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WITH ANN SPANGLER



THE RESCUE

SEVEN PEOPLE,
SEVEN AMAZING STORIES . . .

ZONDERVAN

The Rescue

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ISBN 978-0-310-35117-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-35120-7 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-35119-1 (ebook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016963487

ISBN: 978-0-9978542-0-6

Cymbala, Jim, 1943-

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Publishing project management by Lineage Media & Solutions, Inc.

Published in association with the literary agency of Ann Spangler & Company, 1415 Laurel Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

First printing December 2017 / Printed in the United States of America

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Though the individuals whose stories are told in *The Rescue* are identified by name, a few people who appear in their stories have been given different names in order to protect their privacy.

THE RESCUE

Many of us feel hemmed in by impossible problems for which there are no easy solutions. Barraged by headlines that continually announce fresh trouble in the world, we feel deeply pessimistic, not just about what's going on in the world, but also about the state of our own lives and the lives of those we care about.

Perhaps we have achieved a measure of success but still feel empty inside, as though something is missing. No matter how much money we spend or how many relationships we have or how hard we work, struggle, play, or pretend, we can't find a sense of peace and happiness. A cloud still hangs over us.

Or maybe we are fighting personal battles—wrestling with financial challenges, struggling with addictions, facing a relationship breakup, suffering from sickness, or battling the effects of abuse.

As I travel throughout the country, I often meet people so battered by life that their hope seems as fragile as a candle

burning in a rainstorm. One more gust of wind—one more difficulty or challenge—and the flickering flame will be snuffed out, leaving them in total darkness. If they are not discouraged about their own lives, they are deeply concerned by what's happening in the lives of their children or others they care about.

Fortunately, we don't have to live like that, feeling beaten down by life's challenges or hopeless about the future. No matter how strong our personal storm or how difficult our life circumstances may be, we can emerge with strength and hope.

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be, we can emerge with strength and hope.**

Instead of feeling confused, defeated, angry, and depressed, we can begin to experience life in a way that will bring profound healing and deep peace. We will not need to keep repeating self-destructive behaviors or be victimized by forces we can't control. Instead we will be able to face the future with hope and expectation.

How can we do this? Is there a seven-step plan or a secret path to success that will yield these benefits? Is there a how-to book that will magically solve our worst problems? You probably know there is not.

Rather than offering you a spirited pep talk, or a set of persuasive arguments, or a self-help manual that promises to improve your life, I simply want to share a few remarkable stories. Though each of these stories is unique and dramatic, all of them revolve around common problems and struggles, some of which you may have experienced at one time or another in your own life. Or perhaps someone close to you has.

If I had a big enough house, I'd invite you into my living room to sit down with me and the seven friends whose stories I tell. As you listened to each of them, a window would open up, offering you a glimpse not only into their pain and confusion but also into the joy and peace they've found as a result of a profound transformation. In that intimate setting, you would be able to watch the expressions on their faces and hear the tone of their voices as they recounted their experience of being rescued from impossible situations.

But since my wife and I live in a small one-bedroom apartment in downtown Brooklyn, that's not possible. Instead I've done my best to share these stories in the way they were told to me. As you pick up this small book, I hope the miles between us will shrink until you feel as though we are all sitting down together and that you are listening to each of my friends as they speak openly and honestly about what has happened to them.

But why these particular stories and not others? Truthfully, I could have found countless stories that are every bit as gripping. Such stories happen every day across our country and around the world. I've chosen these because I know the people personally and because I believe that the stories of their transformation have the potential to transform your life and the lives of those you care about. To my seven friends whose stories are told in this book—to Lawrence, Timiney, Rich, Robin, Kaitlin, Alex, and Toni—I say thank you for your honesty and courage. I am profoundly grateful for your willingness to tell the truth so that others can be helped. Thank you for giving me the privilege of sharing your stories.

To everyone else, my hope is that, like my seven friends, you will experience the deep transformation that I call “the

rescue”—an experience that will change your life so that you will no longer feel defeated by your problems or overwhelmed by your worries. Instead you will have learned what it means to live a life of profound transformation, one that will bring you joy and give you the kind of peace that will never leave you.

