of order forms, then typed them into the computer. Because the job could get tedious, I wore headphones at work, and as I typed numbers onto the screen, I sang along to the songs playing on my CD player. I must have sung louder than I realized, because soon I became known as “the girl in customer service who sings.”

Because I was trusting the Lord, my contentment grew, and my spirit remained upbeat. That optimistic spirit, I think, had a lot to do with my being transferred from data entry to tele-

phone orders and then to telephone sales. During the same span of time, I also progressed from singing along with the music in my headphones to singing solos in employee chapel services. I wasn't working in LifeWay's music department, but I *was* singing.

If the Lord Closes a Door, He Opens a Window

I will sing a new song to you, O God! I will sing your praises with a ten-stringed harp.

PSALM 144:9

Each spring, LifeWay holds a time of spiritual revival for its employees. They bring in a preacher and worship leader, and during my second year there, they asked a man named Travis Cottrell to lead the special music.

I had never met Travis, who in addition to many other events was also working as the worship leader for Beth Moore's Living Proof Live conferences. I had heard of Beth before I began working at LifeWay because I had completed *Breaking Free*, one of her Bible studies, while I studied at Fisk.

I didn't realize, however, how popular Beth's Bible studies were until I began taking telephone orders. After talking with excited customers, I learned about her LifeWay-sponsored women's conferences, for which Travis led worship. As the spring revival meetings grew near, I became excited about the chance to meet Travis, but I had no idea the events of that week would change my life forever.

Someone at the company had the bright idea of putting together an employee worship team to sing with Travis. They asked if I wanted to sing on the worship team. *Wow!* I was honored by the invitation and, if truth be told, a little intimidated.

I felt a bit out of my league when we began rehearsals and everyone knew all the songs but me.

When Travis realized that I didn't know the melody to "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," he jokingly asked, "Are you sure you're a believer?"

In that moment, I knew I'd found a friend. That moment also forged the beginning of my relationship with the Beth Moore events. Travis called a few months later and asked if I would come to Charlotte, North Carolina, to sing on the praise team for a Living Proof Live event. I was thrilled by the opportunity, and as I packed for the trip, I realized that the Lord had begun to work in a surprising way. The car was rolling forward, but the GPS said only Charlotte, North Carolina.

In Charlotte, I stood on a stage in the center of an arena filled by fourteen thousand women. I had never sung in front of that many people before, and I was so nervous my throat kept going dry.

What if I messed up? What if Travis decided that I wasn't as good as he thought I was? What if those fourteen thousand women began throwing spitballs at me? My knees trembled as I walked onto the stage. Before we began what was supposed to be our first song, Travis leaned over and asked me to begin the event by singing "Amazing Grace"—all by myself.

For a second I thought about saying no. And I might have if Travis hadn't returned to his keyboard and struck the first chord to give me a starting pitch. The crowd fell silent, waiting.

With fear and trembling I mustered my courage and released a heartfelt version of the old hymn—a rendition that had never come out of my mouth before. The blood in my body began flowing again as Travis invited the ladies to join me in singing the first verse. As the event continued, we sang other hymns and

choruses, and my spirit soared as I lifted my voice with others in praise and gratitude to my heavenly King and the One who had guided me to that place. I felt truly blessed and . . . at home.

Later I realized that God had begun to reveal His plan before my eyes. I continued to travel with Travis for various events, and eventually he asked me to sing on some of his worship CDs, an experience that introduced me to studio work. Producers and contractors became familiar with my name, and soon they were regularly calling me to sing on other studio projects.

Usually those projects involved my being one of sixteen singers recording a choral demo of new church musicals. Often I worked in the studio for relatively unknown artists working on their own CDs. Whatever the project, I was thankful for the opportunity to sing.

God and I were traveling down the highway together, and for a long while, I was content to work full-time at LifeWay and sing as the opportunities arose. Years passed before my soul grew restless and I found myself yearning for more.

A Simple Prayer

Oh, that you would bless me and expand my territory! Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain!

1 CHRONICLES 4:10

In the fall of 2002, my supervisor offered me a promotion within my department. The new job would bring in more money and give me more opportunity for ministry; plus, it was a position I'd been coveting for over a year. By that time, though, I knew not to assume anything about the Lord or His plans.