LAWRENCE'S STORY

LAWRENCE PUNTER IS A FORMER COLLEGE ATHLETE AND FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR. A SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR AND BUSINESSMAN, HE IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE GRAMMY AWARD-WINNING BROOKLYN TABERNACLE CHOIR. IF YOU MET HIM—ALL SIX FEET FIVE INCHES OF HIM—YOU WOULD NEVER GUESS THAT THIS HANDSOME, SOFT-SPOKEN MAN, WHO OFTEN SHARES HIS STORY IN PRISONS, WAS ONCE A BOY NOBODY SEEMED TO LOVE.

I ROLL OVER IN BED, bone tired. I've been lying here for most of a day, grateful at least for clear skies and bearable temperatures. Even when sunlight breaks through the clouds and makes me squint through my closed eyelids, I force myself back to sleep, since dreams are my only relief.

Dreams are my only relief.

My makeshift bedroom is not located in a cozy apartment or a comfortable home. It's not tucked away in a friend's guesthouse or out on a screened-in porch. Night after night I sleep in a place without windows or walls, on a dingy mattress in a dirty alleyway between two apartment buildings.

Except when someone wanders through to toss a bag of trash in the dumpster, I am by myself. There is the occasional rat, as well as buzzing flies during the day and swarms of mosquitoes at night. I wonder if I'll go deaf slapping my ears to shoo them away so I can get some rest. I've been living like this for months—light-headed, dizzy, and alone.

Tonight I feel a sense of relief, as though something might go right for a change. Soon there will be no more pain or

struggling, no more hunger and fighting battles I cannot win. I hold the pills in one hand and a water bottle in the other. In a little while it will all be over. I am going to sleep forever. I will never have to wake up again.

What kind of path does a young guy take to arrive at a place like this? In my case the journey began before I was born.

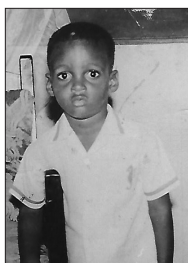
I don't know how my parents met or what attracted them to each other. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that when they were still very young they married. I know nothing about how my dad reacted when he heard the news that he was going to be a father. Maybe he tried to smile. Maybe my mom pretended to be happy. I only know that he walked out on her when she was nine months pregnant.

Whether it was one woman or a string of women, I'm not certain. But he'd already had several affairs during the course of their short marriage. By the time my mother gave birth to me at a hospital in New York, there was no loving husband out in the waiting room. Nor was there a proud dad to take me in his arms and welcome me into the world.

So my parents divorced, and for a short time it was just my mom and me. Single moms are not uncommon, of course. Most of them struggle and work hard and love their children no matter what. But my mother was not like them. She wasn't a hidden hero who everyone would someday praise for all her sacrifices. To her I was just an inconvenience. Like my father, she wanted a new beginning, and a baby would only hold her back.

When I was two or three months old, my mom dropped me off in Antigua, an island in the West Indies, where my grandmother lived. Then she returned to New York.

For the first few years, I was happy. I was a child like every other child. It didn't bother me that my "mom" was so much



Unwanted by my mother and father, I spent the first seven years of my life in Antigua.

older than other kids' mothers. I never noticed. I just knew that she took care of me and that I loved her. She may have told me I had another mother who lived in a strange place called New York City. But if she did, it never registered.

By the time I was seven, my grandmother decided that things needed to change. It wasn't right for a mother to be

separated from her son. Plus her daughter was old enough now to take care of her child. So just like that, I was separated from everyone and everything I loved and packed off to New York to live with a reluctant stranger who happened to be my mother.

The abuse began gradually. Because I looked so much like my father, I was a constant reminder to my mother of all the terrible things he had done to her.

I would spill milk, and she would hit me. I would say something wrong, words that another mother might verbally correct. She would hit me again. Pretty soon she was lashing me with belts and hitting me with her shoes. Once she broke the heel off a favorite pair while hitting me over the head.

After a while she moved up to extension cords, twisting them into whips and thrashing me with the plug end, covering my body with welts.

We had relatives in the city who knew about the abuse because she never tried to hide it, even at family gatherings. "Stop it—you're going to kill him!" my aunts would yell. But she never stopped and they never reported it. Because of the constant abuse, I became very introverted, extremely shy and quiet.

I got picked on at school too. The kids bullied me because I spoke with a West Indian accent. I was different enough to stand out. In Antigua I'd had friends and someone to love me. But in New York I had no one.

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love me. But in New York I had no one.

When I was in middle school, gangs were everywhere. Today you might hear about the Crips and the Bloods or even the Stack Money Goons or the Very Crispy Gangsters. Back then it was the Tomahawks, the Black Spades, and the Jolly Stompers. If you're a sports fan, you might know that Mike Tyson became a member of the Jolly Stompers when he was eleven years old.

One day twenty to thirty guys surrounded me while I walked home from school. "You're drafted into the Jolly Stompers," they said, as though it was already a done deal. "Show up at the courtyard tonight at 11:00." But I was a naïve kid from the West Indies who wanted nothing to do with gangs, and I ignored them.

When they caught up with me the next day, they held me down and started punching and kicking me. "Be at the meeting tonight at 11:00," they told me. I thought about letting my mother know what was happening, but I was afraid she would get angry and beat me up herself. Fearful and not knowing what to do, I stayed home again.

The next day when they found me, they pushed me down and began stomping on me. "We know where you live and what bus your mother takes to work. If you don't show up tonight, something bad is going to happen to her." Even though I thought my mother hated me, I didn't want them to hurt her.

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Since she worked the night shift as a nurse at a local hospital, it was easy for me to leave the house without her knowing. After she went to work, I made my way to the courtyard. That night I learned how new members join a gang. You enter into one-on-one combat with the leader. In my case that was a joke.

How could a thirteen-year-old stand up against a twenty-year-old? I knew I was about to be slaughtered.

I remember how it began—with a fist to my chin. My opponent pummeled me so hard and fast that I didn't get a punch in. After kneeing me in the gut, he hammered my bent-over back with his fists until I collapsed. After kicking and stomping on me, he let the other guys pile on. Finally when he decided I'd had enough, the beating abruptly stopped.

Lying on the ground, looking up at the guys who had so viciously attacked me, I remember thinking how strange it was to see them smiling down at me. Then everyone burst into laughter.

Pulling me to my feet, the leader hugged me and said, "Now you're one of us. We're your family. Anyone messes with you, they mess with us." Then forty or fifty guys took turns hugging and congratulating me.

Instead of feeling hurt or enraged, I felt happy about what had happened—almost elated. Finally somebody wanted me to be part of their group. I was so glad to belong. After congratulating me, the leader handed me the uniform of a Jolly

Stomper—a jean jacket with cut-out sleeves and the gang's insignia painted on the back.

Everyone had a nickname, something like “Fat Boy,” “Slinky,” or “Ghost.” It was a way of reinforcing our gang identity. Since I was tall for my age, they called me “Shorty.”

When I showed up at school the next day in a Jolly Stomper uniform, no one hassled me. The bullies who had made my life miserable turned into instant cowards, terrified of what the gang might do to them if they caused me any more trouble.

Wow! I was beginning to enjoy the benefits of being part of a gang. I belonged to those guys and they belonged to me. But belonging brought obligations. I had a job to do.

At that time there were about 120 members of the Jolly Stompers. Our specialty was robbing small stores and holding people up on the street. Most of the guys were eighteen, nineteen, or twenty. As the youngest member, I was like a mascot. “Shorty,” they would say, “tonight we’re gonna rob a bodega” (a small grocery store). “We don’t want you to get hurt, so just stay outside and be the lookout. If anybody comes while we’re inside, just yell.”

I remember one small market that we robbed repeatedly. It was a mom-and-pop store run by an elderly couple. Over and over those two old people would huddle in the corner watching as the gang ransacked their place, grabbing beer from the fridge and money from the cash drawer. When they were finished, I would come in to collect my share, stuffing my pockets full of candy and bubble gum.

I can still picture the people we victimized, especially that old couple. I felt horrible about what we were doing but didn't know how to stop.

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doing but didn't know how to stop.

Even though I was running with a gang, I was still a quiet, introverted kid at home. "You're just like your father!" my mother would scream. "You're useless; good for nothing!" Though she kept on beating me, I never tried to defend myself, because I thought that was how parents treated their kids. What my mother didn't know was that at night while she was working, I was out roaming the streets. I was also

skipping school, hanging out and drinking beer with other guys in the gang.

Being a Jolly Stomper meant not only that you were part of a family but also that you had common enemies. Street wars could erupt quickly if another gang thought you were invading their turf, or if someone felt disrespected, or if there was an argument over a girl. At that time it was mostly knives, bats, brass knuckles, and chains, but there were guns too.