I needed His guidance, and I was desperate to know His

will. Several times in the Bible, I'd read about people who fasted—gave up food and drink for a set period of time—and prayed when facing an important decision. Moses, David, Jehoshaphat, and Ezra all fasted when they needed guidance, and the Lord gave them the help they needed.

Paul and Barnabas were praying and fasting with men from the church at Antioch. “The Holy Spirit said, ‘Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.’ So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way” on what was their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2-5).

At the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, right after His baptism, He fasted for forty days (see Luke 4:1-2). This intense time of focus and prayer gave him the strength he needed to withstand temptation and endure the trials of public ministry.

Abraham Lincoln called for a national day of fasting in America. His proclamation set apart Thursday, April 30, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer.² The Civil War was a dark time in our nation's history, but it ended slavery and restored our national union. God certainly heard the prayers of those who fasted and prayed for our nation.

I've heard it said that fasting is the direct opposite of man's first sin in the Garden of Eden. Instead of eating what is forbidden, as Adam and Eve did, a fasting person refuses to eat what is allowed. The purpose of a fast is to weaken people physically in order to strengthen them spiritually.

The Bible demonstrates that God honors an obedient child who sacrifices food for a while and instead uses that time to pray. There seems to be a correlation between emptying ourselves of things in this physical world in order to become more

attentive to what God's Spirit wants us to hear spiritually. So before accepting the promotion at LifeWay, I fasted and prayed for three days. Then with great clarity and confidence, I declined the promotion.

While I was fasting and praying, I read *The Prayer of Jabez*, by Bruce Wilkinson. Influenced by Jabez's simple prayer, I asked the Lord to expand my territory and my circle of influence. Soon after I voiced this prayer, I received an invitation to go on a three-week tour called iWorship. I would be singing backup for established Christian artists Don Moen and Twila Paris.

As I thought about asking for time off so I could go on the tour, I began to sense that my time at LifeWay was drawing to a close. I wasn't sure what the future held—or even whether or not it held a steady paycheck—but I couldn't help feeling a sense of excitement. My path had forked: I could either stay where I was and enjoy the stability of a regular job, a consistent paycheck, and people whose company I appreciated, or I could take a three-week gig that might lead to something else—or to nothing at all.

For years I had made a regular habit of getting up and getting to the office early to spend some “quiet time” with God at the office. I knew that if I tried to do it at home, I'd probably fall asleep and be late for work. I remember sitting in my usual quiet corner at LifeWay and praying about whether or not to accept the tour invitation. I knew I could trust God with my future. I'd given Him my life years before, and He had never failed me. And I couldn't deny that I was excited by the thought of living a day-by-day faith adventure.

After telling the Lord that I would trust Him to provide for me after the tour, I went to my desk to begin work. One of my coworkers, Nelson Ray, walked up with an iWorship DVD and

handed me the disc. “Here,” he said. “I feel like the Lord is telling me to give this to you.”

It was a small gesture, but it felt like a definite confirmation that I was doing the right thing.

With mixed feelings I said good-bye to my friends and co-workers at LifeWay. I will always be grateful for the things I learned there and for the way God used those people and that company in my life.

God calls people from some unusual places. His angel found “mighty hero” Gideon hiding at the bottom of a winepress (see Judges 6:11-12). David was a shepherd before he became Israel’s most favored king, and Peter was a humble fisherman before he began fishing for people’s souls.

Data entry? God knew that was exactly where I needed to be at the start of this amazing journey.

Full-Time Professional

The iWorship tour was a wonderful experience, but God used it as a sort of professional boot camp for me. For the first time in my life I was a full-time professional musician, relying on my musical ability and training to make my living.

On the tour I sang background vocals for Don Moen, Paul Baloche, and Twila Paris, as well as two songs with the worship team that travels full-time with Women of Faith events. Our tour consisted of fifteen concerts, and we spent most of our time in the northern and eastern parts of the country. I loved every minute of the experience, even the packing and traveling.

As an added benefit, once I came home, I discovered that I’d gained the connections and credibility to regularly land session work in Nashville recording studios. Talk about intimidat-

ing! During my first few outings I felt like a fish out of water among so many professionals.

For my first big job I was called into the studio to sing the guide and background vocals for an accompaniment track. I was so nervous that what was supposed to take a few hours actually took two days!

I quickly realized the work was harder than I had imagined. I would sing something and think it was okay, but when I listened to the engineer's playback, I could hear that I was either off pitch, off rhythm, or flat-out horrible! On those occasions I longed to be back sitting safely in my LifeWay cubicle.

But practice makes perfect. I hung in with the work and improved my craft as I learned from others. Most studio musicians have been doing session work for years. Instrumentalists can pick up a chart and play or improvise without a moment's thought; professional studio singers can sight-read almost anything the first time they pick up even a scribbled sheet of music.

At first I couldn't trust myself to record anything until I'd sung through a chart at least three times. While my fellow sopranos were confidently delivering their pitch-perfect notes, I would sing quietly until I got the hang of it. By the time I was ready to record, the group was moving on to the next section.

I knew it would take me a while to become confident at this work, but I was grateful for the opportunity because for the first time since leaving college, I didn't have a steady job. Yet between recording sessions and singing background for Beth Moore events, I managed to keep my bills paid.

I certainly wasn't living a luxurious lifestyle in those days. My one-bedroom apartment wasn't the Ritz, but it kept a roof over my head. My 1996 red Nissan 200SX had seen better days too.

I'll never forget the day I got that car. Although my father was not wealthy, he paid most of my college expenses from his salary as a federal civil servant. He also told me he would buy me a car if I got all A's during my sophomore year at Fisk.

When I presented him with my report card, Dad kept his promise and bought the car I ended up driving for eight years. That vehicle was a blessing in 1998, but by 2003, it was desperately in need of retirement. If I even thought about accelerating over sixty-five miles per hour, the engine put up a fit. The car that had gone from cute to clunker could barely wheeze down the highway, but it got me around town and helped me make ends meet.

The Lord was also blessing me in other ways. To my surprise, people began to ask me to lead worship for other events—on my own. My first reaction was, “I'm not a worship leader,” and at first I turned several people down because I felt inadequate.

But when people kept asking—and knowing that the Lord often speaks through His people, the body of Christ—I decided I'd better consult Him to find out what He was up to. I asked; He answered: I was to lead worship. He would equip me; He would empower me.

What can you say when you hear promises like those? I took a deep breath and agreed to lead worship at a women's conference to be held at the First Baptist Church of Hendersonville, Tennessee.

I should explain that First Baptist of Hendersonville is a predominantly white congregation. They had invited me and an African-American speaker to address this conference. I was both excited by the opportunity and quaking in my shoes.

I've heard it said that courage is fear that has said its prayers, and I was “prayed-up” and ready to watch God work that week-

end. I have always felt a burden for racial unity in the body of Christ—America is never more racially segregated than it is on Sunday mornings.

I love the promise found in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In God’s eyes, we are not black believers or white believers—we are His children, period. We are brothers and sisters, united in Jesus.

That weekend, as I stood before a sea of women representing all races, I felt the Lord’s pleasure in us—and in me. Not because I was flawless; I wasn’t. I was, however, desperate for Him and was depending on His power in my weakness. That day I caught a glimpse of His future plan for me. He had anointed me as a worship leader.

The experience reminds me of the words of a psalm:

*I give you thanks, O LORD, with all my heart;
I will sing your praises before the gods.
I bow before your holy Temple as I worship.
I praise your name for your unfailing love and
faithfulness;
For your promises are backed
By all the honor of your name.
As soon as I pray, you answer me;
You encourage me by giving me strength.*

PSALM 138:1-3

There’s something amazing about the experience of using music to lead people into an awareness of the presence of God. There’s no other feeling quite like it. When I’m singing worship music,

the experience is not horizontal, solely between me and the audience. It's more vertical, between me and the Lord God.

In his book *The World Within*, Quaker philosopher and social reformer Rufus Matthew Jones said, "Worship is the act of rising to a personal, experimental consciousness of the real presence of God which floods the soul with joy and bathes the whole inward spirit with refreshing streams of life."³

He's right. And if I can use my music to ease world-weary people into the throne room of heaven, I am blessed indeed.

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

My life had settled into a pattern by the fall of 2005. The Lord had proven Himself faithful, and I was happy doing session work. Yet I was still addicted to food and, on a less serious level, to reality television.

While watching the season-four *American Idol* finale with Carrie Underwood and Bo Bice, the question rose again in my brain: *What would happen if I auditioned?* Despite my fears, I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that I might be missing a real opportunity, so I made plans to go to the regional auditions scheduled for Memphis. That city was only a three-hour drive from my home in Nashville, so auditioning in Memphis wouldn't require a lot of time or money.