One day word went out that we were to show up at midnight fully armed for a rumble with the Tomahawks. As soon as the fighting began, it was clear who was going to win, because we were vastly outnumbered. Every Jolly Stomper escaped but me. I had counted on fellow gang members to have my back, but that was a fantasy. They were just too scared.

Before I knew it I was down on the concrete with twenty guys piling on. They took turns kicking me and stomping on my head. One of them stabbed me with a metal spike.

This is it, I thought. I'm thirteen years old and I am going to die. They're going to kick me to pieces—break my arms, legs, ribs, everything! I absorbed blow after blow until I grew numb to the pain. Curled into a ball with my arms wrapped around my head, I

knew I would be dead if they didn't stop soon. I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness.

But then, out of the blue, I heard sirens. When the cops arrived, everybody scattered. I don't know what tipped them off. Maybe they were cruising the neighborhood. But the area we were fighting in wasn't visible from the street. Plenty of times they didn't find out about fights until they were over, if they even found out at all. But that night they showed up just in time to save my life.

The Tomahawks had done a number on me. My face was so swollen I couldn't open my eyes, but at least I was alive. Instead of going home and facing my mother's wrath, I stayed at my aunt's house until I got better.

She convinced my mother that if we stayed in Brooklyn I would end up either dead or in jail. So overnight we moved to Miami. I couldn't believe the difference. Compared to New York, it looked like paradise, filled with green lawns and nice homes.

Instead of running with gangs, I started getting involved in sports. "Which team are you going to join?" everyone kept asking. When the basketball coach saw how tall I was, he said,

“We want you for the team.” When the football coach saw me, he said, “No, you’re coming out for football.”

Things were getting better at home too. By the time I was sixteen, my mother started giving me more space. The beatings were less frequent even though she kept calling me a no-good juvenile delinquent who was just taking up space on the planet. I heard it so often that I thought she must be right.

Fortunately I was good at basketball—very good. I’d started playing the game in middle school. By my senior year I was an MVP and an All-American. With that came five college scholarships. Normally if you’re in high school and you make MVP and All-American, your parents are excited. *Wow, Mom, do you believe it? Dad, I made All-American! Look I was offered five scholarships! Which one should I take?*

But my dad wasn’t around, and my mom didn’t care. She hadn’t planned to send me to college anyway. So my coach helped me decide which scholarship to accept. Auburn offered me free tuition but with no room and board, so I chose a small college in Atlanta that covered all my expenses.

At first things went well in class and on the basketball court. I began to feel better about myself and more hopeful about the

future. Maybe my mother was wrong about me. Maybe I could make something of my life. But during my sophomore year, I suffered a severe leg injury that ended my basketball career. Without a scholarship, I had to drop out. I returned home in a full leg cast that reached to my thigh.

But home was different now. My mother had a new husband and a baby, and I didn't fit in. She wanted nothing to do with a good-for-nothing son who reminded her of her rotten ex-husband.

As soon as my cast came off, I returned to New York and found a summer job. My dream had always been to attend flight school. Since I was six feet five, an inch too tall for the Air Force, I picked out a school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that was advertised in the newspaper. Between the money I earned from the job and a gift from my aunt and uncle, I had \$1,000 in my pocket when I boarded a bus to Tulsa.

After enrolling in school, I quickly found a roommate and a dishwashing job at Denny's. Here was another chance to make good. *So what if I don't have parents*, I thought. *I made MVP and All-American by myself. I'm doing great on my own.* And I was.

But after a while I lost my job at Denny's. My boss assured me I would be hired back as soon as business picked up. It shouldn't be long. Fortunately my roommate was willing to carry me until I returned to work. But Denny's never called back, and I couldn't find another job. After several weeks my roommate reluctantly asked me to leave. He needed someone who could help him make the rent.

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Because it seemed like a temporary setback, I wasn't about to run back to New York. I was determined to make it on my own, to show my relatives—especially the ones who hadn't intervened to stop my mother's abuse—that I could amount to something.

For a while I depended on friends from Denny's who took turns letting me sleep on their couches. I kept promising to get myself together. But I was spiraling downward. When I finally ran out of friends to stay with, I landed out on the street.