Because so many people audition for *American Idol* each year, many community media outlets sponsor regional competitions. They get extra publicity, and the winners of their contests are allowed to move to the head of the line at regular regional *Idol* auditions.

A Tennessee radio station sponsored a contest they called "Memphis Idol," so I sent in a CD that I'd recorded at my friend Kevin Perry's home studio. I was working on something else at

Kevin's studio when I saw an advertisement for the "Memphis Idol" contest. On a whim I threw together an a cappella version of the Jackson 5's "Who's Lovin' You" and mailed it in. But I never heard anything from the radio station, and a few weeks later Hurricane Katrina roared ashore and wreaked destruction along the Gulf Coast. Because tens of thousands of storm refugees poured into Memphis, the producers of *American Idol* decided not to put any additional pressure on Memphis city services.

They canceled the Memphis auditions.

I was disappointed, but not destroyed. Throughout the summer I had been telling myself that if I ran into roadblocks or closed doors, I would just drop the idea. I think the vulnerable part of me was still terrified of Simon Cowell and what he might say about my weight. The part of me that wanted to give everything to the dream of pursuing *American Idol* was constantly kept in check by the hurt little girl who'd heard too many mean comments in gym class.

I was certainly no stranger to mean comments. The object of my first real crush was named Joe, and while he wasn't a typical heartthrob, his short stature, black hair, and hazel eyes could put me in a trance.

Joe and I were in elementary school band together. He played clarinet, and I was still trying to contort my lips and play the flute. We made friendly with each other, and I became convinced that Joe had warm feelings for me, too.

Somehow I mustered enough boldness to write him a letter. Like so many other little girls, in closing I wrote, "Check yes if

The part of me that wanted to give everything to the dream of pursuing *American Idol* was constantly kept in check by the hurt little girl who'd heard too many mean comments in gym class.

you like me and no if you don't." I folded the letter into a small box and adorned my masterpiece with happy-face stickers. I couldn't wait to give it to Joe.

Friday morning, before school began, I handed Joe the letter and ran away giggling, certain he would catch up to me at some point in the day. I passed the morning dreaming of what it would feel like to kiss my first boyfriend. Would he come up and hand me the letter with a big check mark next to the word *yes*? Or would he simply walk up and kiss me? Would the kiss be sweet—or slobbery?

The day ticked by slowly. When I hadn't received any response from Joe by lunchtime, I began to worry. By that time I was afraid to encounter him in person, so instead of going to the cafeteria for lunch, I went to the library.

But as I walked into the trailer that served as our make-shift library, Joe and his friend Corey stood by the librarian's desk. My eyes widened as the two of them smirked at me, and I whirled around to back out of the main door.

Amid a stream of giggling, I heard Corey's sarcastic taunt: "Joe doesn't like you. You're too fat!"

With two heartbreaking sentences, a boy destroyed my innocent hopes and dreams.

When the producers canceled the Memphis auditions, I wondered whether God was protecting me from the same sort of heartbreak and disillusionment. Was this my heavenly Father's way of preventing me from hearing, "Simon doesn't like you. You're too fat"?

Though I wanted to go out and follow my dream, it was easier by far to stay home, munch on my favorite snacks, and watch someone else's dreams come true on television in the comfort of my safe living room.

So when I never heard back from the radio station and the Memphis auditions were canceled, I assumed it wasn't the Lord's will for me to audition for *Idol*. I didn't think twice about it—until unexpectedly another door opened.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

“I don’t ever remember not singing,” Mandisa once replied to an interviewer’s question. Mentored by her high school music director, she began to learn the technical aspects of singing. After graduating from high school, Mandisa attended Fisk University, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in music with a concentration in vocal performance. She did session work in Nashville for several years, and at twenty-eight she auditioned for the fifth season of the reality television show *American Idol*, where she made it all the way to the top ten before being eliminated. Her powerful voice, musical versatility, and strong faith made her a standout contestant and have earned her the respect of peers and viewers alike. When Mandisa isn’t on the road, she lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

Christy Award winner Angela Hunt writes books for readers who have learned to expect the unexpected. With more than three million copies of her books sold worldwide, she is the best-selling author of *The Tale of Three Trees*, *The Note*, *Unspoken*, and more than one hundred other titles.

She and her youth pastor husband make their home in Florida with their mastiffs. One of their dogs was featured on *Live with Regis and Kelly* as the second-largest canine in America.

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